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Community Information Needs: Access to Information Through the Mining Life Cycle

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I Introduction

Communities need information to participate in making informed decisions about mining activities. Community members experience impacts of a mining operation, such as an increased cost of living and taxation and influx of outsiders. However, communities are often seen by mining executives as the least important audience to inform of activities. Companies have tended to control the release of information in an attempt to manage community responses or simply because they lack certainty on whether a reserve will be developed.

Simply providing information does not ensure that a message will be understood in a community or that information will be disseminated widely. People's comprehension of information may be affected by how the information is communicated, the process of communication, an individual's ability to access and use information and the prior relationship between industry and the community.

This paper reviews some factors that affect the process of communication, key information needs encountered at community levels and mechanisms for encouraging access to information.

1.1 Principles of consultation

During discussions with experts in community-development, a few fundamental principles of community consultation were suggested.

- **Communities have the right to be informed of development before mine operation begins.** The presence of mining companies is usually noted from the moment exploration happens to the closure of a mine. Once exploration is underway, company staff should begin to consult with community members to discuss the potential benefits and risks of mining in the area. (Sweeting and Clark 2000)
- **Communities have the right to seek multiple accounts of the effects of mining.** There is no single account of a mining development that is "objective" as mining development often causes many unintended consequences. People cannot foresee all eventualities and all accounts will provide a different lens on the foreseeable future.
- **Communities have the right to seek information from sources that they trust, at the same time as they may take into account the findings of those they do not.** Community members may not trust sources such as the government or the mining company. Multiple sources of information may be needed to provide communities with rich and complete understandings of the benefits and impacts of mining.
- **Communities are complex, fluid and diverse.** Communities can be segmented by any number of factors, including economic status, educational level, culture, language, interests, social class, gender, geography, among others. An individual can be a member of many different communities at the same time. Simplistic definitions of communities are likely to hinder communication.

- **Communication goes both ways.** Most mining companies would prefer to get the business of communicating out of the way quickly and often consider communication to be the presentation of company plans. However, communication is about listening as much as it is about providing information.

Three rationales buttress the need to respond to community information needs. These rationales are, in order of appearance, instrumental, substantive and normative. (NRC 1996)

1. Community members who are informed and involved in a project can become project proponents, reducing the potential for future conflict and reducing the risk of investment. (Sweeting and Clark 2000) If community members are informed, there is a greater likelihood that potential issues will be identified at an early stage in the mine life cycle, allowing the company to respond to concerns.
2. When community members are informed of mining development, local needs and strengths can be identified. Strengths and information can be leveraged and local opportunities for growth can be pursued.
3. Corporations and governments should obtain the consent of communities affected by mining.

2 Access to information and communication

2.1 Timing of communication

Community members suggest that communication needs to start during exploration and continue throughout the life cycle of the mine. Communication should be consistent – people who are in contact with the community should be the same through time, where possible, and there should be common agreement and understanding of the corporate message and goal. Communities are often frustrated by the constant change of personnel in a mine and by conflicting messages from different staff. Where it is not possible to maintain the same staff, the mine should at least maintain a database of key contacts with communities and meetings held.

1 Community members suggest that communication needs to start during exploration and continue throughout the life cycle of the mine.

A number of strategies exist for understanding communities concerns and strengths, such as needs assessment and stakeholder mapping. Undertaking these kinds of exercises during exploration will help to identify key groups and their information needs.

2.2 Format and channel for communication

Companies can conduct studies about how and when a community receives information, but there is no substitution for asking local people about what they need to know and how they would like to know it. Furthermore, community members may be interested in developing their own accounts, in tandem with a company, of the potential effects of mining development.

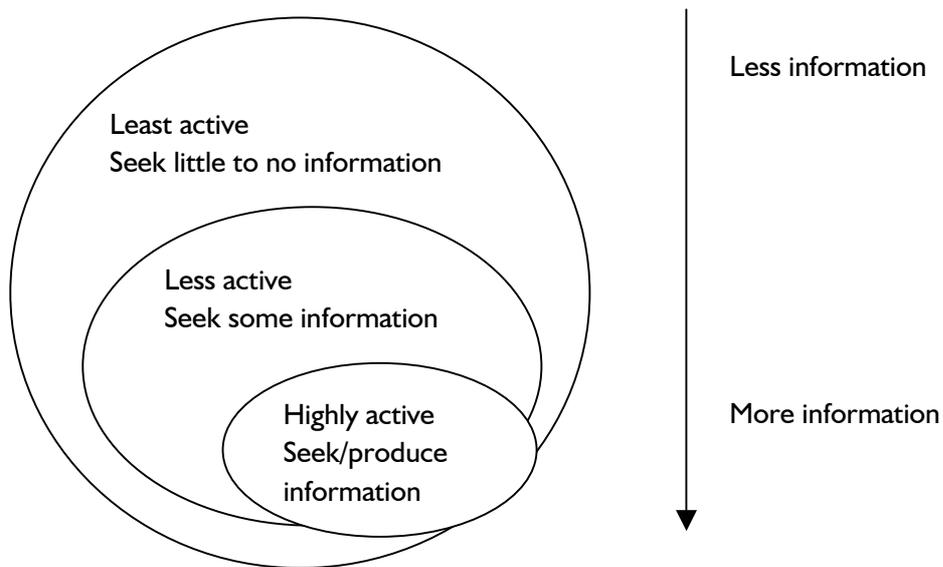
2 Community members may be interested in developing their own accounts, in tandem with a company, of the potential effects of mining development.

2.2.1 Segmenting community information needs

A number of factors will affect how different members of the community may understand or use information, such as gender, economic status, literacy, etc. For example, materials developed about the effects of increased mining activities that do not refer to the impact of mining on women (e.g., increased workload at home) will fail to resonate with 50 per cent of the population. Similarly, materials developed by engineers that read at a Grade 12 level are unlikely to be understood in a community with non-literate members. Often there exists a difference between expert and public assessments of risks and benefits. Community members may assess new development or risks in the context of their everyday experiences, without necessarily being aware of specialized knowledge. (Powell and Leiss 1997)

One way of targeting community information needs is through considering level of interest in information – the corporate communication strategy can then be targeted at different information needs.

2.2.2 Segmenting Communities by Interest in Information



Some questions to consider for communicating with a community:

- What language is spoken locally?
- Do people read and write in the area?
- What format(s) are popular locally for communicating?
- How do people find out about environmental issues?
- Are there local leaders who are trusted as communicators?
- What are local beliefs or attitudes that may influence the way the community understands and reacts to development?

Level of interest will be insufficient to understand the complexity of community information needs, however it may help to identify the range of materials that are needed and the groups that require them. Other factors, such as readability, level of literacy, language, will need to be considered when developing or disseminating materials at the community level.

2.2.3 Channels

Each community has its own way of communicating and finding out about what is going on in their area. Some people rely on written materials while others prefer oral presentations. The best way to understand how community members find out about things is to ask them. For example, in Sucker Creek, Canada, indigenous people say they rely on word of mouth, a locally broadcast radio station that plays for 15 minutes each day, a local newspaper, and public meetings.

2.2.4 Formats

Everyone's needs cannot be met by one version of information. A range of materials explaining mining development may need to be developed, including short and detailed technical summaries, pamphlets, news releases, and signs, among others. Again local community members are best placed to advise on formats for information.

2.2.5 Exchange of information

Typically mining proponents consider a message delivered after an engineer tells a crowd of people of the technical merits of proposed development. Communication must go both ways – mining executives must be prepared to listen and respond to community concerns.

2.2.6 Pre-testing of materials and plans

Materials and communication plans are often developed without the input or review of the intended audiences. As a result, materials usually miss the mark because jargon or inappropriate language is used. Local people can help to make materials and plans appropriate to the local context, using local examples and advising on the content and form of the materials.

2.3 Information sources

Communities may not trust industry as a source of information and people may seek what company representatives consider to be biased accounts of effects. Multiple sources for different kinds of information are usually needed at the community level to provide rich and complete understandings of the impacts of mining. Community members may seek information from many sources, including:

- Mining companies;
- Other mining communities in the country and abroad;
- Various levels and agencies of the national government;
- Government agencies and institutions from where the companies' headquarters are located;
- Local, national and international development organizations;
- International financial institutions;
- Research institutions and independent experts, and
- The media.

3 Community information needs specific to sectors

Companies will need to provide different information during the phases of mining and each mining site and community will be unique. While there are differences in information needs throughout the life cycle of a mine, there is one consistent factor: communities

request steady communication from a company operating in their area. The following list summarizes some of the potential subjects that community people may have interest in with regards to the potential effects and benefits of mining.¹

3.1 Information needs from mining companies

3.1.1 Mining site.

During the exploration phase, communities may seek basic descriptions of the nature of the ore deposit. Enormous uncertainty exists for the company during exploration and often staff may be hesitant to communicate at all, however at the very least the company can communicate critical decision-making junctures. Once a feasibility study is underway, more substantive questions about the mine site itself should be provided about the deposit, the site and company plans.

3 During exploration, staff may be hesitant to communicate at all, however at the very least the company can communicate critical decision-making junctures.

3.1.2 Scope of operation.

Communities need to understand the scope of a mining operation. A community will want to know of the proposed duration of the operation and the financial and geographical horizon of the mine. Members of the community may consider many of these factors as negotiable. For example, leaders may request a short-term mine invest in long-term benefits for the community, or that the proposed area be altered to maintain key habitat for a species. Other areas that may be of interest to the community are:

- Geological potential;
- Development plans;
- Expected production;
- Financing options;
- Processing options, and
- Equipment and technologies proposed for the mine site.

3.1.3 Mining impacts.

Community members will seek reviews of the social, cultural, health and environmental impacts of mining activities. Companies will need to provide archaeological studies, social and environmental impact assessments. Sweeting and Clark suggest a company prepare "preliminary national, regional and local social profiles to identify stakeholders and potential sources of conflict

4 Studies done in collaboration with communities have a greater chance of reflecting local realities and being understood.

¹ This section on community information needs is in part adapted from CoDevelopment Canada's Community Decision Making-Model (1997). It is also based on interviews held with key informants in August 2001, named in the acknowledgements.

and cooperation" (Sweeting and Clark 2000: 51). These profiles may help a company to understand which organizations need to be involved in social and environmental studies. Studies done in collaboration with communities have a greater chance of reflecting local realities and being understood (Gibson et al. 1999).

Plans for mitigation of effects (social or environmental) using state-of-the-art technology should be discussed with communities as well as technological advances for the exploitation and exploration of minerals and metals.

3.1.4 Company information and track record.

As there is no such thing as a typical mining operation, it is indispensable for communities to have as much information as possible about the company that is about to start operations or is already active in the local area. Communities experience difficulties accessing corporate data and even have problems getting basic information about mining companies such as the names of company executives and representatives, company structure, financial status, history, policies, labor practices and safety records. At the very least, communities seek to have contact with the same people in a company over time – and want to know how to get in touch with them.

Companies should provide interested members of the community with a sense of

- The company's operations in the country and in other countries, and
- The company's policies and safety and environmental record in its worldwide operations.

It is common for mining companies to provide communities with copies of their annual reports and environmental impact surveys and assessments, preferably in the local language.

3.1.5 Economic options and anticipated benefits.

One of the most crucial pieces of information for a community is what benefits can be distributed locally as a result of the mine operation, either directly through employment or indirectly through contributions to development, the economy or the culture. Communities often wish to negotiate the benefits of mining in order to strengthen their local economy in ways that meet their needs in the short and long-term. Examples of issues that may be negotiated are:

- Compensation schemes,
- Infrastructure (e.g., health clinics, schools, sports facilities),
- Local hiring and skills development, and
- Use of local products and integration of businesses, among others. (Sweeting and Clark 2000)

5 One of the most crucial pieces of information for a community is what benefits can be distributed locally as a result of the mine operation, either directly through employment or indirectly through contributions to development, the economy or the culture.

Corporations, agencies and communities may discuss many options for economic diversification at a local level. For example, local food businesses can become involved in catering or local truck drivers can be contracted for the mine. Other examples of economic diversification are not always directly mine related, such as Tech Cominco's support for a Canadian community's new golf course and ski hill (in Kimberly, BC). Many corporations and communities sign impact and benefit agreements summarizing negotiations.

Communities may also want to know more about benefit sharing options, such as trust funds, tax breaks or other mechanisms that might be used locally or nationally to share benefits.

3.2 Information needs from the government

3.2.1 Government decision-making process.

Communities are often not informed of the departments or agencies responsible for reviewing mining permits and ensuring compliance. Further, they may not understand the role a community can play in affecting the decisions associated with mine development, their opportunities for participating in these decisions, or who holds decision-making power. Materials or short-courses aimed at explaining the processes of decision-making, the departments or agencies involved, and the role of citizens in this process may help communities to participate actively. These materials or courses should explain:

- The decision making process for mining at the local, regional and national level,
- Who is responsible for decision-making and how decisions get made, and
- The process of mine permitting and compliance checking.

3.2.2 Communities should be provided with contact names in the government.

Moreover, communities require information about existing and proposed legislation regarding mineral exploration, foreign investment, joint ventures, tax incentives, and profit expatriation.

3.2.3 Emergency management plans.

Communities should be advised of international safety standards and environmental safeguards. Responsibility for disaster response planning generally falls on a branch of the government, however companies should also be involved in these initiatives. Communities also should be involved in developing local emergency response plans jointly with agencies and industry. The United Nations Environment Programme's Awareness and Preparedness for Emergencies at Local Level (APELL) process provides a promising template for local level planning about the mining industry. (UNEP Industry and Environment 2000)

6 Communities should be involved in developing local emergency response plans jointly with agencies and industry.

Companies are often wary of providing information on disaster response plans because of concerns about releasing sensitive information to communities. The threat of terrorism has been cited as reason not to provide information about chemicals stored on, however community right-to-know about hazards and responses should be respected. Companies and governments can provide needed information to citizens to facilitate appropriate responses in the case of emergency without disclosing information that could be used for terrorist attacks. Right-to-Know and Clean Air Act legislation in the United States provides useful examples of what has to be disclosed by the American chemical industry to the public.

3.3 Information from the community level

3.3.1 Community contributions to understanding impacts.

Many people, whether literate or not, have a remarkable understanding of their surroundings and are capable of analyzing and assessing their situation, often better than trained professionals. Community members often have specialized knowledge about the geography and environment in their area. In indigenous communities, hunters, trappers, berry pickers and elders can provide invaluable knowledge about the well being of species. Community experts should be consulted during development phases of mining in order to access this knowledge.

Many northern Canadian First Nation groups have assembled geographic information system databases that document land use and traditional knowledge within oil and gas extraction areas. These databases are now used for planning development. Supporting local use and knowledge studies may require funding support in advance by corporations, governments or other agencies.

3.3.2 Community process and potential effects.

Communities can be impacted in many ways by the entrance of a mining company. Often people are not prepared for the impacts, such as a rise in housing costs or property taxes. They are also ill prepared for the divisiveness that can be engendered by the entrance of a mining company. Mining companies often aim to "divide and conquer," consulting with pro-mining groups and virtually ignoring anti-mining voices. Families and communities are often fractured by the decisions that are made. It may be helpful for communities to anticipate local changes and foresee ways to minimize impacts.²

² Janet Epps refers to this aspect as "the likely effects of development on normal evolutionary processes within the community (way of life, relationships, behaviour, social resilience) (Epps, 2000).

3.4 Information needs from other sectors

3.4.1 Mining industry and the economy.

Community members may want to know about the role of mining in the countries' economy. For example, they may seek information on:

- The history or future of the industry in the country or abroad,
- The structure and function of stock exchanges, and
- The background to international pricing of metals.

While it may not be the role of the company to provide these portfolios, NGOs may be involved in searching for and releasing this information.

3.4.2 Rights.

Communities and mineworkers should be informed about their rights and obligations under legislation in force in their respective countries and in the country of the parent company. Information should be provided regarding labor codes and practices, protection of the environment, mining regulations, land tenure, indigenous populations rights, etc.

Another important element within the area of information exchanges is related to the communities' access to legal resources available to them in their own countries, as well as to those available to the communities in the countries where mining companies have their legal seats.

4 Information Sharing Mechanisms and Capacity Building

This list of information needs is incomplete without a discussion of information sharing mechanisms and capacity building. Communities, especially those in remote areas, have difficulties in accessing and understanding information about the mining industry. Some companies may be proactive, providing community members with information and support to use and disseminate it. Networks of mining communities, such as the organization of mining communities in Peru (CONACAME) or NGO or CBO networks may also serve communities as decision-support teams. It is likely that many actors will need to support communities in the quest to participate in decisions about mining.

7 It is likely that many actors will need to support communities in the quest to participate in decisions about mining.

Access to information should be permanent, reliable, and available to every community that is affected by the mining industry. The following list describes some of the potential resources or mechanisms that can be developed to help a community to build the capacity to absorb, create and use information and negotiate the development of proposed mining development.

4.1.1 *Local resource centre.*

People can develop a local resource center to coordinate the flow of information about a specific mine or set of mines. Individual community members may need to bear the responsibility for acquiring and disseminating information as well as for the establishment and continuing operation of the resource centre. Staff at resources centres can help citizens to understand the effects of mining development, serve as a facilitator between industry and the community, and identify opportunities for capacity building. Several communities and companies could share costs.

4.1.2 *Clearing houses and databases.*

Communities and companies may both be in a better position if they have assured access to clearing houses or databases on mining activities around the world. Clearinghouses could provide access to impact and benefit agreements, community-company agreements and social and environmental impact assessments. Financial support could be obtained from companies, international development institutions and national and international NGOs.

Two examples of clearinghouses currently exist. In South Africa, a voluntary web-based clearinghouse jointly run by environmental NGOs, CBOs and the mining industry shows promise for facilitating information transfer between groups (Courtnage et al. 2000)³. The International Labour Organization's Business and Social Initiatives Database also provides information on the labour and employment dimension of corporate social responsibility. The database features corporate policies and reports, codes of conduct, accreditation and certification criteria, labelling and other programmes. It allows browsers to undertake customized searches to retrieve information on specific companies and organizations, countries, regions, business sectors and labour and employment issues.⁴

Community members may not be able to use this kind of data if they do not have internet and phone access, which is the case in most remote and poor communities. Further, voluntary initiatives are often flawed as only leading edge companies are become involved in them.

4.1.3 *Electronic and printed bulletins.*

The dissemination of information can be undertaken through the use of the Internet or by relying on print, radio and television. Communities and networks can be encouraged to publish regular electronic and/or printed bulletins, in which stories, experiences, technical data and useful information are shared among stakeholders and the wider international community. For example, CooperAccion in Peru publishes a monthly electronic bulletin, *Current Mining Affairs in Peru*.⁵ Several communities could share costs or seek funding from companies, NGOs and international organizations.

³ www.cominfo.org.za/mcc/mcc.htm

⁴ <http://oracle02.ilo.org:6060/vpi/vpisearch.first>

⁵ CooperAccion - Acción Solidaria para el Desarrollo – cooperac@chavin.rcp.net.pe

4.1.4 Access to independent expertise.

Most communities do not have the capacity to assess the full impacts of mining development. Nor should communities have to understand and assess the impacts, but those that want to participate in processes should have access to technical knowledge and expertise. Often people in communities cannot even articulate the need for independent expertise. Experts can be hired to assess company reports and studies, or alternatively, some individuals in communities may be trained and provided with the support to be involved in evaluation of mining activities.

4.1.5 Technical capacity.

Lack of access to computers, even electricity, hinders many people from attaining any information. Many poor communities in Peru share one telephone for the entire community and access to computers is unheard of. If they could have a computer in some of these communities, they still lack electricity. Even when there is a computer available there often is a shortage of trained personnel to maintain computer systems or trouble shoot problems. Funding for computer technologies, electrification, and capacity building in skills associated with computer usage is desperately needed at NGO and community levels in many areas affected by mining development.

4.1.6 Capacity building.

When individuals want to participate in or affect the mining decision-making process, they need to absorb a massive amount of material. There are many levels of capacity building that could help communities to engage in the discussion of mining development. For example, capacity building could involve literacy programs, training of community experts or programs on the process of mining development, among others.⁶

To participate in mining development decision making, community members are often required to participate in a debate adhering to strict rules. Emotional arguments are discounted, so community members need to establish their credibility. This process of learning the "rules of the game" can be an intensive process for community members. Capacity building for citizens is necessary so that they can participate on equal footing with companies to jointly decide about the future of mining.

Government and community representatives in northern Canada participated in a capacity building program. The two-day course held on risk assessment in the aboriginal community of Deline helped a community negotiating team to understand the methods to be used to study previous exposure of the population to uranium. A parallel course helped government scientists to understand the basis and structure of traditional knowledge about wildlife populations and variations in ecosystem health.

⁶ For a review of capacity building programs, please see another MMSD commissioned paper, *Key Elements of Capacity Building*, by Ginger Gibson, gibson@aesop.rutgers.edu

4.1.7 *Monitoring realities.*

Community members can be trained to monitor changes experienced in communities, such as the influx of workers, socioeconomic changes, or environmental change. Dr. Martha McIntyre, interviewed for this research, spoke of training community leaders in Papua New Guinea to monitor basic social and economic indicators.

4.1.8 *Funding mechanisms.*

For key leaders to participate in, digest and disseminate information to their communities, funding will be required. Indigenous people in Canada have developed administrative structures to receive funds from companies to develop local capacity about mining development. However, companies often have concerns about local transparency and accountability with funds. In many Latin American companies, receiving company funds is tantamount to working for the company. Hence, most mining communities still prefer to seek funds from other sources.

Studies of administrative structures that encourage transparency, independence and accountability are needed to support further growth of community involvement in decisions related to mining development.

4.1.9 *Translation services.*

Most of the data pertaining to mining and the companies is produced in English-speaking countries. Communities need translation services because inaccessible information is no information at all.

5 **Conclusions and recommendations**

This research has focused on the key information needs of communities affected and involved in mining. The following conclusions can be made:

1. *Communication throughout.* Community members suggest that communication needs to start during exploration and continue throughout the life cycle of the mine.
2. *Communication goes both ways.* Communication is about listening as much as it is about providing information. Communities are best placed to advise companies and governments on the channels, formats and plans for communication in an area.
3. *Companies play a critical role in generating information.* Companies should provide information on the scope, impacts and benefits of the mine. Communities may also want to know about the company's background and track record as well as structures for sharing benefits. Most communities currently struggle to get access to this information.
4. *Agencies can drive change.* Agencies should provide support to communities in accessing and using information about mining development and economic opportunities. Agencies should also describe the role of the government in permitting and monitoring mining. Finally, a key role of agencies will be to drive the process of emergency

response planning with communities and companies. Many companies still steer clear of joint planning for emergencies.

5. *Communities provide information.* Community members can provide critical information on the effects of mining on an area. Communities may need support to foresee the impacts of mining and plan to mitigate them. Further, communities will need support to access, understand and use information about mining development.
6. Mechanisms and funds to support community access to information. Many structures and mechanisms exist to support community involvement in negotiating mining development. The mechanisms reviewed in this paper include local resource centres, clearinghouses and databases, bulletins, and access to independent expertise. Capacity building programs to enable community involvement are critical. Companies, governments and independent foundations could provide funding for these initiatives.
7. *Companies hold more power than communities and efforts should be made to reduce power imbalances.* Companies have the funds to pay for experts and research studies. Mining communities are often remote and seldom have funds to fund studies or independent reviews. Further, companies usually are located near to lending institutions, regulatory agencies and media outlets. Strategies to reduce the power imbalances that communities affected by mining face should be considered through capacity building.

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