Proposal to Explore the Use of New Strategies to Create a Community Based Decision Making Process for Indigenous Peoples

Gary J. Marchioro

Edith Cowan University
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Gary Marchioro  
Edith Cowan University, Australia  
g.marchioro@ecu.edu.au

Abstract: The area of project management by definition focuses on how a project is to be executed, monitored and controlled in a defined period of time. Companies routinely adopt project management as the preferred method of working (Eve 2007). The project management plan typically covers topics such as scope, resource risk and schedule management but, does not adequately address other associated issues. Integrating resource management strategies that address sustainability and community concerns provide challenges to the traditional discipline of project management. Inadequate opportunity to be actively involved adds another level of concern and raises questions about the effectiveness of existing tools and strategies to elicit community involvement and ensure a process that will produce effective long term results. Lack of consultation with the community regarding planning decisions also carries perceived risks of marginalisation of community attitudes, and can escalate controversy and associated political pressures surrounding decisions. New-generation project management tools afford the opportunity to create a collaborative space where project participants have the opportunity to be potential contributors. Running in parallel constructs such as Sense Of Place (SOP) is presented as a set of possible principles to consider in the planning and consultation process. Collaborative efforts in natural resource management and environmental dispute resolution continue to evolve. There is a need for periodic review and assessment of the collaborative process and the lessons that have been learned. Documenting and learning from the process needs to be a focus for all parties involved.

Keywords: sustainability, project management, indigenous populations, sense of place and community consultation

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on an ongoing case study located in the north western region of Western Australia. The paper outlines a scenario where large Australian mining companies faces new challenges in resource development planning and implementation strategies. A new sustainability framework and planning tool is presented to help create better decision making and long term positive community results in an environment characterised by competing demands and complex cultural issues. The aim of this thesis is to explore whether new principles and contemporary approaches can be translated into a model that could be implemented as a potential turnkey project management and consultation tool for resource projects. A case study approach along with multiple research methodologies exploring views on sustainability, indigenous populations and project management will be presented.

2. Background

Approximately 300,000 Aboriginal people, speaking around 250 languages inhabited Australia in the late 18th century. The British, finding no obvious political structure, took Australia as their own (http://www.australianexplorer.com/australian_history.htm). Restrictions on where Aboriginals could live and work resulted in families being broken up under a policy of segregation. Assimilation became the government’s stated policy and Aboriginal rights were removed and attempts were made to ‘Europeanise’ them. The 1960's witnessed a new policy of social inclusion. Legislation was passed enabling Aboriginals to be granted Australian citizenship. By 1972 indigenous people were given back limited rights to own their land.

Federal and state governments recognising this importance began to legislate to return certain Crown (government-owned) land to Indigenous communities using the Native Title Act (1993) to establish a framework for the protection and recognition of native title. More recently, mining companies have been actively involved under their sustainability, reputation agendas and corporate social responsibility charters in ensuring adherence to these laws and in some cases extending their role in the community space.

3. Background Browse development

The Browse Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) development involves a number of large publicly listed companies referred to as the Browse Joint Venture. A range of differing views exist on locating a major industrial complex on the Kimberley coast. The State Government gave in-principle agreement to the construction of the precinct despite alternate views. James Price Point was selected as the preferred site.
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to undergo a full assessment because it satisfied several criteria, including avoiding the most environmentally and culturally significant areas of the Kimberley’s coastline. James Price Point was initially supported by Indigenous interests for further investigation (Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities 2011). However, other related issues are proving more contentious. Different perspectives on moves to build a Kimberley gas precinct exist. For example, it is recognised that reserves of gas will provide immense export revenue for the country. Divisions within the Aboriginal communities are a current matter of on-going dispute in negotiations (Mills 2010).

Planning decisions that are based on engineering and economic efficiency are often influenced by political judgement rather than the express desire of the community. When local communities are not involved in the decision-making process, the outcome is generally a land use plan that does not reflect the needs, concerns and values of the communities (Moote and McClaran 1996). One of the main challenges to sustainable land planning is resolving disputes among competing stakeholders over the use of limited natural resources resulting in demands for a consultative process (Frame et al., 2004 in Tapsuwan, et al 2008). The consultative approach and the tools available are critical to the overall success of the project. Increased public interest in decisions affecting the environment, combined with recognition of the limitations of traditional top-down approaches, have provided further impetus to the development of new collaborative processes (Paulson and Chamberlin 1998). However, defining the concept of community is problematic. "What constitutes an Aboriginal community?" Not all Aboriginal people identify with communities and leadership notions (Peters-Little 2000). The aim of this thesis is to develop a sustainable framework and planning tool to help create better decision making the Aboriginal community require special attention.

4. Leadership and community issues impacting on the project

Two main thoughts on the issue of Aboriginal leadership currently exist: that Aboriginal people’s notions of leadership clash with white concepts of leadership, and that conflict will always arise when Aboriginal people are expected to conform to the latter (Peters-Little 2000). Aboriginal community organisations have become the representative 'gate-keepers' of communities. However, they are somewhat problematic because the prominent families in the rural towns tend to lead them. These organisations have an advantage over other Aboriginal families and consciously foster the use of the concept of 'community' for their own benefit and to the disadvantage of less powerful language groups (Gerritsen 1982). The Aboriginal world view is based largely on interactional relationships, as distinct from transactional relationships common to western societies and business relationships. The fact that most Aboriginal communities are artificial constructs further compounds the problem.

These communities were artificially created by missionaries and governments over a long period of time (Cook 1994). The amalgamation of previously separate hunter gatherer families, clans and tribes from their own traditional lands to land belonging to one particular Aboriginal group (on which the government or mission established the community), provides for a legacy of difficulties when it comes to control of community based resources (Cook 1994). Traditional lands are very important to Aboriginal people, both in terms of their attachment to it and control of natural resources. Land, therefore, can provide a basis for unequal control of community resources and provide a multitude of associated issues (Cook 1994).

Moreover, in these distinct clans and often linguistically heterogeneous communities, there is a high degree of tension and associated politicking between different Aboriginal factions. Leaders of such factions are said to gain their power from both traditional custodianship of land as well as their expertise in ‘Whitefella’ savvy business. Gerritsen’s study of communities in the Katherine region (Northern Territory) found an absence of democratic processes within particular kinship and family groups (Gerritsen 1982).

The degree of non-Aboriginal control over community organizations and the number of external organisations advocating a developmental ideology that traditionally orientated Aboriginal people do not share further exacerbates the problem. Indeed, non-Aboriginal control over these communities is acknowledged by the government to be a major deterrent to self-management and self-determination (Cook 1994). Therefore, the use of the term ‘community’ without proper Aboriginal consultation, self analysis and definition has acted as a barrier to self determination (Smith 1990). Aboriginal people have endured years of oppression and division. It is unrealistic to expect all loyalties to kin and tribes to disappear if structures of ‘community’ boards are based on Western notions of ‘representativeness’ (Tatz 1977). The integration of land, spirit beings, people and trees does not lend itself to dissemination and
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scientific analysis since the focus is on apparent qualities and relationships between physical and spiritual entities (Cook 1994).

Indeed many problems are generated by community based organisations, many of which were set up under government and mission auspices with western structures of control and accountability (Cook 1994). Aboriginal people must clearly define their leadership structure including what and who their elders are, identify and define their community, and its distinctive features, and acknowledge the input they have had in the shaping of their community and identity (Peters-Little 2000). The development of the alternative more popularised notions of ‘community’ need to be addressed. There are various ‘introduced and artificial boundaries’ in rural Aboriginal towns that need to be deconstructed (Peters-Little 2000). Without this any moves by resource companies will be ineffective despite setting up and funding community organisations to help mitigate the issues.

The relationship between society, the individual, and the economy are not necessarily widely held by Indigenous people themselves; in fact, they may well be opposed. Within Indigenous groups, value is typically placed on particular sets of relationships to other people within particular social networks (especially those of kinship), and on connections to specific regions and locales (Martin 2002). The values accorded to such ‘economic’ matters as work, cash, consumer goods, entrepreneurship, investment, and productivity, may differ significantly from those which enable individuals and groups to compete effectively in the wider economy (Martin 2002).

A significant point of difference lies in the focus of mutual obligation on individuals. It implicitly assumes that social and economic change should be driven through changes in the circumstances, skills, and opportunities of individuals. However, this focus on the individual does not reflect common principles of Indigenous social, economic, and political organisation. Nor does it reflect the fact that the problems associated with the cumulative effects of historical exclusion and welfare dependency in many Indigenous communities (Martin 2002). For resource companies to be effective, they must take account of the particular ways in which individual participants, in each scheme, are embedded within their social networks and groups, for example those of family and kin (Martin 2002).

Paradoxically, companies and governments seek what they term ‘community support’ for their policies, and will legitimate policy changes in terms of this supposed support (Peters-Little 2000). However, Indigenous communities are highly complex and internally differentiated (Peters-Little 2000). Aboriginal communities are artificial in nature. Their populations are differentiated in terms of connections with ancestral land and language, personal and group histories, ethnicity, and bearing on all of these, family and other local group affiliations (Martin 2002). Indigenous people typically do not operate in terms of their ‘community’; rather, their place in the Indigenous world, and their responses to the non-Indigenous society, are established through their place as a member of their particular family (Sutton 1998).

5. Collaborative processes

Increased public interest in decisions affecting the environment and natural resource use, combined with recognition of the limitations of traditional top-down approaches, have led to the development of collaborative processes in the last few decades (Paulson 1998). Collaborative efforts in natural resource management and environmental dispute resolution continue to evolve, and there is need for periodic review and assessment of collaboration and the lessons that have been learned (Paulson 1998). Applying this definition to the case study and expecting a collaborative process to emerge is obviously challenging for any community or organisation. This research question attempts to provide some general guidelines and principles of collaboration that reflect the experience gained over recent years and to pose the question of what new developments could be used effectively to help ensure better outcomes.

Mining companies are faced with growing societal demands that a sufficient portion of the benefits from mining profits should flow to local communities to ensure they are adequately compensated for any negative social impacts they may experience (Esteves and Vanclay 2009). As outlined the paper also recognises the particular circumstances and legacies that the indigenous population presents to the mining industry and attempts to employ a variety of tools and new methodologies to help mitigate potential problems.

6. New tools

Social Development Needs Analysis (SDA) is introduced as an enhancement to participatory Social Impact Assessment methods to give practical guidance to site managers in evaluating community
investment alternatives (Esteves and Vanclay 2009). SDA identifies critical social issues that need to be addressed in order for a company to contribute to a have net positive impact in the community (Esteves and Vanclay 2009). SDA is one example of the advantage of examining a suite of tools to help achieve better outcomes. Other tools that are more directly relevant to the indigenous peoples’ relationship with the land also need to be presented. While planning decisions may be technically sound intangible values that make proposed planning less or more acceptable to the community as a whole or groups can prove critical. Empirical research has demonstrated the level of emotional connection with a place has an effect on people’s willingness to protect it (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001; Tucker et al 2006). Walker and Ryan (2008) suggest that there is a strong positive correlation between local residents’ attachment to the rural landscape and their level of support for conservation planning. Cantrill and Senecah 2001 summarized the theoretical definitions of SOP construct into three main groups. The first group considers SOP as personal and collective meanings that intersect at a particular physical site. The second group sees SOP as the bond between individuals and particular places. The third group believes that SOP is the perception of what is most salient in a specific location, which may be reflected in value preferences. With its definition spanning both the psychological and physical space, SOP offers great potential to bridge the gap between the science of ecosystems and their management. This can be achieved because it offers ecosystem managers a way to understand and respond to the emotional and spiritual bonds people form with certain places (Williams and Stewart 1998). For this reason it is especially relevant and appropriate to this research project given the connection between indigenous people and the land. SOP has been further refined which is of direct relevance to the case study and integral relationship indigenous people have with the land.

Psychological SOP is a theoretical construct which examines three components of an individual’s relationship with a location (Jorgensen and Stedman 2001). These components are typically Place identity, Place attachment and Place dependence. The theoretical conception of attachment to place describes Place attachment as comprised of a person’s identity (Place identity) with a place and a person’s dependence (Place dependence) on a place (Proshansky et al. 1983). A competing viewpoint is that an overall SOP is tripartite and multidimensional with each dimension representing different components of an individual’s attitude (see Stedman, 2002; Nanzer, 2004; Tucker et al., 2006; Jorgensen and Stedman 2006). Place dependence is the behavioural component and relates to the strength of the relationship between an individual and the ability of a place to fulfill certain instrumental needs (Stedman 2002). Place attachment is the emotive component of SOP and refers to a positive emotional bond that develops between the individual and their environment (Altman and Low 1992).

A full typology of place values that represent the social, spiritual and economic values nested in landscapes is a critical part of recognising the intrinsic relationships between the symbolic and material components of decision-making in landscape management (Wardell Johnson 2005). Different sectors of social catchments contributing to the decision-making making process have different ways of valuing landscapes. Explicit acknowledgement of these differences is critical if we are to adequately understand and effectively implement new approaches in governance and management. In this case study the Social Needs Assessment must consider the dimensions of place dependence, place identity and emotional bonding that are formed by the indigenous populations and how these elements affect their values and decision making processes. Knowledge of this process is critical if we are to understand how to effectively communicate with indigenous populations. By effectively understanding the process and incorporating it within a general management process of sustainable management practices can provide a template for development projects.

Lack of consultation with the community regarding planning decisions also carries the risk of the perceived marginalisation of community attitudes, and consequently can inflate controversy and associated political pressures surrounding decisions. Many project management methodologies have not yet integrated sustainability into their internal processes. Making the connection between sustainability and project management more visible is vital. Incorporating sustainability in the project management cycle and making it a visible part of the project discipline is a necessary addition to meet new demands. Creating project management policies in which sustainability is embedded is necessary to improve the level of explicit sustainability practices in an organisation and meet new and growing community demands.

Companies are increasingly aware of sustainability as a management practice and as a strategic driver in the companies’ operations (Grevelman and Kluwstra 2010). The sustainability issue for many mining operations in Australia now involves integrating the interests of indigenous populations as one of many
stakeholders that demands increased attention (Working with Indigenous Communities 2007). A new set of demands partially evolved around community relations and indigenous affairs wrapped up in the sustainability umbrella has now surfaced. To compound the problem mining companies have allocated budgets to the issue but, appear to have limited real knowledge of how to allocate resources under the sustainability banner. In addition, new sets of learning needs to be achieved as people exit companies. The mining sector is characterised by a fluid recruitment sector with high turnover resulting in a loss of corporate memory and expertise. Solomon et al. (2008) argue that the social dimensions of resource communities are critical yet remain the least understood aspect of the business.

Addressing regional development will require an integrated and collaborative partnership approach between industry, government and community sectors. Embedding sustainable development principles into site operations, and working closely with local suppliers are two important success factors in this process. However, the complexity and interdependency of the challenges confronting the case study indicate that much wider engagement is necessary. Partnerships and regional coordination between industry, government and the community are important, especially those that take a regional and multidisciplinary approach.

7. How to achieve it?

In addition to general guidelines the role that collaboration should play in shifting or maintaining relative power is a fundamental issue that society has only begun to recognize and consider. The extent to which collaborative processes can or should replace more traditional forms of resource management and environmental decision-making is another unresolved question. New-generation project management tools make it possible to create a collaborative space. Ideally, everyone involved in the project is able to contribute to the project in a team oriented manner. In this scenario a project is managed by the whole team. Each team member has the requisite project information. Project progress is highly visible to everyone on the team-and the team ‘owns’ the project’s progress. A project manager transforms from taskmaster to project visionary and has input to the project development. Other tools are also available. Emergent structures are patterns that cannot result from a small set of rules or events. They are more than the sum of their parts because the emergent order will not arise if the various parts are simply coexisting; the interaction of these parts is central. The way emerging structures operate in project management is as follows: If different parts of the organization or different members of the team designed a structure that works for them then when they collaborate and apply collective intelligence, they start to align those structures together (http://www.basdebaar.com/emerging-structures-in-project-management-andrew-filev-432.html). This approach is directly relevant to the case study by allowing a more participative approach in the community to satisfy the requirement to draw from various parts rather than a small set of rules that could liberate projects from their legacy of dependency.

These new-generation tools remove part of the traditional project manager’s burden and allow greater focus on higher level responsibilities. New-generation technologies create a collective intelligence into the project management process and facilitate emergent structures. Traditional project management software with one-to-many work breakdown structures can’t adequately accommodate a number of interdependent sub-projects. Project management 2.0 tools have fewer restrictions and allow structures to emerge, without the limitations of strong central control. Collaborative planning tools for example, Wrike, utilise hierarchies that are many-to-many, in contrast to one-to-many hierarchy in traditional tools. Traditional project management tools typically rely on a single work-breakdown structure and/or separate project workspaces, so they do not allow harnessing the full power of collective intelligence and emergent structures in the organization. There needs to be better and smarter methods available to organize tasks, collect and document project information and manage projects particularly in complex environments.

Collaborative planning tools allow team members to create meaningful lists of project-related tasks that help understanding. Some of the tasks can be shared among the team members to allow a clearer vision of the project. Planning and project management is automated. The focus of software development tools has shifted towards ‘team-aware’ tools that explicitly support communication and cooperation. Many of these collaboration features draw on lightweight technologies that are associated with Web 2.0 such as social tagging or wikis (http://ctreu.de.wordpress.com/2010/01/25/emergent-knowledge-structures). Empowered by emergent structures and collective intelligence, project managers can combine field knowledge feeding bottom-up with the guidance coming top-down. Complete visibility creates faster changes in the business environment allowing a more proactive business environment.
The case study approach proposed in this thesis will rely on secondary data available through existing mining developments. Where necessary, new data will be overlaid incorporating in particular the SOP constructs sourced and assessed from the indigenous populations. New-generation tools as discussed in this paper will be tested for their usefulness in bridging the gap between traditional management practices and the need to incorporate the sustainable social needs of indigenous populations. In the first instance the work will involve analysing existing data available across a wide range of areas from the mining sector. Data from these existing secondary sources, key stakeholders from within the mining companies and the indigenous population will be merged with the aid of new technology tools to examine how the model fits together. This approach presents an opportunity to develop a best practice example to test the model’s utility and relevance. The information presented also affords the opportunity to include SOP into the existing social needs analysis and then use tools such as emergent structures to provide the collaborative space for all parties to contribute.

8. Conclusion

This case study presents a set of contemporary issue for indigenous people, the community and resource companies. New sustainability framework and planning tools are required to help create better decision making and long term positive community results in an environment characterised by competing demands and complex cultural issues. Large scale projects cannot adequately manage the inherent demands of project management and the growing and changing needs for real community participation and development without the assistance of new tools. Investigating the utility of the current tools available to enhance community involvement is an opportunity to bridge the gap in long term sustainable relationships and real community involvement.

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