Mining is a lot more than complex technology, logistics and finance. While mineral extraction does require an amazing array of machinery, computers, and processes for transporting and treating the materials, it is just as much a social project that is negotiated and conducted within a social context.

And just as the technological challenges require qualified engineers, geologists and other specialists, the social aspects of mining demand skilled, sophisticated experts who can lay the foundations for productive dialogue between communities, governments and project proponents.

Such a dialogue is critical to the viability of mining projects today. Securing the support of not only the communities immediately surrounding a site but of the larger society can be accomplished only within a framework of understanding that can endure throughout the life cycle of a project. Whether this step is required by law or pursued voluntarily, few mining projects can hope to succeed over the long term without it. Continuous dialogue among governments, communities and extractive companies that involves a consensus about both sharing opportunities and managing risk is essential.

Latin America is ahead of other regions in the expertise and practice of dialogue around mining. Largely as a result of its history of conflicts over mining, the region has generated scores of groups dedicated to fostering dialogue at all levels: project, regional and national.

With the support of the International Mining for Development Centre, we conducted two workshops in November 2013 in Lima, Peru, that were aimed at tapping this rich experience—and learning from it. The workshops included more than 60 specialists from 10 countries in the Americas: Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Panama, and Peru—with representatives from Australia.

Here are some of the things we learned.1

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 kale is an important in the early phases of development. Early dialogue, such as free, prior and informed consultation and/or consent, is important not just to reach out to communities, but also to help inform decision making and integrate a plurality of perspectives and norms into the company’s plan and operation. Early on, there are also opportunities to optimize project design for social and environmental outcomes and to establish the forums to maintain this focus over the life of the project.

But dialogue must also be a continuous process with multiple actors. Dialogue plays an important role in policy making, impact assessment, regulatory approval, and negotiating agreements with Indigenous and local communities. It also involves participatory monitoring and collaboratively setting the conditions for the closure of the mine. In short, dialogue must be embedded into all aspects of the life cycle of a project.

Spaces for dialogue on natural resource extraction have emerged in many countries in Latin America over the past decade. Peru’s long-standing Grupo de Diálogo Minera y Desarrollo Sostenible (Dialogue Group on Mining and Sustainable Development—GDMS), established 13 years ago, is now a network of over 500 people.

In the past three to five years, similar groups have emerged in Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, Brazil, and Colombia, to mention a few, and there is interest in Guatemala, the Dominican Republic and Panama. Within Latin America, a network now exists that promotes exchange between members, organizes international, multi-stakeholder forums, and seeks to support the technical capacity of dialogue initiatives at the national and regional levels.

The core function of these dialogue groups is to create social capital among diverse participants. While the motivations and support for a dialogue group might vary, they generally share an understanding that dialogue, as an approach in itself, must be promoted and dialogue skills developed. The groups help build a culture for dialogue by allowing participants to learn through non-binding processes that permit seemingly incompatible actors to approach each other.

Dialogue groups have a multitude of functions. Some put forward position papers (e.g. Peru). Others commission research to inform the public about mining (e.g. Colombia). Several host speakers from different backgrounds to speak to particular issues. Most serve as a platform for forming relationships outside the pressures of negotiation processes, giving participants an opportunity to challenge stereotypes about different stakeholders. In national contexts where the debate on mining and its role in development is highly polarized, such as in Colombia or Argentina, dialogue tables can generate reliable information and shift polarization to informed debate.

The dialogue groups of Peru and Argentina have formed sub-groups that focus on specific themes, such as impact assessment and royalties. The Peruvian group has been particularly influential in the debate around the canon minero (the redistribution of mining revenue to regional and local governments) and citizen participation in the mining sector, while providing support for regional dialogue tables and regional leaders.

Knowledge-sharing among groups and countries is a key benefit of broader dialogue networks, helping to improve processes and even regulations around complex topics such as consulta previa and revenue sharing.

GET STARTED EARLY AND KEEP IT GOING

S ustaining dialogue isn’t easy. Mining industry proponents may fear losing control when the mining project is opened to outsiders. Some find that government or industry willingness to participate in a non-binding dialogue process is limited or changes over time. Early on, a key challenge is to begin bridging ideological, political or trust barriers to get actors to “talk mining.”

These issues are more significant where a critical mass around dialogue has not been built, and industry, civil society, community, and government actors from various territorial levels have not developed the habits or skills for effective dialogue. Effort is needed to harmonize often diametrically opposed understandings of critical timelines. Some actors seek immediate results, while others need time to come to the table.

Even the act of bringing people together from diverse sectors can be unexpectedly complicated. Such processes typically require time commitments that might be difficult to accommodate for public servants or industry professionals. Regional or local stakeholders may need dialogue to come to them or may require resources or time for issues to be consulted on at a grassroots level.

Furthermore, difficulties might arise in connecting a dialogue table or group with other relevant dialogue processes and institutions in the government or private sector.

BUILD BRIDGES

i n countries like Peru, there is already an established dialogue infrastructure with numerous local and regional levels. At the local level, organizations such as the Tintaya mesa de diálogo (dialogue table) have many years of experience working through project-specific issues. At the national level, the Peruvian government has the Oficina Nacional de Diálogo y Sostenibilidad (National Office for Dialogue and Sustainability) that has devised indicators to monitor conflict potential and deploys personnel nationally to help bridge conflicts and promote agreement negotiation.

The office has proposed a National System for Conflict Prevention and Management. Peru also has a Defensoria del Pueblo whose mandate centers on supervising the work of the state and defending fundamental rights. Over the past decade it developed a framework on conflict that ranges from conflict monitoring and early warning systems to mediation. The Ministry of Energy and Mines is also playing a role promoting mesas de diálogo as spaces of intersectorial dialogue. All of these multiple spaces reflect various ways of approaching conflict transformation or of situating dialogue and mining in relation to each other. An encouraging trend is that across Latin America, groups like the Latin American Dialogue Group are networked and meet regularly to share experiences and promote a common agenda.

STAY CONNECTED

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The environmental impact assessment that governments require for new mining projects can be a vehicle for underlying or emerging conflict or dissatisfaction to get some air time. A new extractive project invariably brings uncertainty, fear of change and clashing priorities. This early stage of a project mobilizes opponents and creates a period of vulnerability for project proponents.

For this reason, the environmental impact assessment should be perceived as a political process, in which building relationships and trust can weigh more than scientific conclusions about impacts and their management. There are many examples of projects that have received formal approval from government agencies on the basis of their environmental impact statement, only to face community backlash on the very same issues that were addressed in it.

Impact assessment can be largely meaningless to communities in the absence of conditions that can give it credibility. This is where dialogue comes in. Dialogue can help to build a credible and meaningful process.

To have credibility, legitimacy and reliability, impact assessment needs to be conceived as part of an ongoing process of understanding and adjusting. People have to trust the information they see.

One way to address this is through participatory or independent monitoring that takes place not just at the time of the assessment but throughout the life of projects. An exercise in citizen oversight, monitoring committees also allow relationship and trust building, the generation of reliable data, and the development of social capital to negotiate systems of environmental management.

In Peru, there have been experiences of participatory environmental monitoring in many regions, including Apurímac, Ancash, Cajamarca, Cusco, Junín, Moquegua, Pasco, and Puno. For example, in the case of Tintaya mine in Cusco, the community and business created a monitoring committee that lasted.

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