

Extraction: Tracing the veins

Massey University, New Zealand and the

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Presentation Transcript - Charles Roche

Asymmetric realities; can participant action research assist mining-affected communities?

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Centre for Responsible Citizenship and Sustainability, Murdoch University
and

Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Planning and Environmental Decision Making:

The Role of Community-Based Impact Assessments, UIT The Arctic University of Norway

Abstract: Contrary to hegemonic capitalist discourses, the reality of mining for development is contested, uneven and messy. Indeed, the gap between the discourse and actual outcomes is stark, especially for extractive-industry-dominated countries like Papua New Guinea. There, positive intentional benefits such as the provision of health services, education and roads are overwhelmed by the immanent impacts of extraction evident in the marginalisation of vulnerable women, cultural fragmentation and the spread of non-communicable and sexually transmitted diseases. Tired of partisan extremes, this purposeful and emancipatory participatory action-research project sought to harness Western and Indigenous knowledge to identify, challenge and avoid the injustices and asymmetries that dominate interactions between host communities and multinational mining companies. Based on ethics that acknowledge and value ontological differences, we used, and then refined *tok stori*¹ to challenge assumptions and practices; hoping to create a more positive development future. The challenge remains. Almost inevitably our interactions proved tangential to a process that mashes together self-determination and development need on one hand, with dominant discourses, reductionism and a political licence to operate on the other, somehow creating a perception of legitimacy, however flawed. Nevertheless, there was some success, with relationships sustained and information exchanged that supports the possibility of development justice. The meshing together of different perspectives, some based on different ontologies and epistemologies, created possibilities for change and mutual learning. We contend that these approaches, if applied as part of community-company relationships and impact assessment processes, are valuable pathways of engagement that could ensure that the human flourishing of communities is the primary goal of extractive development.

¹ A Melanesian methodology of reciprocal exchange with some shared characteristics with the Australian yarning methodology

1. Introduction [slide 1] This is a *tok stori* (story, yarn) about communities in Papua New Guinea (PNG). It is a brief fragment of a grander tale that has been lived and told for tens of thousands of years. My time with the communities is brief and contentious, responding to a clash of culture, different, but overlapping ontologies, asymmetric relations and a quest for development justice.

2. [slide 2] Whereas this story is about a proposed mine and journey to understand what that entails, and for the company, regulators and stakeholders to understand the lived reality of the impacts they are about to create. Impacts that go beyond environmental destruction, and social and cultural fragmentation; impacts that reflect and reinforce the epistemic violence of imperialism and colonialism. It is a story of using academic research to challenge the unequal outcomes of extraction, a naïve and ambitious agenda to achieve emancipatory outcomes that ended with a better understanding of the domination of Western epistemic orthodoxies, in mining and research.

3. [slide 3] This story starts before the research began. I had been working on the impacts of mining in Australia for many years and with communities in PNG since 2009, with the Mineral Policy Institute. It is the challenges witnessed and relationships fostered in that time that prompted me to better understand extractive impacts so as to avoid them. The research follows this aim, a wandering exploration of paradigms, perspectives, theories and interactions as I sought fresh insights to respond to extractive realities.

4. Note, I am not Indigenous, in talking today and in the research undertaken, I make no claim to speak for the Communities, but having listened to and learnt with them, I am willing to amplify their voices through our shared story. To be clear the communities I co-research with do not readily identify as Indigenous, for the most part they identify locally (*ples*), as well as Melanesian, Papuan and PNG'eans. Apart from self-identification, they satisfy any criteria for indigeneity and I use the term to situate their work in international conversations.

5. [slide 4] Part reactive, part pro-active, this project responds to existing and future realities in the Watut River Valley in the Morobe Province of PNG. The communities are heterogeneous with some living more Western lifestyles others have fairly traditional semi-subsistence, or hybrid lifestyles and livelihoods. What does that mean? It means they build their own houses, grow their own food, supply their own water; living on traditional land, relying on their skills, and communal reciprocity, with little Government intervention or assistance. They walk and then truck into town to sell produce, buy clothes, building materials, phones, health services and other essential and luxury items. They are hardworking artisanal miners, and/or food producers (cacao, vanilla, coconut, vegetables) that are keen to engage in the market.

6. [slide 5] The proposed Wafi-Golpu gold-copper mine, has been coming for more than forty years. In that time a sense of endless waiting for development has come to dominate all possible futures, leaving communities with an almost single minded focus and expectant dependency on the development that will, could, should accompany mining. The proposed mine is set within the context of a young country that asserted 5 enlightened national development goals

at independence in 1975, but since then has pursued national economic growth through the exploitation of natural resources (Kaiku, 2020; May, 2004).

7. [slide 6] But before we go any further let's meet the research team. First the Watut, Wafi and Venembeli Communities it is their land, their community and future that is the focus of the work and today's talk. Then the university team, those in Morobe Province, Howard Sindana, Nawasio Walim and Eugene John, who respectively focus on development outcomes, women rights and education, and art. And in Perth myself and my supervisors Martin Brueckner and Rochelle Spencer, a political economist and an anthropologist at Murdoch University.

8. Methodology. As the title indicates we used a participant action research approach; an iterative and reflexive mode that was circumscribed by the realities of our research focus and generally low levels of English, written and technical literacy. Being multidisciplinary, if not undisciplined, I make no claim to speak with paradigmatic authority, for the entire project is a messy assemblage of positivist (science data), transformative, pragmatic and Indigenous paradigms – not an entirely conformable fit for anyone (Cram & Mertens, 2015; Held, 2019).

9. Our approach was a mix of pedagogy and practice, meshing practical realities with education and information sharing between community and team researchers – a mutual process of listening and speaking. As a university team we had deliberate emancipatory ambitions - even as we realised that emancipation was not ours to deliver or even define. We needed research that was capable of unsettling the usual modalities of mining; research that privileged and was capable of recognising knowledge from the periphery, contributing not just to intellectual works in the Northern metropole but into Southern Theories; and research capable of tackling extractive issues, where the holders of power were produced by, governed by and beholden only to western values – we needed to speak their language (Connell, 2007; L. T. Smith, 2012).

10. Tok Stori/tok ples [slide 7] In our final work (articles 4 & 5) we used a *tok stori/tok ples* approach (exchanging stories from local language) (Roche et al., in review). This grew from a journey that started with yarning, and then morphed into *tok stori*, which is a mode of exchange with an emphasis on relationality and mutuality created by speakers and listeners (Sanga & Reynolds, 2019; Stead, 2013). But we were also aware of the dominance of Western thought that had permeated life in PNG, evident in a willingness to follow, and a reluctance to question, authority. So, after input from some *strongpla meri* (strong women) and reflecting on our previous engagements we adopted *tok stori/tok ples* as an extension of what Sanga et. al. (2018) described as a language of resistance.

11. In article four we described the aim as to focus attention using the villager's own language, and thereby remove the barriers imposed by languages with different ontological and epistemological foundations. This encouraged our community co-researchers to connect with their culture and values that are often unseen or rendered invisible by outsiders. The basic concept is that the elements of the *tok stori* is decided in *tok ples*, that community co-researchers talk first amongst themselves (in a language the team is illiterate in) before deciding what to share with the team (in Tok Pisin and English). It's not a perfect solution to the

dominance of Western perspectives, but it is implicitly respectful, with communities exerting power and control over the research.

12. So far, I've outlined the research project, the motivation behind it, the research, the contributors, and the methodology. That was all needed to situate the talk's specific focus on using participant action research to inform and learn from communities: and from that to alter the usual path of development; to inform legislation, policy and practice; and to contribute to theory and praxis. I will leave asymmetric realities that dominate company-community interactions to another time. Next I will step through the components of the research as they relate to the emancipatory and practical potential of PAR.

13. [slide 8] The work is captured in five articles and an exegesis: The articles focus on (1) A linking of geological data and mining trends with the governance of environmental and social impacts in PNG; (2) A pluricultural understanding of human flourishing in the Watut River Valley; (3) An exploration of mining impacts through the lens of extractive dispossession; (4) A *tok stori* about life in Venembeli, a village close to proposed mine; And (5) will be an epistemic critique of the impact assessment (IA) for the proposed Wafi-Golpu mine.

14. Human Flourishing (Roche, Walim, & Sindana, 2019). So, let's turn to human flourishing, known as *gutpla sindaun* in PNG. Applying a human flourishing lens allows us to think about the actual outcomes from mining, not in the way they were planned, or how outsiders might see or experience them, but in the way they are experienced by local people, an experience that is dependent on their own conception of human flourishing (well-being). While human flourishing has a neo-Aristotelian basis in the West (Rasmussen, 1999), our conceptualisation was also informed by a plurality of views, cultures and ontologies, such as *Ubuntu*, *Buen Vivir* or *Samak Kawsey* (Kothari, Demaria, & Acosta, 2014). In Papua New Guinea human flourishing fits within a wider understanding of the *Melanesian Way*, a term that describes an authentic and communal life marked by an interdependence with the plant and animal worlds (Narokobi, 1983). These conceptions of a good life both predate and respond to Western colonialism, and in doing so can inform and expand Western views of well-being; for example, to encompass the recognition of and application of flourishing concepts to non-human life. Using human flourishing also meant we could express values in the very language of Western hegemony, liberalism.

15. [slide 9] Here are some Community voices on *gutpla sindaun*. Particularly relevant to an often-external imposed mining development is the need to recognise and respect the importance of individual and collective agency to human flourishing, and the centrality of self-determination to development that contributes to, rather than diminishes human flourishing. Perhaps most importantly, by applying human flourishing to their own situation community researchers were better able to see an enlarged view of the mine's impacts and outcomes from their own community perspective. To be able to look past, or around the proposed mine and focus on their own well-being was valuable as a process for the community researchers, as well as enabling the non-community researchers to recognise how hegemonic mining approval processes were able to corral dissent and deny agency to communities.

16. Extractive Dispossession (Roche, Sindana, & Walim, 2019). Our second lens is dispossession, which we used to identify the potential impacts from mining based on the experience of communities elsewhere in PNG and around the world. The approach was a direct response to Community requests for information from a recipient rather than the usual management perspective. Needing to recognise the reality of living with the impacts of mining and challenge discourses that assumed commensurability, we developed and applied the concept of extractive dispossession based on the conceptual work of Harvey (2004) and the application of it in the Philippines by Holden, Nadeau, and Jacobson (2011).

17. The eleven factors of dispossession, many of which were overlapping or intersectional, were explained to our community researchers alongside the explanatory images. Today I will briefly introduce three of them. **[slide 10]** The first, ‘gendered realities’ depicts the usually gendered distribution of resource monies. **[slide 11]** The second, ‘whose consent’ depicts the exclusion of Communities from decision-making processes. **[slide 12]** Finally, the third, ‘others’ values’ captures the processes of imperialism and epistemicide that often accompany western controlled and/or imposed development. By identifying and naming these impacts, or factors of extractive dispossession, we sought to avoid them and maximise the human flourishing of Communities for generations.

18. Unseen existence [slide 13] (Roche et al., in review) With the benefit of 12 months of reflection, we were then able to engage the Venembeli Community using *tok stori-tok ples* as a participative methodology; a deliberately decolonial and emancipatory approach that was capable of seeing the Community through shared stories about children, village courtship and relationships, the experience of women and the diversity and role of food in day-to-day life. Their stories of existence are part of Venembeli’s story as it is now, existing alongside mineral exploration; and offer a glimpse of life in Venembeli before mining and the inevitable dispossession, displacement and fragmentation of a community. The intent of the research was to reveal aspects and realities of daily life in ways that the usual impact assessments fail to do. As importantly, the methodology and participation of the Venembeli Community helped them to see critical aspects and components of their human flourishing that exist now, that the mine could not deliver, and indeed was likely to harm. This was often captured in the saying ‘the mine can only offer what money can buy’, which implies that much of *gutpla sindaun* was situational and relational, both of which were vulnerable to the changes that mining would bring.

19. To better understand their story I will give some context. The Wafi River is the main reason the Community moved and settled there, and in addition to its practical uses for washing, playing and mining, it provides income for vulnerable women, and **[slide 14]** is a site of personal formation and the development of relations vital for the social reproduction of the village. The reality is that for the Wafi-Golpu mine to proceed the Village will have to be moved, or at least that has been the reality for the last 5-10 years, though, in part responding to our research, the proponents have been re-evaluating this decision. In mining language this is called resettlement, with new homes and services to entice and reward consent thus solving a mining management problem. **[slide 15]** We call it displacement, the uprooting of a Community and severing of connections, captured in the image of the Community, represented

as a *diwai* (tree) being removed for resettlement. Critically, the new alternate village sites are not near a large flowing river which is why we sought to uncover what the River's absence might have on the Community.

20. Outcomes. So, what does this mean for the future of the Wafi and Watut Communities? The Wafi-Golpu mine is currently in an assessment, negotiation and approval phase. While the end seems pre-determined, there is still hope that impacts can be lessened. Though it is hard to overestimate the extent that western cultural hegemony has dominated the forty years of waiting, the assessment of alternate futures and the final outcomes. Unfortunately, while valuable, our work was overwhelmed by the processes in place: the complexity of impacts; the low levels of English, technical and written literacy; the Communities' almost unquestioning desire for development; and the mining companies Newcrest Mining and Harmony Gold's willingness to reproduce the inequalities of the past as they ignore the epistemic violence of the process and the impacts they were about to impose.

21. [slide 16/1718 - community art as part of PAR/Indigenous Knowledge] From a research perspective we demonstrated the utility of participant action research as a methodology of exchange that altered the trajectory of our research, though it's too early to see whether it positively affected outcomes from the mine. We saw success, with evidence of insight and emancipation in their stories, questions and engagement; and in the way our co-researchers challenged us, and modified our methodology - a demonstration of agency that could also be applied to mining interactions. Mindful of negative and unintended consequences, we are hopeful our contribution has been a positive one, and are affirmed and reassured by the comments and thanks from our hosts and co-researchers.

22. [slide 17] We were able to demonstrate how human flourishing could be used to both inform stakeholders and encourage them on a journey of discovery that provides fresh perspectives on development, and challenges established industry understandings and practices. We note the human flourishing lens is also being applied to the extractive sector elsewhere in PNG, in Vietnam and the US (Evensen & Stedman, 2018; Nguyen, Boruff, & Tonts, 2017; Richardson, 2018), and most recently in an assessment of tourism in a post-covid world (Cheer, 2020).

23. Developed as a tool, the factors of extractive dispossession can identify potential impacts long before formal assessment processes and documents can. Indeed, it was designed to overcome impact assessment deficiencies where many decisions are made before specific impact assessments are made public. This systemic failure of process undermines the ability of communities to understand impacts, to properly evaluate options and to engage in negotiations with companies, regulators and politicians.

24. [slide 18] While our *tok stori/tok ples* approach was risky in handing over power to the community researchers, the outcomes were positive as we heard new and more complex stories. Unable to share them properly here, the stories are a statement of values and relationships that western, technocratic processes fail to see.

25. Mindful of Graham Smith's (2003) warning to not uncritically export aspects of Kaupapa Maori Theory, I venture to say that the process was one of conscientisation and transformation, though more of a circular process than a linear journey. A mixing and sharing of outside and Indigenous knowledge to inform communities, practice, researchers and theory. This reminds us that the university team's contribution on matters of mining or social justice is just a component of a grander journey that began before, and continues to respond to colonisation and extractivism. A resistance stifled, but not fully suppressed by imperial, capitalist and religious authorities, both historical and contemporary, and the national pursuit of extractive based development that conflicts with the very aims of PNG's constitution. And so, the cycle of colonialism continues; waiting to be challenged, ameliorated or broken, with a little help from a mutual and respectful learning approach as is supported by PAR.

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