IMPACT OF INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT ON TRADITIONAL COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

The impact of industrial development in remote locations in Australia
and its by-product, such as new towns, on local Aboriginal population,
are discussed. Assuming Aboriginal people have already been adequately
consulted about the new developments and have been made aware of their
possible consequences and further, that after appropriate negotiations
and financial arrangements, they have agreed to such developments,
their adverse and beneficial effects are discussed. Finally, a set of
guidelines relevant to planning and architecture professions are
proposed.

All over the world we can see that generally whenever any nation has
tried to exploit resources on a large scale, it had no hesitation in
trampling over the rights of indigenous cultures who are affected by
such incursions. I can cite many examples in both the developed and
developing countries - and Australia is no exception to this. There
are very few serious studies which specifically look at this important
issue. But the climate for such studies is now quite good because we
at least accept the principle that indigenous communities have special
needs and that their rights must be recognised and protected. These
communities have also themselves become highly politicised and they now
demand economic equity and autonomy and the right to make their own
decisions rather than someone else telling them what they should do and
what is good for them.

In Australia, the impact of industrial development on traditional
communities is direct as well as indirect. The indirect influence is
largely caused by changes in the physical environment which in turn
affects the Aboriginal people who are known to have close spiritual
and emotional links with their surroundings. In fact, according to
many anthropologists, they see themselves as an integral part of that
environment.

A more direct influence involves social interaction when an alien group
of people come face to face with a traditional community whose
attitudes, values, culture and lifestyle are totally different. The
implications are that cash is introduced to a subsistence economy, thus
suddenly forcing a whole new way of life on a people who are not quite
ready for it. But before we discuss these social issues, I would like

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to first mention something about the nature of Australia's industrial activity, particularly mining activity, the kind of towns and settlements it has generated and their impact on the physical development. I will then go on to comment about the social impact on the Aboriginal people and what could be done about it to minimise the blow.

In recent years mining industry in Australia has become very efficient and productive. It is the result of technological development involving exploration, mining, smelting, refining, transport and material handling down to infrastructure. So we have now a situation where even very large and extensive developments can be operated by a very small workforce. This workforce has to be highly skilled - skills which simply do not exist even among urban Aborigines - let alone the rural groups. So, it is no wonder these groups are virtually denied any access to this workforce.

In Australia, our older mining towns such as Broken Hill and Kalgoorlie had a much stronger impact on their surroundings. Timber was cut for domestic and industrial fuel. Domestic animals ate all the vegetation and the effect on the surrounding semi-desert environment was quite devastating, causing wind and water erosion. Mining in those days was a labour-intensive industry and towns were usually located close to the mine itself. New towns are more manageable.

There are two types of mining towns - closed company towns and open towns. Closed company towns are small, virtually single employer and landlord and one owner of all facilities, e.g., shops, recreation, etc. By contrast, in open towns such as Mt. Isa, Karratha, Port Hedland, mining company employees live and work with employees of other industries. These towns are usually administered by local government authorities.

As I said earlier, now mining industry has become capital-intensive, rather than labour-intensive, so the towns do not have to be big. Communications have also improved - so we can transport food, fuel and construction materials from long distances. The town doesn't have to sit next to the mine itself - so we have more flexibility in its location and size. New towns which are usually closed company towns are small and compact and provide first class, sophisticated amenities to workers who are highly educated and skilled and are offered great incentives to bring their families to remote areas. So the kind of impact these new towns have on their surroundings depends upon their function because on this depends the type of people who will live there, the extent of control and spread over local landscape. This impact also depends upon what stage the town is going through. For example, the impact during its early construction stage is very different from when it is well established.

In the early stages, usually a main access road or railway is built which, by diverting water, can damage vegetation and cause soil erosion. Proper location and careful engineering can avoid this. We don't have much of a choice about the location of the mine itself - it has to go where the ore body is. But we can be careful about where we put the works, or dumps, or the township - so that they do least damage to the vegetation, important landscape features and historical and cultural relics. We can preserve important areas by carefully fencing controlled areas and roads as early as possible.

Once the town is established, the main problem is to regulate the activities of the town population without being heavy handed about it. People don't like to stay put in one place. They are bound to go out and explore the local surroundings by using cars, jeeps, trail bikes. They go hunting and shooting, collecting and defacing relics of historic or cultural value - in fact, all those things which are sacred to the indigenous people and which may be damaged. To add to all this, mining activity in an area can also generate a host of other activities which may be counter-productive or seriously affect the environment. For instance, an access road for mining may generate tourist traffic which adds up to more people in the area.

A good place to study this phenomenon is Northern Territory's uranium district where you can feel a number of competing pressures. Here mining areas and leases are scattered all over the place with each located at or near the foot of the Arnhem Land's escarpment which also is the centre of many other activities - the National Park, Aboriginal reserves, missions, tourism and even beef production. The escarpment's sacred to the local Aboriginal people and has many rock paintings. Its spectacular scenery attracts tourists. The park has unique vegetation and wild life. In all this, we now have the miners muscling in. How much damage they can do will depend upon whether each mine develops a small town or one large centre is developed to meet all the needs of local industries. In fact, it requires the kind of coordination which ensures the conservation of the environment - yet allows controlled mining where, after proper consultation between Aboriginal people, government and the mining companies, a proper course has been agreed to by everyone.

Here communication with Aboriginal people is critical to the whole exercise, particularly the way it is handled by development agencies. To achieve any kind of rational planning, we now have all the necessary tools. There are strategies used by Ian McHarg and others which use detailed information from large scale aerial photographs and ground surveys: and then decide where to locate roads, towns, solid and liquid waste disposal, dumps and recreational areas. Even after the town has been established, one should pay ongoing attention to regulate affected areas, local controls, rules and educational programmes for tourists, mining employees and the Aboriginal communities to make everyone aware of the importance of local environment. After all, we must keep reminding ourselves that what we want to preserve is not just a piece of land but a whole culture associated with it and which cannot be measured in dollars and cents. I would now like to discuss the more direct impact on Aboriginal communities.

Broadly, one could classify Aboriginal people as those living in traditional ways and those living in towns and cities. Here we are mainly concerned with those with traditional background in remote areas where they are threatened by industrial development. They are the people who have retained a significant part of their tribal culture and social organisation. Their attitude to the development varies quite a bit. For instance, there are tribal and traditional cultural groups who, for various religious reasons, consider all tribal land to be sacred. They are totally opposed to any kind of intrusion into their land. There are those who consider specific selected areas as sacred and they are therefore opposed to development in those areas. There are other small groups who for historical reasons have lost belief in their own culture and no longer understand their traditional values. Their attitude to development is no different from Europeans. We must also accept that not all mining activity in Australia affects

Aboriginal land.

But there are extensive Aboriginal reserves, particularly in Northern Australia where large scale mining has already taken place, for example, Weipa in North Queensland and Nhulumby and Groote Eylandt in the Northern Territory. There are other places. For instance, RTZ, Comalco, Alcan and Shell have mining rights on well over 2000 square miles around Mapoon and Arukun in North East Australia. A Swiss company has bauxite mining leases over the eastern part of Arnhem Land reserve and another three uranium mining developments are going ahead on Aboriginal land on the western side. Arnhem Land is not only one of the largest Aboriginal reserves - it has more than 120 Aboriginal sites representing earliest known settlements in tropical Australia.

It has provided the world's oldest edge-ground stone axes and oldest grindstones in Australia. Not long ago, RTZ acquired diamond mining exploration rights over the largest Aboriginal reserve in Western Australia - at Forest River. There was a case of Mount Isa Mines who prevented the return of Aboriginal land at McArthur River in the Northern Territory near Queensland border to the Aboriginal people who are opposing mining because it will involve re-routing a river with important sacred places along it. This list does not include what is planned for the future.

Until recently, mining companies have tended to ignore the views of local people. They are very powerful with a lot of money and political influence behind them. So they tend to bulldoze their way through Aboriginal areas because Aboriginal people have very little economic or political clout - it is usually impossible for them to get a fair deal. Lately there have been a number of reports which indicate that Aboriginal people in Northern Australia seem to live constantly in fear of mining exploration companies who have a history of eroding their land rights and who appear to add enormous pressures on their socially fragile communities, some of whom are still recovering from what they call the invasion of the pastoralists.

Already near the uranium districts of Arnhem Land, one sees excessive alcohol drinking and increase in stress related problems. In a report to the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, two and half years ago, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies has stated four main problems in that area and they are:

ONE   because communications are poor, Aboriginal people are
          generally worried about what is happening

TWO   people in and around Oenelli and Nabarlek are really worried
          about the questions of roads and their use

THREE   there is no proper structure which can help Aboriginal people
          to handle money they get from agreements with the Ranger and
          Queensland Mines Ltd.

FOUR   no one has done anything about jobs for Aboriginal people and
          training them in mining operations.

In fact, apart from some token gestures, generally the record of mining companies giving the Aboriginal people opportunities to participate in the development and offer employment is pretty dismal.

Absence of meaningful employment does not necessarily mean that Aboriginal people are without cash. In fact, injection of money, whether as a share of royalties or welfare subsidies, has created havoc among many communities. For instance, alcohol presents a difficult problem, in the sense that there is less money for food and clothing. The next important problem is sexual, often leading to prostitution. Initially, new mining towns attract a European workforce where there are more men than women. So the risk of interference with Aboriginal women and young girls is quite high. This often leads to violence and birth of mixed-race children who are often rejected by Europeans as well as full blood Aboriginal communities.

Of course, a good simple way to avoid the problem and confrontation between the new mining community and the local Aboriginal people is not to build the town at all - or build it well away from the mining site or away from sacred areas where Aboriginal people gather. For instance, let the miners commute to the mine site from any one of the existing towns.

The idea is not new. In fact, it has been successfully tried in North Western Ontario in Canada. In a recent paper, Newton and Brealy of CSIRO's Remote Communities Unit have made a forceful case for doing something very similar in Australia. They have suggested that in some of the older established mining centres, miners already travel long distances to work because mines in their own districts have closed down. There are examples of commuters from Cessnock, Maitland and Kurri Kurri to Newcastle in New South Wales and from Kalgoorlie to Kambalda in Western Australia. Small isolated mining towns have many drawbacks. There are limited shopping facilities, the company breathes down your neck all the time; there are few avenues for entertainment and social contacts are limited because everyone works for the same boss. Educational and health facilities are generally poor and there are few jobs for school leavers and women. In an established town, infrastructure is already there. Larger populations have educational, health and shopping facilities. It offers a broader economic base for a variety of jobs. In areas where there are no existing towns, there are two possible options:

ONE   if the minesite is not too far from the coast, then most people prefer the new town near the beach with its own advantages

TWO   in places where resources are at some distance from the coast, you could assess the future resource potential of the region, avoid tramping over Aboriginal sacred sites and identify townsites which can serve two or more minesites.

CSIRO studies go further into these issues and have actually analysed possible growth areas where these strategies can be effectively applied in Australia.

Now, a word about Aboriginal housing - over the last 15-20 years many people have conducted research into Aboriginal housing - much of it concerns shelter for tribal communities. As I see this issue, in Australia mining companies go to great lengths to offer good quality two-three bedroom houses, fully air-conditioned and furnished with all the mod cons, to their workforce. This is necessary if they are to attract people to such remote areas and therefore reduce the high rate of turnover. If mining companies start a concerted training programme for Aboriginal people who then acquire the necessary skills to effectively participate as part of the normal workforce - then there is

no reason why they should not be provided with the same good quality houses as those given to Europeans. As I see them, they are part of the town structure and have therefore the same rights to accommodation, facilities and services as others. A training programme at least offers a choice to Aboriginal people to go into the workforce if they so desire. There are occasional cases where Aboriginal people have been successfully employed as operators of plants and equipment - and, of course, there are always possibilities for jobs in support services in shops, hospitals and laundering, gardening, carpentry and labouring work. Housing for these people is best scattered all over the place in salt and pepper manner as they not only accept, but perhaps demand, the same rights and privileges as others.

There may be Aboriginal communities who may find such integration unaccaptable if not oppressive. They may still have strong ties with tribal culture and may wish to preserve their own identity and there-fore find it more comforting to live among their own people. In such cases, planners and architects may have to consider housing them in special enclaves and decide whether these enclaves should be within the new town or at some distance from it. All these decisions are critical and the intentions of the professional could be misinterpreted. I think the most important thing is to ensure proper consultation and clearly determine what the Aboriginal communities themselves prefer. Architects who are responsible for design of houses for Aboriginal people may have to decide how far they can go to sell the European style accommodation to those who are not yet ready for it.

Research so far suggests that Aboriginal peoples' priorities and perceptions of housing are quite different from the Europeans. They have a very close physical and spiritual association with their environment and therefore show a very flexible and adaptable response to it. So they don't give the same importance to houses as Europeans because they tend to see their four walls as barriers between themselves and nature around them. An important problem is posed by close kinship which Aboriginal families have with each other. It means the houses designed for a statistically typical European family of four may not be large enough to house Aboriginal families who may have to accept a sudden influx of friends and relatives. This phenomenon is no different from many other traditional families in Asia and Africa where most houses, including those in urban areas have many secondary semi-sheltered spaces such as verandahs and courtyards which provide extra shelter for families whose numbers may vary in size from four or five to as many as ten or twelve or more.

It would be quite rash for me to say that there are ways and means by which we can eliminate altogether the impact of industrial development on our Aboriginal people. We have made many mistakes but we do now understand the problems a little better and can therefore take steps to soften the blow. It is a tricky and sensitive issue. If I were to sum up the main guidelines for policy makers and professionals, then I would say -

ONE   Consult before action.

TWO   Respect their culture as if it were your own.

THREE   Create employment opportunities.

AND LAST   Offer a choice of lifestyles to individuals and families and
           allow the Aboriginal people to decide for themselves.

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