



Project managers and engineers working to develop infrastructure would *never* make assumptions about the technical aspects of a project, such as the depth to bedrock or the presence of a natural gas pipeline. Facts, calculations, and regulatory and/or license approvals are relied upon in order to commit funds to project execution. Those are details that are critical among the myriad list of responsibilities necessary to get a project delivered safely and in as timely a manner as possible.

While project leaders would never consider making assumptions about technical aspects of a project, why would they ever make assumptions about the people that would be impacted by it? After 11 years of columns on Social Ecology and six years of Social Ecology Course 225 (which has trained over 400 IRWA professionals), the cadre of Social Ecology practitioners—Jim Kent, Kevin Preister, Glenn Winfree and I—have come to understand that the answer is a resounding “they would not!” For those of you who have followed the unfolding of the science of Social Ecology over the last several years, you will recognize a new world emerging. It provides the professional world with a systematic process that does not have to rely on guesswork and assumptions when approaching communities of impact. In the 39 Social Ecology columns and the Course 225 Learning Guide, the technical applications for working with communities are discussed in detail with

MYTHS AND ASSUMPTIONS

Unraveling Some Community Engagement Misunderstandings

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UNCOVER THE FACTS



case studies that, when followed, can produce successful projects.

However, there remains a disconnect between the two worlds of the technical science and the social science, the former being well-respected and the latter not so much. This disconnect creates costly misunderstandings. In the social world, assumptions (the absence of facts) are often made by project proponents about the positive benefits of the project to the impacted people. The reliance on assumption instead of fact sets up an artificial environment where the reality of genuine community impacts are unaccounted for, creating affronts to community members.

What can cause a project to disregard its public to the point where they make assumptions about what the public wants? How can they know what is best for a community, what the public *doesn't* want or what *isn't* good for them?

Corporate leaders and project managers that do presume to know what an impacted community thinks about a proposed project could be misunderstanding the way in which communities and individuals function. Two timely examples can illustrate the unintended consequences to communities from the negative assumption experience.

Consider new affordable housing. There is a lack of affordable housing in the U.S. Older neighborhoods in cities across the country are being

discovered by people with the means to update and improve them. But what about those who could only afford homes in older neighborhoods and are now displaced? Why couldn't a pipeline project consider providing some affordable housing in an impacted community as a mitigation? Another example is oil exploration on the North Slope of Alaska. Alaska Native populations are in desperate need of jobs in order to continue to live in their familial homelands where their ancestors are buried and where their culture is celebrated and lived. Their lifeways are unfamiliar to most Americans, but that does not diminish their value. Alaskan Natives want to preserve, honor and protect their heritage, as well as have a part in economic resource development. They have the most to lose and to gain—yet policy decisions are being made by corporations that have been long-time partners in resource production and are pulling out overnight. This unilateral action excludes the people from the market. What are the Alaska Natives supposed to do as a result of this systematic denial of opportunities?

Several examples of how to better understand the differences between social processes and business approaches are provided below to help projects be successful and also cast the widest net of opportunity by engaging with communities.

1 A Social License to Operate is a regulatory function.

Misunderstanding.

A Social License to Operate (SLO) functions on a project by project basis—unique to the physical, social, cultural and economic environments within which a specific project operates. It is important to understand that the future of SLO effectiveness is *not* to move toward a regulatory world, but to remain as a social process at the project site level. Experiences of the lack or loss of a Social License are growing daily in the U.S. Protest signs at project sites opposing regulatory decisions are no longer anomalies. Practicing the Social Ecology approach to engagement is a healthy aspect of obtaining a Social License.

2 Having a Social License means that public engagement is complete.

Misunderstanding.

This is completely and perhaps dangerously incorrect. Recall that a SLO is best defined by what it isn't rather than what it is. It is not a requirement, permit or formal license. The building-blocks of every SLO consist of working with members of affected communities to build understanding and to potentially obtain and maintain community acceptance, resulting in support and approval. A





project cannot go and *get* this. It has to be granted by the community since they own it. The SLO can be lost in an instant. It is a measure of trust in a relationship and like all relationships, it needs to be worked on to be maintained.

3 A Social License to Operate and Corporate Social Responsibility are the same thing.

Misunderstanding.

Any SLO that has been granted is minimally a proclamation of understanding, and at maximum a provisional statement of support (see #2). It requires frequent and continuing interaction to be sustained because it is an organic, ongoing, cooperative effort. Alternatively, Corporate Social Responsibility, or CSR, is a self-regulating business model. CSR is focused on the impacts of a business on society, including the economic, social and environmental arenas and typically includes metrics such as hiring practices, environmentally responsible procurement and the percentage of renewables in a portfolio. Having a SLO for a project is a positive contribution to a firm's CSR measures, but it is only a component, not a full measure. For instance, scores of 100 percent on recycling/zero landfill manufacturing and ethical investing are separate from on-the-ground impacts in development projects.

4 All stakeholders are created equal.

Myth.

Consider the term “stakeholder” itself; it is flexible. Some stakeholders are identified by law as having a role, others by location or affiliation, and others by choice. The fluidity of the term can result in actual stakeholders—the impacted populations that will be directly affected by a project—being overlooked. It's not the most vocal people who are the most important. It's those who have the most to lose. Those losses can be short-term and minor, such as a temporary road closure to repeated frequent use of a utility right of way that *always* and often chronically affects the same communities. The context of the impacts is crucial to understanding the stakeholder population. These individuals may not be vocal, but they need to be sought out and patiently/genuinely engaged by the project – ideally using the Social Ecology approach. If a project overlooks the impacted population, it will end up dealing with the volatile extremes, to the detriment of the impacted *and* the project. These realities are especially evident now with interstate beltways and fossil fuels in general.

5 Business/industry/corporate leaders know what's best for communities.

Myth.

This myth is the most damaging one of all to communities. Corporate leaders usually claim to value, involve and consult communities when they often do not. Projects that are identified by proponents as “in the public's best interest,” or “it's what is good for the community” can quickly create opposition due to lack of trust. The fact is that community leaders (those who strive for community cohesiveness and are not necessarily the elected officials) know more about their communities and how they function than any outsider and they will fight to protect that knowledge and preserve their communities. The other complication that creates resistance is when decisions are made specifically to *exclude* communities from projects. That decision is a non-starter and potentially devastating to the project. The reality is that those decisions are often made at the policy level and not with the mindset of what is necessary at the local level for success. When decisions are made that overlook, dismiss or even ignore the affected communities, the costly myth of “we know what's best for the community” can become the reality of project failure.

6 Communities know what's best (and worst) for themselves.

Reality.

Project planning and analyses have alternatives, including those that were analyzed and dismissed. Some level of engagement should include the communities along alternative corridors/project development footprints. If the best route (from an engineering, cost and/or environmental perspective) does not access local knowledge of the landscape, that route may face the greatest opposition. While the project can obtain all needed approvals, it may be fiercely protested, face injunctions and eventually be canceled all because of this “efficient” route. Whereas routes that are challenging but have the support of the impacted communities can succeed because project teams work with the people to develop innovative mitigation measures. These cooperative efforts can create projects that bring jobs and related benefits to often overlooked and frequently underserved communities.

The intent of hearing and heeding stakeholder voices has been grasped by many in corporate leadership, but selective hearing can also be at play. Fact. ☘



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