

Practice Note: Community engagement and COVID-19

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“The phrase ‘How are you’ has never meant as much.”

“Virtual engagement can offend or create barriers and exasperate exclusion.”

How has COVID-19 impacted community engagement activities?

On 29 July 2020 Community Relations Connect held a session with practitioners focused on community engagement in the context of COVID-19. This Practice Note includes selected highlights from the session.

The session highlighted the cumulative impact engagement constraints can have on relationships and trust. We are challenged to think afresh about how to connect with stakeholders. Technology and contextual references, especially in combination, allow for creative ways to create connections.

Josephine Pieters, Social Impacts & Risks, De Beers Group in South Africa. She is responsible for overseeing the strategic management of Social Impacts & Risks for De Beers Group in South Africa. With over 10 years mining experience and 7 years public sector exposure, she has a wealth of knowledge and experience in stakeholder management, government relations, community engagement, media relations, strategic management of internal & external communication and heading up a Corporate Affairs Department. Josephine holds a Masters Degree in Corporate Communication from the University of the Free State and a BSc Honours in Industrial Technology & Management from Production Management Institute of Southern Africa. She is also the author of *The Hollander’s Cat* a children’s book she launched in November 2019.

Mary Boyden, Managing Director, Eighth Fire Solutions. Eighth Fire Solutions, is a social enterprise established upon the direction of the AMAK Elders, a Traditional Elders Council, with a mandate to encourage excellence in Indigenous-led land reclamation strategies. After 30 years working in the communities of Treaty 9 both as an adult educator and trainer and in the mining industry, Mary is well-versed on the complex issues facing Indigenous Peoples, particularly women and youth, as they establish themselves in meaningful pursuits within the resource economy. Her passion for facilitating respect of Indigenous Ways of Knowing by mainstream society is fed by her own journey as the product of Indigenous and Settler ancestors who paved the way for Canada as we know it today.

Maselaganye Petrus Matji, Infrastructure specialist, Machidi Development Foundation. He has more than 29 years in the field. His technical area of Infrastructure specialist is water and wastewater. He has acquired extensive experience in economic infrastructure (e.g. roads, energy) finance and management. He has acquired knowledge in facilitating and overseeing transactions for public private partnerships in terms of infrastructure delivery. His extensive experience cuts across various perspectives including government, private sector and community. He is also the Director of the Machidi Development Foundation, which is a community-based NPO in the Mhlaletse area in South Africa, aiming to facilitate strategic partnership initiatives for purposes of attracting investment opportunities for community development programs and cooperatives.

INSIGHTS

COVID-19 has a tendency to **further compound existing engagement challenges**. Top ranking in our pre-session survey were: ensuring equal access and participation and the building of relationships and trust.

Everyone has been impacted by COVID-19, but **the pandemic is affecting vulnerable people at a much higher rate**. In addition, we live in a divided society and people need to be engaged in different ways.

The nature and purpose of engagement is different. COVID-19 has meant we can't engage like usual – the channels of engagement are different, and at a grassroots level people don't always have access to technology.

There is a difference between maintaining a relationship remotely and starting one. How do you engage virtually if you don't already have a robust relationship? How do you do it from the beginning?

There are cultural expectations about in-person engagement, in some contexts it is found dis-respectful to start with a text message or email.

When access to information is limited, people share information with each other and learn from each other. We need to be mindful about who is shaping that information, the validity of it and accuracy.

ACTIONS

Make Health and Safety protocols for all in-person engagement. Make a plan for physical distancing, outside engagements, masking and sanitizers. Plan to share contact details to facilitate contact tracing.

Take the time to make a personal connection. COVID offers an opportunity to connect over a shared circumstance. We need to focus on care and respect for what people are dealing with, and focus on building connections.

Check-in regularly, even if it's online. Make a regular practice of touching base with stakeholders, especially if they don't respond make sure to connect.

Create awareness about technology and tools for virtual connections. Work with data providers to make data/tools available. Identify the point of tech connection for the community (e.g. channel and people).

Be mindful about how communities are accessing information. Companies and NGOs have a role to play in providing trusted and accurate information. Provide clear information about activities and programming. Use accessible channels such as radio shows, posters and flyers, online hubs/social media, key individuals who can share information.

Use the limited time properly. Share information in advance and design for efficient and clear engagement.

Lean-in to online engagement. Don't try to replicate in-person meetings. Design online engagement within the limitations of the platform. Plan activities that participants can 'do' together online (e.g. prep food when talking about food security).

Use technology to bring company personnel and communities together. For example, use drones to record site activities. Host language lessons or history lessons between community members and company employees.



Community Relations Connect

An African Practitioners Forum

Community Relations Connect is an emerging network for community relations and social performance practitioners working throughout Africa.

It is a community of practice for people to come together to share, learn and improve their practices.

Community Relations Connect has grown out of the urgent need to effectively respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, although the seed was planted long before the pandemic, and the aspiration is to build a community which flourishes beyond the pandemic.

CRC is hosted by Synergy Global Consulting and is supported by the International Council for Mining and Metals (ICMM).



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