10 Social work and the struggle for corporate social responsibility

Dyann Ross

Power and ethics are inseparable and socio-environmental justice efforts need to embrace this complexity in: relationships in context, within specific historical situations, over time, with the people involved, and differently situated in the controversy (Dyann Ross).

As a profession, social work stands for human rights and social justice for individuals, communities, and societies. This chapter examines how social workers might engage in the struggle between multinational corporate mining companies and neighbouring communities directly affected by mining activities. This examination is based on the belief that social work's invaluable knowledge and skills can inform debates and practice in the area of corporate social responsibility toward adjacent communities. Drawing on research about the tensions between social, health, and environmental concerns associated with alumina mining in a rural community in Australia, the chapter explores the quest for social justice for local people and sustainability for the local environment. It argues that profit unhinged from the parallel considerations of 'people and place' threatens environmental sustainability as well as social justice. A key insight is the importance of engaging the powerful parties—the mining company and senior government officials and politicians—in any attempt to assist surrounding communities to have their concerns addressed in fair and substantial ways. To further social justice and environmental sustainability, power dynamics must be grasped and relationship tensions held. This needs to occur within a strongly supported logic of limits being set on corporate profits through, for example, compensation paid for adverse community, social, and environmental impacts arising from mining operations. This is unlikely without the mining company holding to a very robust sense of its corporate social responsibility.

How then might social workers engage in the struggle between competing interests of multinational corporate mining companies and neighbouring communities? First, social work needs to position itself as a key player in socioenvironmental conflicts by extending its practice beyond its ameliorative and reactive focus on caring and support for vulnerable...
populations. In this instance, social workers need to engage with powerful mining interests and their profit-driven agendas that prevail over their social responsibilities towards community environmental well-being. Further, they need to do this in the absence of satisfactory international legal strategies and federal and state government regulations (Higgins, 2010) to ensure the fair treatment of communities, landscapes, and ecosystems directly affected by mining operations. Here there is potential for social work to participate actively in building ethical norms in civil society and effective strategies for just and sustainable mining practices.

In building this chapter, the chapter presents a case study positioning social work in the struggle for corporate social responsibility through an Australian research study involving the multinational mining corporation Alcoa World Alumina (Wagerup) and the Yarloop community in Western Australia. Importantly, Alcoa (2002) claims to use its values to build financial success, environmental excellence, and social responsibility in partnership with all stakeholders, while social work claims to promote social and environmental justice. The chapter describes learning from the experience which sought to align these two value systems and advance knowledge of how social workers might engage with corporate social responsibility in the interests of promoting social and environmental justice (see Chapter 1).

Repositioning social work

In Australia and globally, social work has committed itself to a profession to working with socially, economically, and culturally disadvantaged, marginalized, and oppressed people (Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), 2010; International Federation of Social Workers (IRSW), 2011; with the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW)). Despite its clear normative statements about human rights and social justice, this is an ethical minefield given powerful social interests in maintaining the status quo. This is especially so where the natural environment is being degraded and local citizens are being negatively affected (Beetham, 2002; Coates, 2008). The relationship between social and environmental injustice has not been part of mainstream social work education or practice in Australia (Ibe, 2008; Hawkins, 2010). Additionally, and perhaps because of the absence of the natural environment as a matter of social work concern, it remains less obvious that socioeconomic injustices are directly related to environmental degradation and unsustainable mining practices, as demonstrated in this chapter.

Long associated with anti-oppressive social work practice is Marxist originator of critical pedagogy Paulo Freire’s (1970) argument that change is best leveraged through bringing the oppressed into a resistant relationship with their oppressor. Through this political process the oppressed are conscientized as to their rights and interests and how they were being compromised or exploited (Leonard, 1997; Mullaly, 1997).

Young, 1990). This overly reductive binary of ‘oppressor and oppressed’ belies the complex power relations between corporate mining conglomerates and local mining communities. Nonetheless, it is a useful starting point for critical engagement with powerful financial mining interests that are beyond the control of national boundaries and their local effects. This is a new area for social work given the dearth of concrete evidence as to its effectiveness not only in relation to corporate social responsibility but also issues of socioenvironmental justice. There is little prior guidance, therefore, in how social work might influence corporations whose operations threaten local economies and ecosystems (Roes, 2002a, 2009).

Social work at the edge of corporate social responsibility

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) refers to the desire of corporations to pursue their business interests given due regard to social, economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic expectations at a given point in time (Carroll and Buchholtz, in Crane and Matten, 2010). However, corporations ‘self-define’ the nature and extent of their social responsibility. For the most part, corporate social responsibility employs a philanthropic or charity model (Porter and Kramer, 2006), ‘voluntarily committing to social actions and programs ... to forestall legislation and ensure greater corporate independence from government’ (Moon and Vogel, in Crane and Matten, 2010: 51). A report in The Economist found that more than 50 per cent of global business leaders engaged in CSR primarily as a marketing exercise to establish better ‘brand reputation’:

For companies with a strong global brand, consumer pressure can be a key driver towards more responsible practices ... and employees might be attracted to work for and even be more committed to a corporation perceived as being socially responsible.

(Green and Truen, in Crane and Matten, 2010: 51)

With the growth of the environment movement, environmental sustainability has become an increasing aspect of corporate social responsibility so in successive annual reports of major mining corporations it is not uncommon to find claims that mining is sustainable (Holliday, Schmitz, and Watts, 2002). For example, extensive rehabilitation of mines sites or investment in initiatives like land care in Australia are cited as evidence of mining’s environmental sustainability (Alcoa, 2008). This weak definition of sustainability, while the same company clear cuts unique jarrah forests to extract bauxite, belies the deeply contradictory use of language by many multinational mining companies to obscure social upheaval and environmental degradation. According to MacDonald (2011), Alcoa’s claims of being socially responsible are more rhetoric than reality. From an anti-oppressive social work perspective, CSR reinforces relations of
domination and subservience' under the guise of 'doing good' for the community and ecosystems and there is little evidence of social justice for communities adjacent to mining operations or of sustainability for local ecosystems under the pervasive influence of corporate skies (Brueckner and Ross, 2010). Internationally, there is a deeply troubling pattern of exploitation and degradation of sovereign homelands, usually legally sanctioned by the peoples' own governments (Higgins, 2010). It is simply not sufficient for social work as a collective of people who understand the importance of social justice to patch up those displaced and exploited by mining corporations (Global Social Agenda, 2011).

Hence an invitation from a multinational mining company to assist in resolving an issue that was affecting their good standing in the local area arose in 2002 when Alcoa Wagerup commissioned Edith Cowan University to undertake research to discover how to respond to an aggrieved community’s pollution concerns. Alcoa’s Wagerup mine site and alumina refinery is situated south-east of Perth in Western Australia in close physical proximity to several small towns, in particular, the town of Yarloop. Over a two-year period, this study provided an opportunity to bring the corporation and community into a relationship to resolve an environmental concern. The research became a crucial space for re-framing the problem as a socioenvironmental issue for a local community concerned about the sustainability of the local environment. Given the complex power dynamics alluded to above, Alcoa had the advantage but, in light of its commitment to financial success, environmental excellence, and social responsibility, the corporation wanted to pursue its profit-driven interests in a socially and environmentally responsive manner. At the same time, practising social work at the edge of corporate social responsibility presented a professional challenge. This was unfamiliar territory and the limited mandate for holding Alcoa accountable through the research was clear from the outset: What might a social work researcher committed to socioenvironmental justice achieve in these circumstances?

The Wagerup controversy: A struggle between people, place, and profit

Before answering this question, a brief account of the controversy is provided. The case study centres on a particularly intractable conflict in the mining industry in Western Australia. The conflict involves Alcoa World Alumina, one of the largest producers of aluminium in the world, and residents of the adjacent rural community of Yarloop. Many of Yarloop's 600 residents believe that the polluting effects of Alcoa’s operations have adversely affected their health and socioeconomic well-being (Community Alliance for Positive Solutions, 2011). Additionally, overlaying these concerns was the social upheaval arising from the intrusive and divisive effects of Alcoa’s purchase of private properties to protect its commercial interests (Ross, 2002a, 2002b). The extent and persistence of the controversy has been highlighted by a Parliamentary Inquiry (2004), ongoing media attention (Flint, 2005), including the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) 'Four Corners' television program (McDermott, 2005), and Brueckner and Ross's (2010) book documenting the issues. At the heart of the controversy are claims of harm and disadvantage resulting from Alcoa Wagerup's failure to contain emissions and noise within its footprint and to provide a legal 'buffer' area between the refinery and the nearby town without buying up private properties and displacing local people:

My skin, I get burnt. It's like a radiation thing ... You also have bladder problems and it affects your bowels, it affects your mood, it affects your skin, see my skin is horrible ... I went to a naturopath and he told me I had chemical liver poisoning, that my liver was not coping with all the toxins in my blood.

(Brueckner and Ross, 2010: 67)

While Alcoa consulted local people, they proceeded to create a buffer without formal government planning approval and refused to admit the property buy-ups would cause problems in the community (Alcoa, 2001/2002). Raising alarm about the health risks from the refinery emissions led many people to sell their properties and move out of the community. This created a domino effect as residents lost friends and family and, in turn, sold to Alcoa and left Yarloop as a ghost town where the quality of life disintegrated:

Well it's almost no town now. I feel it's a dying town (resident)

It's a beautiful place ... But I wish to God I had never moved here (former resident)

(Brueckner and Ross, 2010: 65)

Alcoa is on the public record as saying it is very sorry for the disruption it has caused to people in the Yarloop area (Sharp, 2004). Nevertheless, it denies any responsibility for the collapse of the town or the individual health issues. After denying their extension plans for some time (Alcoa, 2005), Alcoa pushed ahead with gaining government approval for a substantial expansion of its Wagerup refinery. It did so despite calls from the Wagerup Medical Practitioner's Forum (2005) and an unprecedented number of public submissions to the government concerning the increased risk of further adverse impacts from the refinery operations and Alcoa’s adversarial public relations behaviour. In 2012, the situation remains unchanged, though the expansion has not proceeded yet due to the global financial crisis. A number of local residents are pursuing a class action against Alcoa for knowingly causing a range of health, social, and environmental problems. Higgins (2010) would describe Alcoa's dogged
pursuit of its development agenda in the face of continued human and ecological distress as 'ecocide', which she defines as the 'extensive destruction, damage to or loss of ecosystem(s) of a given territory, whether by human agency or by other causes, to such an extent that peaceful enjoyment by the inhabitants of that territory has been severely diminished' (p. 59). Since the parties involved in the conflict do not agree on the issues, and who should be responsible for fixing them, a major power struggle around irreconcilable interests continues:

1. The Western Australian state government has a pro-development agenda to support job creation and economic prosperity.
2. Alcoa has profit-driven corporate and legal imperatives to satisfy its shareholders.
3. The Yarloop people are differently positioned but collectively constitute a range of claims for guarantees of a safe environment, fair treatment in property sales, compensation for losses, and non-intrusion in their lives and town.
4. The public at large consume Alcoa's aluminium products.
5. Australian society overall wants the jobs Alcoa provides and less obviously and more cynically is content with a social contract that ensures the negative trade-offs of corporate profit making do not affect the silent majority.

At the same time, to some extent these irreconcilable interests can be addressed through negotiated trade-offs (Brueckner and Ross, 2010) and this points to the interconnected nature of each party's interests and the reasons why the conflict has been so protracted and not finally winnable for any particular party. Through the work of the research team, each of the three main parties -- the government, company and community -- has gained respect for and awareness of the interests and rights of the others involved (see Brager and Holloway, 1979b). This would constitute an important juncture in any socioenvironmental change effort.

Despite the impasse reached, Alcoa has continued to position itself as a leader in corporate social responsibility and to claim that its operations are socially just and environmentally sustainable (Alcoa, 2008; Donoghue and Cullen, 2007). Yet the social and environmental consequences at Wagerup and the long-running conflict suggest otherwise. CSR theory suggests the best outcomes ensue when corporate agendas align with government and community interests (Brueckner and Ross, 2010).

Social work in relation to corporate moral pressure and legislative influence

Earlier it was claimed that building ethical norms in civil society was necessary for just and sustainable mining practices. Many corporations place value on local community endorsement of their activities giving them a 'licence to operate' (McKibben and Waters, 2010). This approval is often tacit and follows transparent processes surrounding local development. However, for many residents, Alcoa lost its 'operating licence' when it went ahead with private land purchases while denying pollution concerns without government approval or sufficient local community endorsement and support. Alcoa's values of building financial success, environmental excellence, and social responsibility were jeopardized (Alcoa, 2008). Clearly, Alcoa's ethical stance as to the nature of a 'good' company meant 'good for profits and appeasing shareholders', thus privileging financial success. Financial success could not be compromised by social responsibility and environmental sustainability.

Environmental advocates like Mackenzie (2004) argue that society needs to exert greater moral pressure on corporations to make them accountable for the negative impacts of their profit-making activities on neighbouring communities and environments. This is in line with calls for corporations to be held accountable for the externalized costs of production -- costs such as polluted air and water, poisoning of plants and animals, and exposure of people to toxins (see Costes, 2008). Mackenzie (2004) asks how pressure groups and other elements of civil society might effectively regulate corporate behaviour 'without access to legal or market means' (p. 50), especially when corporations deny responsibility and injury to both the environment and to victims in neighbouring communities (Axand, Ashforth, and Joshi, in Crane and Matten, 2010: 167). Brueckner and Ross (2010) reported residents were caught in a double bind and made to appear 'bad and wrong' for raising their health concerns while Alcoa reacted as if it were being unfairly accused and attacked. This insidious abuse of power by Alcoa has the ripple effect of hiding the human rights abuses perpetrated on people in local communities through pollution, water contamination, and other environmentally unsustainable and health-degenerating industrial practices (Cosier in Flammary, 2009: 120).

No amount of appeals to good ethical behaviour by corporations such as Alcoa can be relied upon to address significant power inequalities between the corporation and the impacted community and the interrelated environmental degradation. The limits of voluntary self-regulation by corporations are well documented (Walker and Howard, 2002); corporations will not typically act to support legislation that curbs their current operations or profits. Social workers need to know, therefore, how to address the power dynamics that are intricately interconnected with the ethical and legal dynamics in conflicted situations. For example, the opportunity to influence government behaviour on the Alcoa issue was afforded by invitations to the research team, supported by Alcoa, to address the state government's Ministers' Council, which also comprised senior government officials. Recommendations relating to providing a new regional plan, infrastructure protection, and social support to the local communities were progressed as
a result of this invitation. This is about recognizing the importance of taking up invitations to influence the powerful parties in the conflict and not to shy away from the challenge of trying to shift the balance of power yet always remaining aware of the inherent risk of cooperation. Further, it was made possible by holding onto the relationship with Alcoa senior personnel and acting both with Alcoa and for the communities’ interests at the same time in an open manner with both parties. In turn, the government of the day was able to follow the recommendations without being off side with Alcoa or the community, this being welcomed as they have double loyalties and legal obligations to both parties. Alcoa was enabled to hold the tension between commercial interests and its duty of care to affected communities without losing face or forgetting its strategic control over the situation. Here we see the value of a significant social work capacity of being able to analyse and work with power issues by holding onto relationships with all three stakeholder groups – the community, the corporation, and the government – and progressing matters of substance and mutual interest.

The influence of the research-based work at Wagerrup near Yarloop was also evident in some of the recommendations arising from the Parliamentary Inquiry (Sharp, 2004). Here social workers contributed to the development of local knowledge of the situation which was really important to counterbalance unfounded claims and counter-claims. Other efforts by social workers in the research team to influence statutory obligations of the government centred on written submissions as part of the appeal process against Alcoa’s plans for an expansion at its Wagerrup refinery. These contributions allowing the local people to be heard represent important steps in enabling the least powerful to be listened to in the corridors of power. However, these examples should not be mistaken as strategies that in and of themselves can change the power imbalance towards more enduring favourable consideration of the local communities’ socioeconomic and environmental sustainability. Nevertheless, they do show that power and ethics are inseparable and social justice efforts need to embrace this complexity in relationships in context, within specific historical situations, over time, with the people who are involved, and differently situated, in the controversy.

Poststructuralist notions of power (Ross, 2002b; Stanley and Wise, 1993) are consistent with this way of thinking about and responding to socioenvironmental issues of this order of impact and vested interests. Social workers need to be ready to work alongside the community, government, and corporation for the long haul, in multidimensional ways, using a broad range of (nonviolent) strategies and tactics, many of which will not be declared. For example, to the present time social workers from the original research team are actively involved behind-the-scenes with some of the community on the ongoing issues writing letters, providing support to community leaders, helping to protect community culture and history, writing for publication, and providing advice to other affected communities. Tellingly though, direct social work involvement with Alcoa has not endured, which sharply reduces the scope for relationship-based approaches in trying to change the unequal power dynamics underpinning the controversy.

Social work as contributions to efforts at dialogue

Social and environmental justice cannot be achieved without dialogue between the ‘oppressed’ and the ‘oppressors’ on matters of substance where the dominant party – the party being most advantaged by the status quo – is additionally legally or ethically held accountable by society. Ensuring that the legal obligations, ethical imperatives, and relational demands in the case study in question are all addressed is not the preserve of any one stakeholder group or intervention. What the research experience showed is the relational aspect needed to involve a three-way dialogue between the government, corporation, and community but this was incredibly hard to achieve and sustain over the long haul. In part, this was because of the contractual and outsider status of the researcher’s relationship with Alcoa. But furthermore, Alcoa was operating in a legal manner (yet see the next point) and also believed it was behaving in an ethical manner. Some legal pressure was brought to bear on Alcoa when it was fined for breaches of its licensing requirements on various occasions (Community Alliance for Positive Solutions, 2011). However, these fines were regarded by locals as grossly inadequate relative to the harm done. Social workers need to actively embrace opportunities to influence legislative aspects of these types of issues. For example, part of the submission-writing process against Alcoa’s plans to expand its operational capacity included an analysis of the limits of regulatory powers and recommendations on how to give greater strength to the precautionary principle (Drake, 2011) with regard to the issues identified in the case study. Adherence to the precautionary principle would give scope for the government not to support Alcoa’s submission on the grounds of possible irrevocable harm to the environment in light of growing evidence of concerns by local people and a range of environmental experts. Bigger pro-development forces in the state government have meant little has changed on the basis of this micro level of intervention and point of law alone. However, Alcoa has been subject to the greatest number of conditions for its expansion plans ever required of a corporation in Australia (McGowan, 2006), meaning it has had to overcome more obstacles to achieve its economic objectives.

It is the case that social workers will not always be placed, either unilaterally or in collaboration with other parties, in a position to influence all the dimensions and actors in these kinds of controversies. These points notwithstanding, the use of social work knowledge and skills in the case study resulted in a concerted attempt with the community and Alcoa to negotiate a more equitable set of outcomes relating to the land purchases
Alcoa was undertaking. What was critical here was the timing of this attempt at dialogue: It was on Alcoa’s invitation when it was reacting to strong threats to its credibility and, in fact, to its ability to operate its refinery at Wagerup. Here the legal and ethical imperatives that are the main leversages for securing more just and sustainable outcomes were intersected through the struggle over Alcoa’s legal right to buy up a great deal of private land. Social workers supported local activists to raise this issue with Federal and State politicians but no basis could be found for illegal behaviour under the current legislation about foreign ownership of land. The lack of fairness in Alcoa’s buy-up plan for adjacent private properties in Yarloop district was thoroughly scrutinized and required changes due to the evidence provided to the Parliamentary Inquiry by the research team.

Thus, timing when to intervene to ensure the best opportunity to influence the status quo of how corporations like Alcoa do their business is a key factor in socioenvironmental change efforts. The basis of the research contract with Alcoa was also crucial for gaining entry into the corporation's boardroom and key discussions about the issues. Aligning with other concerned stakeholders, including sitting members of parliament, in particular members of the Western Australian Greens party, was crucial for keeping the political and legal dimensions of the issue on the agenda. Further, another parallel focus was social work support of local leaders to resist involvement in government-led tripartite meetings aimed at assisting Alcoa’s development interests. Once, this local resistance has threatened the credibility of the tripartite process and resulted in the government’s environmental protection agency working informally with the activists.

The research contract with Alcoa was crafted using social work skills of engaging conflicting parties, analysing the multilayered power dynamics, and applying socioenvironmental justice principles. Its purpose was to enable Alcoa to engage affected community members in a non-exploitative dialogue and genuine problem-solving partnership. It was based on the following warrants or agreements through which the research team asked Alcoa to:

1. Build a sincere relationship with the aggrieved parties who were disadvantaged and harmed by its actions.
2. Stay focused on relevant shared issues with willing attention to the effects of power imbalances.
3. Ensure substantive contributions to solving the problem between Alcoa (the dominant party) relative to the affected community (the non-dominant party) (Fox and Miller, 1995).

These warrants assumed that the more powerful party – Alcoa – would be more likely to break these agreements as it tried to exercise its authority and influence to maintain the status quo against the claims of less powerful aggrieved community. In such unequal power situations, it is particularly important that social workers bear these power dynamics in mind so as to avoid becoming part of the problem through cooptation. It was assumed that naivety about the power dynamics involved would aggravate the problem in contention. When Alcoa started to default on willing attention to the substantive matters on the table in the social work led community dialogues, the research team decided to call the meetings to a halt. This dramatic decision had the effect of making clear what was happening rather than pushing on as if Alcoa were genuinely engaged in making real changes to its land management policy.

The case study experience showed that the community-based meetings with Alcoa and local residents over an 18-month period was a productive space for placing concerns ‘on the table’ and for Alcoa to have the opportunity to account for and change its behaviour. What the preceding comments show is that the meetings alone were not sufficient as a strategy since the corporation was acting on many fronts to protect its interests. How to gain full ‘buy-in’ from Alcoa’s senior executive in Australia and the government to this grassroots, democratic, and power-alert approach, while still retaining their support, remains an unanswered question.

Emphasizing the ‘social work’ in CSR

Adopting social work principles and knowledge in the situation under discussion allowed attention to be given to the importance of emphasizing the social aspects of CSR when thinking about how to secure sustainable outcomes at Wagerup (Ross, 2009). The research was based on building trust, understanding, and respect between people involved in the conflict. It was thought that the relationships contained the possibility for doing things differently if the trust could be built and the power issues mediated by understanding, mutual respect, and collaborative problem solving. These are well honed skills for social workers. Post-structural notions of power recognize that unequal power relations are not only situated in the formal structures of society but also in the micro practices of the everyday relationships between people (Smith, 1990). The partnership approach (Tennyson and Wilde, 2000) and efforts to enable dialogue were premised on the value of the relationships between the corporation and community. While the relationships between key parties brought a keen appreciation of the persistent power dynamics and there were instances of genuine efforts to solve the problem, Alcoa’s unfair land management practices ultimately triumphed. Alcoa now has its own buffer around its refinery at Wagerup. This unwelcome outcome for the community was in part because the trust established in some relationships at key points in the dialogue was lost and diluted by constant changes in the Alcoa personnel involved. Also there were undermining instances of key personnel in the government joining Alcoa or vice versa. Alcoa’s most senior manager at the time of the research later took up the government-appointed post of The Chair of GESS Mutual Ltd., a
unequal situation is really committed to making changes that benefit the less powerful party. This model was employed alongside an adaptation of a set of 'value-rational' questions derived from Flyvbjerg's (2001) power-sensitive inquiry schema:

1. Where is sustainability going in the Wagerup situation?
2. Who gains, who loses, and by which mechanisms of power?
3. Is it desirable?

In particular, the second question in the schema was constantly employed prior to any action or decision being taken by the research team. Brueckner and Ross (2010) provide a full response to Flyvbjerg's (2001) questions, which were used throughout the research, and allowed for constant re-positioning by the research team, and the adoption of new strategies in light of new understandings gained in situ as events unfolded.

Listening to the powerless

Prior to the research, the community felt unheard and resorted to national media releases (Mayman, 2002). The social work skills of advocacy for the marginalized resulted in the state government Minister's Council presentation (noted earlier), with Alcoa present, which placed community concerns on the table months prior to the Parliamentary Inquiry. This action allowed immediate actions by the government to provide infrastructure and planning support relating to threats to the viability of Yarloop as a result of Alcoa's commercial decisions.

Engaging powerful stakeholders

Alcoa sought help from the research team and this initiated the engagement of one of the powerful stakeholders. In turn, ready access to the state government was provided through association with Alcoa and via a specially convened Wagerup Working Party which the research team was permitted to attend. The engagement of the powerful stakeholders covered a two-year period and crucially the research team enabled the legitimacy of the community – members of the towns in the Yarloop district – to be at the table where important discussions and decisions were taken. The skills of diplomacy, negotiation, facilitation, representation, de-escalation of conflict, agenda setting, problem posing, problem solving, and creating spaces for the parties to meet and progress the issues were provided by the social work expertise in the research team.
Dialogue in pursuit of socially and environmentally just outcomes

The idea of dialogue used here relates to non-exploitative formal conversations between stakeholders. Most dialogue occurs through meetings and it is important that the parameters and purpose of these interactions are clear to all parties. While adherence to meeting rules act as safeguards against power abuses, flexibility is required. This was the most successful part of the research as a relatively safe and respectful space was created in an ongoing series of open public meetings where the agenda permitted often highly emotive resident input. It was important that neither party be allowed to be disrespectful or abusive to the other to ensure that residents and Alcoa personnel would continue to attend and have the tough conversations that did in fact happen. For example, the issue of whether the company would consider compensation for the socioenvironmental harm done to the area was highly sensitive and very unwelcome for Alcoa but it did occur. In addition to the social work skills noted above, an important activity in these meetings was constantly seeking and naming the common ground even as the differences were usually so large as to risk swamping any chance of the parties hearing one another, or reaching consensus. In tandem with the public meetings, the research team engaged in a range of de-briefings in which they supported company and community stakeholders and helped them reflect on, and make sense of, their interactions. The researchers’ role was to maintain the integrity of the process and participants’ goodwill for forthcoming meetings.

Ethical behaviour

Ethical behaviour involves accountability toward the less powerful stakeholders and their interests without antagonizing the powerful party. The main challenge for the research team was how to maintain its impartiality, independence, and integrity while acting for and on behalf of all the stakeholder groups involved: company, community, and government stakeholders. The research task was to develop local, experientially rich and collaboratively developed understandings that would assist the parties in their efforts to negotiate around their interconnected issues. The research team used an open and transparent approach, documented its activities, and shared its deliberations with all parties to improve awareness of their respective interests and differences. Alcoa’s refusal to allow a key summary research report to be shared with the community in late 2003 marked the end of the research contract. Key members of the research team withdrew from the contract with Alcoa since the company abused its power and transgressed the key ethic of transparency.

Measuring success

The success or otherwise of the partnership was measured in terms of Alcoa’s adherence to the warrants or agreements for engagement, which sought to equalize power between stakeholders. This is not necessarily how Alcoa would define success or think about the research. As already discussed, Alcoa’s deviation from these warrants led to the breakdown of negotiations in the Yarloop community and led the researchers to terminate their contract with Alcoa. The research team’s duty of care to the community, who continued to invest an enormous amount of time and energy in the meetings, outweighed Alcoa’s interests. The decision to terminate the research contract was inevitable given Alcoa personnel’s lack of commitment to advancing the main parts of the agreed recommendations to their land management policy.

Strategies to equalize power

Given the inherent power imbalances in this unjust socioenvironmental situation, it was important to develop strategies for respectful engagement. For a time, it seemed this was achieved in the public meetings. The researchers worked hard to maintain the goodwill and mutual respect between meetings but, ultimately, were unsuccessful and the reasons for this lay beyond the terms of the research contract. It became evident that the local Alcoa personnel with whom the researchers and community were working did not have the power to make the decisions necessary to fulfill the conditions and outcomes of their joint negotiations. The power lay with Alcoa’s senior executive at the company’s head office in Perth. Though the rural community of Yarloop was a mere two hours south of Perth, there was no direct contact with the company’s senior executive and the Wagerup managers with whom they were negotiating, though well intentioned, were ultimately ineffective. It took a parliamentary inquiry to force Alcoa to engage in socially and environmentally just practices in the purchase of private properties to establish a buffer for its commercial interests.

Conclusion

Efforts directed towards emphasizing the socioenvironmental aspects of struggles around the human rights of people in local communities, corporate social responsibility, and pro-development government agendas necessarily bring matters of power abuse and privilege to the fore. This case study showed social work’s normative, anti-oppressive stance and array of knowledge and skills provided no quick-fix answers. Much, though, can be done to advance social and environmental justice without necessarily fully solving problems. Social work can contribute to informed public debate about the irreconcilable interests between mining companies and their
impacts on people and environments. They can align with local community-based activist groups working to protect local interests and social and environmental ecosystems against the damaging effects wrought by multinational mining companies, such as Alcoa. Social workers can engage with communities, harnessing their skills to those of environmental groups who share a commitment to social and environmental justice. Through these alliances, they might leverage political and financial resources and resist the damaging incursions of corporate expansion. Social workers can participate in corporate social responsibility programs to put environmentally sustainable and socially just practices in the mining industry firmly on the agenda. Though this case study presents an unsuccessful outcome in many respects, like the researchers involved, the people from the Yarloop community, some personnel from Alcoa Wagerup, and some state government officials and politicians made genuine attempts to respond to the multidimensional conflict but could, ultimately, not stand up to the power of this mining giant. The lesson to be learnt from this case study is that moral or ethical grounds – agreed warrants, transparency, and accountability, in this case, for example – are insufficient to counter dominant economic interests. Powerful alliances have to be formed with activist groups to withstand the power of mining corporates vis-a-vis community and environmental interests. Though socioenvironmentally committed people continue to pursue justice-informed and environmentally sustainable outcomes day by day, unless they harness their energy to organizations that share their interests and concerns and at the same time build productive relationships with the mining corporations, little will change.

References


Part 3

Education

Challenging students to respond to environmental issues

\[ \text{Equation} \]

References


