

In which conversations should community stakeholders be involved?

Rosemary Joiner ^a, Jennifer Brereton ^{a,*}

^a Mine Land Rehabilitation Authority, Australia

Abstract

‘Mine closure is more than a managerial-technical-engineering aspect within the lifecycle of a mine. It is a social episode in the lives of individuals, households, families, communities and local governments.’ (Chaloping-March 2008). A just transition recognises the need to address social concerns and inequities emerging from efforts to address environmental problems (Snell 2018). It has been defined as ‘ensuring that no one is left behind or pushed behind in the transition to low-carbon and environmentally sustainable economies and societies’ (United Nations 2023). In mine closure and rehabilitation planning, this means addressing the social concerns and inequities emerging from the environmental problems arising for the stakeholders and communities co-located with a mine at the end of its life.

With the energy transition underway, ‘the question of how to engage communities as stakeholders in the decision-making process and address their needs through an equitable and just transition remains unresolved’ (Tarekegne et al. 2022). Meaningful, responsive, place-based community engagement is part of the answer. But what conversations should the community be involved in?

Community engagement has been defined as a planned process to support decision-making which encourages people to get involved in decisions that are of interest to, and impact on, them. At times, statutory compliance and corporate responsibilities dictate a mine operator’s community engagement work. At other times, social responsibility; environmental, social and governance imperatives; community expectations; and other external pressures will guide this work.

This paper discusses the value of responding to local communities and employing place-based approaches to determine what conversations communities should be involved in and how. In this paper, Latrobe Valley is used as a case study to explore these topics.

Keywords: *social impact, community engagement, community consultation, Latrobe Valley, open cut mines, rehabilitation planning, just transition*

1 Introduction

Latrobe Valley in Gippsland, Victoria, is often identified as one of the most over-consulted communities in Australia. Situated around 150 km east of the state’s capital, Melbourne, it is home to three of the Southern Hemisphere’s largest open cut brown coal mines, which have powered the state’s electricity industry for the last 100 years.

In Victoria, state legislation identifies the concept of a ‘declared mine’: defined as a mine that has geotechnical, hydrogeological, water quality or hydrological factors that may be deemed to pose significant risk of harm to the community, environment and infrastructure. The Minister for Resources may at any time choose to declare a mine according to these criteria.

* Corresponding author.

There are three declared mines in Victoria: Hazelwood, Yallourn and Loy Yang in the Latrobe Valley. All three brown coal mines are very large, proximate (Figure 1) and closed or closing within a relatively short time frame. Hazelwood closed in 2017. Yallourn is scheduled to close in 2028, and Loy Yang in 2035.

The total area of the three open cut mines is over 50 square kilometres. Combined, the voids would hold about 2,350 gigalitres and they have a surrounding land area of 130 square kilometres.

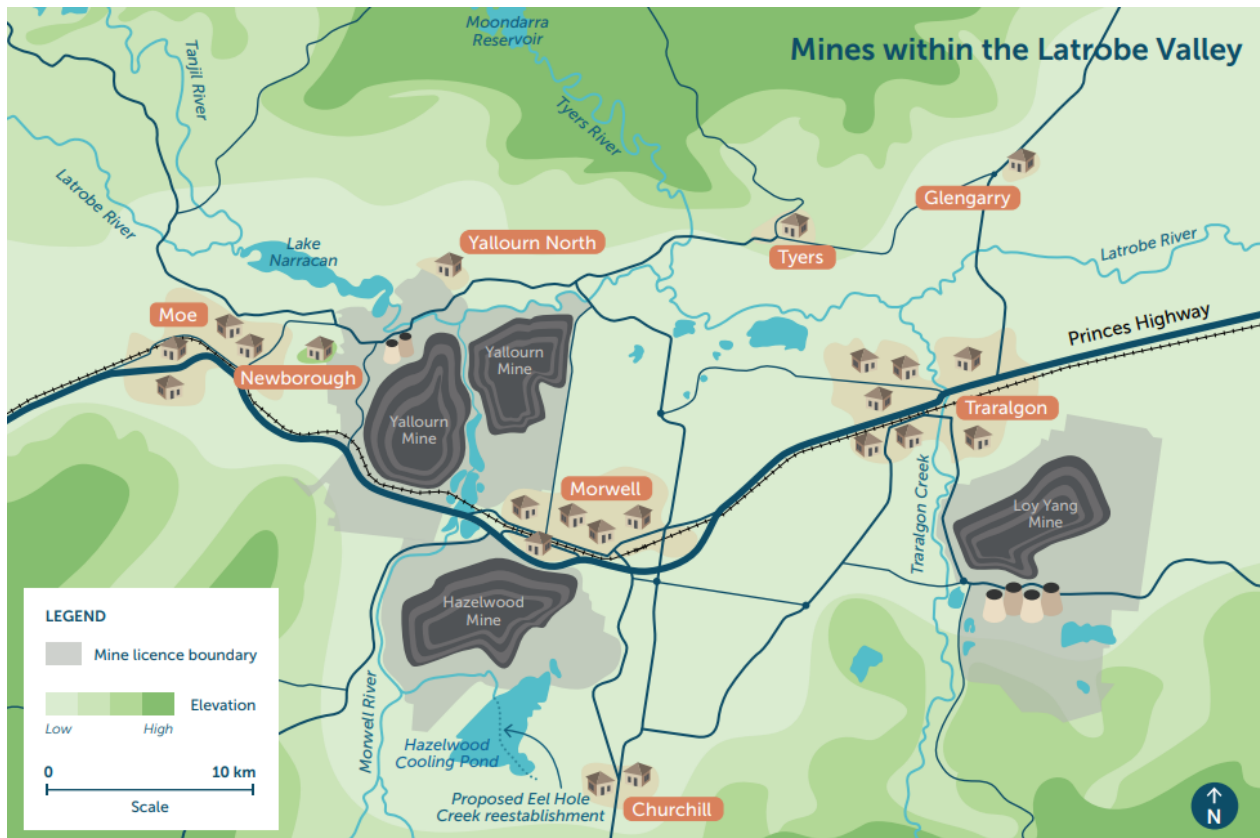


Figure 1 Mines within Latrobe Valley, Victoria

The declared mines are very close to Latrobe Valley towns. The population of Latrobe City (which includes the major towns of Moe, Morwell and Traralgon, and nearby townships) is around 77,000. Between 2016 and 2021 the population in the Latrobe City Council area grew by 5.5%.

The Latrobe Valley and Gippsland Transition Plan, published in 2023, identified that there is a strong community appetite for well-coordinated community consultation, communication and education about complex issues, and meaningful involvement of community groups and Traditional Owners in mine rehabilitation planning processes. The plan clarified that the rehabilitation of the mines presents an opportunity to add value to the region (Latrobe Valley Authority 2023).

The area has seen significant economic, environmental and social transformations over time, including the privatisation of industry and significant recent changes as Victoria moves away from a carbon economy, including timber and coal industries. As a result, significant consultations have taken place with the community on a number of social, economic and environmental issues.

In Victoria, assessments of projects with the potential for significant environmental effects are conducted through the Environmental Effects Statement process under the *Environment Effects Act 1978*. The Statement's objective is to provide for the transparent, integrated and timely assessment of the project's potential effect on the environment, and its associated guidelines define the environment as the physical, biological, heritage, cultural, social, health, safety and economic aspects of humans' surroundings. At time of publishing, an Environmental Effects Statement (EES) is being developed for the Hazelwood mine. While an EES is often associated with new or expanding projects, the Hazelwood Rehabilitation Project EES is being

undertaken to assess which of the available options provide an acceptable outcome to ensure the safety, stability and sustainability of the site. As part of this process, the mine licensee is required to engage with the community.

2 Community engagement approaches in a transitioning community

2.1 Speaking a common language

At the intersection of technical and engagement work in mine closure, when we come together to have conversations, it can feel like we're not speaking the same language. Language is a key component of developing a shared culture (Kramsch 2014). A way to improve engagement work, streamline communication and make the best decisions is to begin with a baseline of consistent vocabulary. A consistent vocabulary can provide consistency of culture and understanding, and lead to better outcomes.

In various fields it has been shown that developing a shared vocabulary can be instrumental in achieving better outcomes through improved communication and consistency (Weaver et al. 2018; Sommerville 2011). In 2023 the Mine Land Rehabilitation Authority (MLRA) undertook a process to develop a mine rehabilitation vocabulary with the purpose of providing a consistent, shared baseline of terms relevant to declared mine rehabilitation in Victoria. The vocabulary was developed in collaboration with subject matter experts across industry and government. An initial draft list of terms for review was derived from reputable, publicly available sources.

The vocabulary aims to: be a concise, curated reference of terms relevant to declared mines; remain a living document, updated as terms evolve and expand; and serve as a reference for community, industry and government stakeholders.

As in most fields, language in mine rehabilitation and closure is evolving and varies between regions. The identification and employment of a shared vocabulary is a simple and effective way to facilitate better discussions, better decision-making and, ultimately, better outcomes. The MLRA has found this to be a useful tool in a variety of ways and it has been used: to provide information to schools; by government in the development of guidelines; and by industry to ensure a common understanding of technical concepts.

2.2 The place-based approach

While place-based approaches are becoming more widely used there is no consensus in the literature regarding what constitutes 'place-based', with a plethora of related terms including 'area-based', 'neighbourhood-led' and 'community-led' also being used (Rong et al. 2023). By definition, place-based policies do not simply focus on identifying the most efficient or impactful strategy for achieving economic growth but instead have a focus on specific cities, localities or regions. A place-based model acknowledges that the context of each and every city, region and rural district offers opportunities for engagement and wellbeing and advocates for a development approach that is tailored to the needs of each (Beer 2023).

A concise definition of the place-based approach, developed by the Victorian government, provides the description, 'Place-based approaches target the specific circumstances of a place and engage local people from different sectors as active participants in development and implementation' (State Government Victoria 2020). When we speak of a place-based approach we know we want to engage communities, heed local needs and wants, and leverage the passion and expertise of local people.

In its engagement work the MLRA has undertaken a number of place-based approaches. These include coordinating a partnership with the Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (GLaWAC) and a local Gippsland nursery and ecological contractor to establish the Gippsland Seed Bank. GLaWAC is recognised under the Victorian *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006* as a Registered Aboriginal Party and as a primary guardian, keeper and knowledge-holder of Aboriginal Cultural Heritage. The Gippsland Seed Bank initiative aims to firstly establish the future demand for seeds in order to determine the volume of seeds that may be required for planting on the former mining land of Latrobe Valley declared mines.

At the 10 Years On: Community Day in 2024, an event intended to reflect on the community's progress since the Hazelwood mine fire 10 years earlier, the MLRA manned an interactive stall to engage with the community, held video screenings and took part in a panel discussion. This was an example of how grassroots community events can be a practical part of a place-based approach.

2.3 Community engagement activities: collaborative and innovative approaches

Throughout the life of the MLRA several projects have been undertaken to communicate the detail and significance of activities associated with Victoria's declared mines. The MLRA employs a diverse range of engagement methods tailored to each stakeholder and time. These methods include conducting face-to-face meetings, delivering presentations at community events, holding open houses, disseminating printed information, providing education programs in schools, and releasing other media such as videos and fact sheets. By utilising these various channels, the MLRA aims to effectively engage with stakeholders and effectively inform the community about mine rehabilitation.

One approach included the development of a series of videos called *A Changing Landscape*, which was designed to build further knowledge in the community about mine rehabilitation. The videos addressed four of the questions most frequently asked by the MLRA's stakeholders about the rehabilitation of Victoria's declared mines:

- Whose job is it to rehabilitate these mines anyway?
- Where do you even start to rehabilitate a mine?
- How can we rehabilitate these mines?
- If we use water to rehabilitate the mines, where would it come from?

These videos have been viewed 1,029 times on the MLRA YouTube channel. These numbers do not include group public screenings and school-based classroom screenings.

A key element of the *A Changing Landscape* project was the decision to ensure that the content was accessible to a broad audience; in easily understood language and in a format which could be used for digital and in-person engagement, including education programs in schools.

Another key element of the project was a responsive and collaborative model, ensuring the storytelling aspect responded to the questions most frequently asked by stakeholders. This collaboration is set to be expanded in future video projects, with video scripts to be collaboratively co-written with key stakeholders.

3 Opting out of community engagement

Community consultation is a cornerstone of good governance and often a legislative requirement. However, there are instances when government and industry may choose not to engage with communities, either by design or due to extenuating circumstances.

3.1 What has already been asked? What has already been said?

When asking the question 'What should government and industry answer for themselves?' it is important to first ask what the community has already said on the topic so that over-consultation might be avoided and existing data used well and acted on.

The Latrobe Valley community has expressed the complaint that it experiences consultation fatigue and is cynical about engagement. Consultation fatigue has been defined as the combination of an excess of consultation activities and a failure to deliver on projects that have been consulted on previously (Richards et al. 2004). It arises as people are approached more and more often to participate but perceive little response, or action, from this participation.

In 2024 the MLRA published a literature review of 12 papers encompassing reports, submissions and publications specifically addressing community consultation in the context of the rehabilitation of Victoria's declared mines. The goals of the review were to identify and examine the existing body of knowledge, provide a baseline for future consultation, identify common themes and counter consultation fatigue.

Examples of verbatim comments relating to consultation fatigue include:

- 'Over-consultation from multiple agencies and having to "repeat the same story over and over" for numerous different support agencies resulted in traumatised residents having to relive the experience' (Young et al. 2021).
- 'We have heard concerns about over-engaging and creating consultation fatigue. We find ourselves asking, who is experiencing consultation fatigue and where is it coming from?' (Latrobe Health Advocate 2020).
- 'The need for a coordinated approach and avoidance of over-consultation was noted. Some members expressed concern that there are a number of different entities consulting on the "same thing", which increases the likelihood of stakeholder confusion' (Latrobe Valley Mine Rehabilitation Advisory Committee 2017).
- 'Wherever possible, activities and consultations should be coordinated to ensure maximum value from our limited time and resources' (Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation 2015).

The literature review identified recurring themes, made recommendations and concluded that when engaging with an over-consulted community there is a strong argument for first asking what the community has already said on the topic, identifying and collating that data, and sharing that information between stakeholders so that it can be used well and acted on. An established and understood field of knowledge of local views on key topics can help us to engage with an over-consulted community, and with all communities.

3.2 When is information greater than engagement?

Engagement activities are usually tailored to audience, stakeholder and project phases. There are many times during engagement activities when providing information to stakeholders is preferable to fully engaging or collaborating with them.

One way that stakeholders might be informed is through the provision of printed information such as brochures and fact sheets. While these models employ one-way communication only, it is common practice to include in the materials ways for readers to get in touch with the organisation and have their say in the project if appropriate.

The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) describes public involvement as occurring at five levels ranging from informing all the way to empowering. IAP2 has designed a widely-accepted Public Participation Spectrum (International Association for Public Participation 2018) designed to assist with selection of the level of participation that defines the public's role in any public participation process. Distinguished by increasing levels of direct public involvement and intended outcomes, the IAP2 Spectrum identifies the following five types of increasing impact the public can have in a participation process: inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower (Vogel et al. 2014).

While the Spectrum describes the levels of participation as 'increasing' it does not ascribe a degree of importance nor value to the levels. It describes all levels as important and defines the 'inform' level of participation as providing 'the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions'. Many engagement practitioners have observed the importance of informing stakeholders as without clear, objective information the public cannot always understand the issues at hand, nor provide meaningful input into collaboration activities (Vogel et al. 2014).

Engagement practitioners must remember that providing high-quality, meaningful, timely information to stakeholders can be as important as hearing their views. Informing stakeholders at every step of the project is a key part of engagement.

3.3 Why might issues not be communicated to the community? What questions should government and industry answer for themselves?

There exists information which cannot be communicated between stakeholders, nor communicated to the community. Information which is commercial in confidence or protected by privacy legislation are examples. Beyond this, during a project there may be times when government and industry decide not to engage with the community and instead answer questions for themselves.

When decisions have already been finalised or predetermined, government and industry bodies should always forfeit community engagement processes which promise an impact on the outcome and instead employ processes which explain reasons for the decisions made. Verbatim feedback continues to tell us that people would rather be told why decisions have been made than engaged in a tokenistic consultation process over which they ultimately have no power. Rather than undertaking meaningless engagement processes without any genuine intent to incorporate community input or change course based on feedback, leaders should focus on meaningfully providing the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding decisions being made.

When emergency situations arise, for example crisis, natural disaster or national security incidents, government and industry bodies might be required to take swift action without waiting for the community consultation which might have otherwise been undertaken.

Some projects contain issues considered highly technical or specialised in nature. For some aspects of these projects, input from subject matter experts may be solely relied upon in lieu of broader community consultation.

In unique cases where government and/or industry leaders choose to forfeit community consultation and instead answer questions between themselves, it is key to instead focus on meaningful communication by providing the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the decisions being made. Where possible, information should be developed in time to be released when the community needs it to provide understanding and empowerment.

4 Conclusion

Understanding and considering innovative, mature and informed engagement processes can provide a functional way of progressing projects. A key criterion for community engagement is the provision of information to stakeholders. One-way communication is not the poor cousin of two-way communication. It is an integral part of engagement. Techniques such as consistency of communication, place-based approaches and understanding when to opt out of engagement are key to a well-functioning engagement program. Lastly, the provision of high-quality, meaningful, timely information to community stakeholders at every step of the project to ensure stakeholders are informed is integral to an informed and empowered community. This could occur in a multitude of ways depending on the specifics of the project, including citizen juries, allowing adequate time to plan appropriate consultation and determining how feedback to consultation will be provided. Let's avoid over-consultation and cynicism and employ mature, nuanced engagement approaches which respect community stakeholders.

References

- Beer, A 2023, 'The governance of place-based policies now and in the future?', paper presented at The Governance of Place-Based Policies Now and in the Future, 15 September 2023.
- Chaloping-March, M 2008, 'Business expediency, contingency and socio-political realities — a case of unplanned mine closure', in AB Fourie, M Tibbett, I Weiersbye & P Dye (eds), *Mine Closure 2008: Proceedings of the Third International Seminar on Mine Closure*, Australian Centre for Geomechanics, Perth, pp. 863–871, https://doi.org/10.36487/ACG_repo/852_80
- GLaWAC 2015, *Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation Whole of Country Plan*, published July 2015
- International Association for Public Participation 2018, *IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation*.
- Kramsch, C 2014, 'Language and culture', *AILA Review*, vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 30–55.
- Latrobe Health Advocate 2020, *Engagement Inspiration Report 2020*, Morwell.
- Latrobe Valley Authority 2023, *Latrobe Valley and Gippsland Transition Plan*, Morwell.
- Latrobe Valley Mine Rehabilitation Advisory Committee 2017, *Latrobe Valley Mine Rehabilitation Advisory Committee*, Meeting 2, April 2017, Morwell.
- Richards, C, Blackstock, K & Carter, C 2004, *Practical Approaches to Participation*, The Macaulay Institute, Aberdeen.
- Rong, T, Risteovski, E & Carroll, M 2023, 'Exploring community engagement in place-based approaches in areas of poor health and disadvantage: a scoping review', *Health & Place*, Elsevier, Amsterdam.
- Snell, Darryn 2018, 'Just transition'? Conceptual challenges meet stark reality in a 'transitioning' coal region in Australia', *Globalizations*, vol. 15, no. 4, pp. 550–564.
- Sommerville, I 2011, *Software Engineering*, 9th edn, Addison-Wesley, Boston.
- State Government Victoria 2020, A framework for place-based approaches.
- Tarekegne, B, Kazimierczuk, K & O'Neil, R 2022, 'Communities in energy transition: exploring best practices and decision support tools to provide equitable outcomes', *Discover Sustainability*, vol. 3, no. 12.
- United Nations 2023, *United Nations Committee for Development Policy*, New York.
- Vogel, R, Moulder, E & Huggins, M 2014, 'The extent of public participation', *Public Management*, vol. 96, no. 2, pp. 6–10.
- Weaver, C, Ball, M, Rim, G & Kiel, J 2018, *Healthcare information management systems: Cases, Strategies, and Solutions*, Springer, New York.
- Young, C, Jones, R & Cormick, C 2021, *Growing the Seeds: Recovery, Strength and Capability in Gippsland Communities*, Victoria University, Melbourne.

