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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION, ENHANCED SUSTAINABILITY AND EMBEDDED COMMUNITIES: ASSESSING APPROACHES BY A PLATINUM MINE IN ZIMBABWE

ABSTRACT

The article assesses strategic communication approaches used by Unki mine to enhance sustainability with its embedded community from 2016 to date in Shurugwi, Zimbabwe. Strategic communication scholars have concluded that mining communities are impoverished societies. The dominant scholarship in strategic communication is European based and there is a dearth of scholarship from Africa to contribute to the debate, which prompted the researcher to study a mining company from a developing nation like Zimbabwe. The study uses constructivism philosophy and interpretivist research theory, which are subjected to a qualitative case study of the Unki mine and the Rietfontein community. Interviews, focus group discussions and documentaries were used, as well as strategic communication and stakeholder theory. The findings of the study indicate that Unki mine has implemented Social Performance Initiative (SPI) programmes at Rietfontein that address the global sustainability expectations contained in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), as well as the Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs). Diverse strategic communication approaches, such as bottom-up, top-down, the issues approach, the Public-Private Partnership Model and the philanthropic approach, are used to engage the community for sustainability and stakeholder relationships.

Keywords: strategic communication, stakeholder theory, corporate social responsibility, corporate social sustainability, community engagement, embedded community, mining, Zimbabwe

INTRODUCTION

Approaches to both theorisation about the sustainability of stakeholder relationships and strategic communication with embedded community are diverse. The 21st century has challenged the business community to take a broader social view of their responsibility beyond traditional considerations

such as legal compliance and economics. This is because there is a stance in the 21st century that questions economic profit motives that assume that corporations should be equally concerned about improving their communities' circumstances (Hahn *et al.* 2014). This paradigm shift is reflected in a shift from a monolithic model (Corporate Social Responsibility – CSR1), where management determines community involvement programmes, towards a more decentralised model (Corporate Sustainability – CS), where corporations engage with communities to co-create solutions in response to their needs (Ajith 2014; Schwartz & Carroll 2008; Claudia & Mihaela 2018).

Studies suggest that stakeholder relationships are key to a firm as these are strategic processes for sustainability (Freeman *et al.* 2010; Matos & Silvestre 2013). This study addresses three objectives:

- ◆ To determine how a mining company in Zimbabwe ensures sustainability and exceptional stakeholder relationships with its embedded community;
- ◆ To establish how a mining company in Zimbabwe enhanced pragmatic community engagement for excellent stakeholder relationships with its embedded community from 2016 to date; and
- ◆ To examine the strategic communication approaches used by a Zimbabwean mining company in engaging with its embedded community for sustainability.

The context of strategic communication research enhances the standard essentials of a discipline, particular objectives and pertinent epistemology, theories and concepts that arrange the acquired knowledge, semantics, research techniques and institutional autopsies (Nothhaft *et al.* 2018). The operation of an organisation is diverse as it spans non-profit organisations and profit-oriented organisations, as well as Global Northern and Global Southern organisations, urban and countryside organisations, in homogenous and heterogeneous societies, and so forth (Zerfass *et al.* 2018).

Sustainability, often a controversial term, implies that society must use no more of a resource than can be regenerated (Aras & Crowther 2012). Moreover, sustainability confronts managers with situations in which they need to address multiple desirables concurrently while meeting controversial economic, environmental, and social outcomes. This is expected to happen at organisational and societal levels operating within different time frames, as well as following different logics (Hahn *et al.* 2014).

Vestrum (2014: 620) defines embedded communities as “communities located near a business set-up, whose livelihoods are intertwined with the business and inevitably affects the community welfare”. Furthermore, in the face of corporate power, local communities seek distributional or procedural justice that can serve as a catalyst for development (Ololade & Annegarn 2013; Muthuri *et al.* 2012).

Communities where mining is conducted tend to endure significant social disruptions and environmental devastation (Prichard 2009). Businesses such as mining establishments operating in such communities are naturally forced to respond to the needs of the communities surrounding them. In the case of Zimbabwe, the fallout from this type of economic activity includes ghost towns and abject poverty due to

job losses, as well as mining operations leaving a trail of environmental destruction in the wake of the cessation of mining activities (Mabhena & Moyo 2014). In view of these issues, it is important to consider how a mining company can adopt pragmatic approaches to improve the ecological, social and economic sustainability of stakeholder communities in developing nations like Zimbabwe. This study, therefore, seeks to establish how Unki mine in Zimbabwe fares in engaging with its embedded community for sustainable development.

The study is guided by the constructivism and interpretivist research theories subjected to a qualitative case study of Unki mine and Rietfontein community. Interviews, focus group discussions and documentaries were used to gather data from mine employees who deal with community issues. Experienced community members with Social Performance Initiatives (SPI) expertise from their areas from as far back as 2016 to date were also involved in the study as participants. Four non-probability sampling techniques, namely purposive, snowball, criterion and stratified random sampling, were used. The study was influenced by strategic communication and stakeholder theory in exploring engagement between the mine and its community for sustainability and development for excellent stakeholder relationships.

APPRECIATING THE CASE STUDY

Unki is a South African-owned Zimplats platinum mine in Shurugwi near Gweru city, the third-largest city in Zimbabwe. It is an example of a company that has unhindered access to foreign currency from offshore accounts. The selection of Unki was on the basis that it is affluent and as such of significance to establish how it has managed to maintain stakeholder relations through sustainability with its embedded community.

Unki employs 1133 people with a capital investment of ZAR 227.8 million (Anglo American Platinum Limited Integrated Report 2019: 71). The Shurugwi district is in the southern part of Zimbabwe and its town and administrative centre, Shurugwi, was established in 1899. Shurugwi is an important mining centre for gold, nickel, chrome and platinum. Unki mine is surrounded by 22 rural wards in the Shurugwi district and has three chiefs: Nhema, Banga and Ndanga. Rietfontein, the community selected for this study, is to the northeast of Unki and is a direct dependent of the mine.

MINING IN ZIMBABWE

Mining is a key strategic section of the Zimbabwean economy contributing commodity export, as well as being a source of employment for about 40 000 workers. The late 1990s, however, significantly witnessed a decline in production and loss of investors' confidence against the background of macroeconomics instability. Platinum and diamond production from the year 2000 to date witnessed a spectacular rise, which led to the spearheading of platinum production.

The mining industry in Zimbabwe is the major foreign currency earner for the country. Therefore, it is vital to assess how a foreign-owned mining corporation under a rubble economy context sustains its stakeholder relationships with surrounding communities.

Often communities within mining establishments have no proper shelter or houses, lack good sources of water and proper health facilities, schools are distantly located, and roads are dilapidated. Mines are usually expected to intervene in such cases to alleviate and better the living conditions of nearby communities as part of their sustainability through philanthropic volunteering, Corporate Sustainability Responsibility (CSR1) and Corporate Social Responsiveness (CSR2) programmes, corporate citizenship or corporate accountability programmes.

Zimbabwe has a rubble economy, which is a major structural dislocation that resulted from the global neoliberal policies of the 1980s (Sachikonye *et al.* 2018). The government of Zimbabwe at the turn of the 21st century resorted to printing surrogate currencies, such as the Bond (coins and notes), which inevitably resulted in hyperinflation and monetary collapse (Rotberg 2018). A lengthy hyperinflation environment caused untold underdevelopment, and remote mining communities were the hardest hit. Against this background, it is of significance to establish how Unki sustains stakeholder relationships with the embedded community to cultivate a spirit of sustainability.

Embedded communities

The 21th century has challenged businesses to take a broader social view of their responsibility beyond traditional considerations such as legal compliance and economics. The call is for corporations to be equally concerned about improving their communities' circumstances (Hahn *et al.* 2014).

The sustainable development of embedded communities regards both the community and the mining organisation as participants in the economy. This view assists researchers to establish how socio-political partnering benefits the mine, local communities, and the government in implementing community development initiatives. It is also important to understand how interconnected mine operations and its embedded community are. Lessons are drawn on whether these relations enforce sustainable developmental approaches, thereby creating interdependence between the mine and embedded communities.

Strategic communication

The historical development of strategic communication and public relations balances and unifies the interests of an organisation and the public (Kristensen 2010). According to Steyn (2007: 143), "In the strategic management literature, communication is regarded as an enabling function, facilitating the successful implementation of strategic decision". In practice, existing literature reflects that strategic management and strategic communication often are not fully integrated, and communication initiatives frequently become reactive routines (Davis 2007).

Strategic communication theory explains how organisations in the 21st century use and employ a variety of methods to influence the behaviour of their constituencies. Questions addressed include what people know, how people feel, and the way people act relatively to the organisation (Hallahan *et al.* 2007). These authors suggest that

through strategic communication, scholars recognise that purposeful influence is the fundamental goal to communication by organisations. Some forms of communication are grounded merely in protecting information (technical communication). Others are concerned with maintaining mutual satisfaction relationships (public relations). All these, however, are not enough to achieve strategically important goals. Therefore, strategic communication focuses on communication that contributes to an organisation's purpose for being.

Moreover, strategic communication concentrates on the core drivers of organisational success. It also expands the traditional sets of institutionalised communication measures to manage meaning in all kinds of interactions with internal and external stakeholders (Zerfass & Huck 2007).

Sustainability

Sustainability concepts are based on the notion that natural resources should not decrease further, but should rather be integrated and enhanced, and that poverty, viewed as the cause of environmental degradation, should be curbed through economic development *vis-a-vis* sustainability (Asafu-Adjaye 2005). The current study investigated how sustainable development programmes implemented by Unki to the benefit of the Rietfontein community advocate for human activities that satisfy the needs of the community members in co-dependence with other components such as the environment and social issues like poverty and hunger.

A number of critical and interrelated areas demand thoughtful attention for communities to move towards a sustainable future, namely the long-term viability of natural systems and the service they provide for human existence; unacceptable social conditions at home and in communities worldwide; and local and global economies and the potential they maintain to initiate a modicum of affluent and prosperity for all inhabitants of the earth. Judging from the above three items, one can argue that these are intertwined. Two-thirds of ecosystem services on which human society depends are degraded and cannot be sustained (World Watch Institute 2013). It remains highly contested whether mining corporations are responsible for addressing ecosystem issues for the wellbeing of their communities.

Sustainability leadership emphasizes a commitment to advance environmental ideologies and principles in its business strategies and operation (Elkington 1998). This study analysed whether sustainability for a healthy stakeholder relationship is possible in an environment with a rubble economy like Zimbabwe. On the other hand, it was interesting to note how the so-called triple bottom line is being reinforced by Unki as an attempt to uphold its social and environmental responsibility to its community.

STAKEHOLDER THEORY

The stakeholder concept was propounded by Freeman (1984), who defined it as "any group or individuals who can affect or be affected by a company's purpose". Freeman (1984: 63) posits that the stakeholder theory is based on the belief that organisations must respond to different groups who have or can have legitimate demands and

could affect their results. Stakeholder theory also has a considerable impact on the interpretation of social responsibility (Phillips *et al.* 2003).

Stakeholder theory forms part of debates on the role of businesses in society where corporations recognise its dependence on external factors in which the idea of CSR and corporate philanthropy emerges (Boucher & Rendtorff 2016). Overton-de Klerk and Verwey (2013) say the shift from corporate philanthropy towards co-empowerment and accountability to the most inclusive number of stakeholders has become an economic imperative. The stakeholder concept entails that societies expect that organisations within their areas are good citizens who can be held accountable in having to provide greater support and CSR1 to society in general (Carroll & Buchholtz 2008).

Strategic communication theory

In strategic communication theory, there is a shift of power and control from management to individual stakeholders, allowing them to make decisions based on value systems they can support (Overton-de Klerk & Verwey 2013). In the context of mining corporations, assessment is thus done to establish how strategic communication is being employed within their community for sustainable development. It is important to note the importance of enhancing the bottom-up rather than top-down approach for sustainable stakeholder relationship in developing nations.

One of the goals of strategic communication is to assist organisations to attain appropriate standards for CSR1; thereby, mitigating crisis. It is also designed to communicate ethically how the organisation is able to meet developmental standards for the good of society (Hallahan *et al.* 2007).

There is a gap in research in Zimbabwe on how mines through the strategic communication theory enable all voices to discuss issues that sustain their future, while maintaining healthy relationships with the surrounding communities.

METHODOLOGY

This study relied on a qualitative research approach to collect data and it is based on the epistemology of constructivism. A qualitative case study approach allowed in-depth data gathering, as well as assisted in developing a detailed historical account of the nature of the relationship between the embedded communities and the selected mining corporation. Instead of uncovering fixed truths that exist in the world “out there” without interaction of other entities (such as social engagements between humans), constructivism assumes that individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences, implying that meanings are varied and multiple (Creswell 2009).

The targeted population of the study was the human resources department and the SPI of Unki. The study also focused on 18 community members from Rietfontein village, which is a direct dependent of Unki. Four traditional leaders from the Rietfontein village were selected and interviewed to obtain detailed information in response to the study’s main objectives. Four qualitative sampling techniques were employed. Snowball sampling was used to select the embedded community, while purposive

sampling was used to select newspaper articles. Stratified sampling was employed to select two Unki mine employees from the human resources department and the Social Performance Initiative (SPI). Criterion sampling was used to select four traditional leaders from Rietfontein. Articles on CSR1 were drawn from *The Sun*, *The Times*, *NewsDay*, *The Herald* and *The Chronicle* newspapers.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Strategic communication approaches

The study found that the mine uses the bottom-up approach as a communication strategy when engaging with their embedded community. It emerged that the bottom-up approach is used mainly for community or mine issues that have the potential to impact communities. The community leads the initiation of sustainable projects for development in their communities. However, the study also established that the community is of the opinion that Unki does not negotiate in good faith as it failed to recall and fulfil all its agreements with Rietfontein community members. The community presented its grievances through the Shurugwi District Administrator (DA) Office. Participants in the second focus group discussion stated the following:

The displacement was at the mine's favour and due to our illiteracy and legal English used by the mine in its documents we were 'way-laid' and duped. The mine failed to pay us in full money for clearing our field, which was supposed to be \$250 thousand dollars. They only gave us 100 thousand dollars. No displacement allowance was given to any of us as agreed. If we take it to our ancestors that may bring lots of problems to the mine - Participant 3 from second focus group discussion.

Negotiations were not done in good faith and as a community had our grievances launched through the District Administrator (DA) in Shurugwi complaining about unfair treatment. The mine did not pay us our displacement allowance as per our agreement – Participant 1 from first focus group discussion.

We have good relationship with Unki mine and as a community we write and directly submit our to Unki mine. Most of the times they respond positively to our request, except the displacement allowance, which we were not given and suspect that the old administration duped us – Headman's response, interview.

In fact, the mine displaced us twice while we were in Shungudzevu, our original place. The displacement was not to the community's favour, as we wanted to remain in our red rich soils that were rich for farming. The community had elders who, although were literate, got confused by legal binding terminology, which the mine took advantage of and did not pay us \$250 thousand per family to clear two hectares, but rather gave each family \$100 thousand. The remaining balance of \$150 thousand was not paid and we approached the mine several times and they are not willing to pay - Councillor's response, interview.

The above responses show that although Unki follows a bottom-up approach with Rietfontein, the community is aggrieved on certain issues, which they feel the mine should revisit and address to cement healthy stakeholder relationships.

Interviews with two mine representatives, four traditional leaders and focus groups discussions with 18 community members revealed that various methods are used to engage with the community of Rietfontein. These include the bottom-up and top-down approach, the public private partnership model, and meetings that are transactional. The following responses support the claim:

Not one approach is suitable for all situations. We use both. Top-down for accurate reporting of mine developments of mutual interest. Bottom-up for community issues or mine issues that have the potential to impact communities - Social Performance Manager, Unki, interview.

Unki mine has been working with us as a direct dependent community that they displaced from Shungudzevu where they are currently located. We engage with the mine representatives for sustainable development programmes through meetings; sometimes they request us as a community to accept the projects they think can develop our community or we as a community we sat down and write issues that we wish the mine to assist us - Headman's response, interview.

The results indicated that Unki mine did well through its social performance project implemented at Rietfontein to address the community's needs, which led to sustainable development issues. It emerged that Rietfontein was one of the communities that benefited from the SPI programmes implemented by Unki, which created good road networks and provided clean running water, a good clinic, and a primary and secondary school, among other projects implemented since 2016 to date.

However, it was also noted that dependency syndrome is developing among some villagers. Such villagers constantly look to the mine to address most of their problems without taking responsibility of their own. This is supported by the following responses:

The economic downturn has had a direct impact on stakeholders' high expectations for the mine to contribute to delivery of services that ordinarily are the responsibility of government/local authorities. Unmet expectations are then seen as not being responsive - Unki Social Performance Initiatives Manager and Human Resources Representative.

As a community at times we expect much from the mine as if we are the only community yet there are more than 10 surrounding community that are assisted by Unki mine. The more they address our challenges the higher the chances of dependency syndrome amongst the villagers, who now are becoming lazy and cry babies. The mine cannot address all our problems; as individuals we have to work for our families as well - First elder, interview.

Some of the challenges we encounter is having high expectations from the mine to help us, which should be addressed by the government, and we should be content with that the mine has done for us - Second elder, interview.

Community members appreciate what the mine has done for us towards improving our community and our livelihoods. We should stop being crying babies and work for our families... not to expect the mine to do everything for us. Most of the community members after getting unsatisfied with some of the houses built for them by the mine had to work hard to build their big nice houses - Participant 5 from first focus group discussion.

The mine is trying their best to understand and improve our livelihood. There are individuals who are reluctant to work for their families, yet some are working extra hard to complement the mine's social performance programmes. At Rietfontein while some have to build more big beautiful houses, others are still complaining and expect the mine to come and build them nice houses. Dependency syndrome is affecting some of the community members and I am sure you saw some of the homesteads with shabby huts and some with mansions - Participant 5 from the second focus group discussion.

The above responses reflect positive and negative opinions from community members who depend on and expect the mine to do everything for them. It was established that while villagers at Rietfontein are working hard to better their lives, despite the assistance provided by the mine, some villagers strongly feel the mine should meet all their demands. In an interview with the Unki Social Performance Initiative Manager and a Human Resources representative, Unki personnel had this to say:

We listen to the community and respond to their requests using the bottom-up approach to get legitimacy and licence to continue our operations, which if not fulfilled may lead to protest actions and disruption of business. This may even lead to the loss of social licence to operate - Unki Social Performance Initiative Manager and Human Resources Representative.

Unki mine is the best and as a community, we appreciate their programmes, which have gone a long way in addressing the most pressing concerns to our welfare. They may continue extracting minerals and hope they are here to stay and to provide employment to our children in future - Participant 6 from the second focus group discussion.

From the above, it would appear that Unki displays full commitment to the corporate social performance model, which made it gain legitimacy from the Rietfontein community. The study also established that Unki uses a top-down approach when dealing with their surrounding communities, depending on the nature of the social performance programme they intend to implement. It also emerged that the top-down approach is used by the mine for reporting on mine expansions of common interest:

The mine uses meetings, top-down and bottom-up approaches with local authorities of Tongogara Rural District Council, Shurugwi Town Council, Gweru City Council, chiefs, host ward councillor, representatives of men, women and youths (1/ category) of the communities around the mine including Rietfontein village. District level, service government departments that include the District Administrators, Environment Management Agent, Education, Health, Agritex, Veterinary, Irrigation and Mechanisation, Social Welfare. Top-down is used for accurate reporting of mine developments of mutual interest - Unki Social Performance Initiative Manager, interview.

We usually take our request to the mine after sitting together as a community. Several meetings ... All the requests since we were relocated to this place by Unki mine were all received and responded to positively - First elder, interview.

Judging from the above, the mine uses meetings, both top-down and bottom-up, for various reasons to maintain stakeholder relationships. The mine uses the top-down approach to communicate SPIs to the targeted community, notifying them,

and for announcements. The bottom-up approach comes into effect when the community initiates requests and presents these to the mine using their community representatives. Both approaches are dialogical and achieve transactional communication that maintains health communications between the mine and the community for sustainable development:

In September 2019, Unki mine in Zimbabwe was the first mine in the world to publicly commit to an independent audit against the Initiative for Responsible Mining Assurance (IRMA) standards for responsible mining ... Unki performed well against the 26 areas covered including working conditions, human rights, community and stakeholder engagement, environment impact, planning and financing reclamation and closure (Anglo American Platinum Limited Integrated Report 2019: 118).

It can therefore be argued that Unki performed well with its SPIs. The same can be said of their community engagement activities, which have earned the mine respect and recognition. The international award won by Unki in 2019 was a result of their SPIs, implemented in all the surrounding communities in Shurugwi, including Rietfontein.

The study also established that the mine responds to the community's needs using the issue approach as a strategy to address concerns. The issue approach suggests identifying an emerging issue that may affect organisational operations as well as embedded communities' relationship with the mine. In this regard, the following was said:

Our approach to sustainability involves partnering with communities and participatory co-development of community social investment initiatives, and involving them throughout the projects cycle, that is from need identification, project scoping, mobilisation of material, contracting, monitoring and evaluation - Unki Social Performance Initiative Manager, interview.

The mine has been engaging with our community on certain issues like requests for road network, Muteveki bridge, water sources to water our gardens, schools and clinics for our family, and income generating projects. The mine responded positively to most of the issues except the issue of employing our children and energetic Rietfontein community members, which they remain silent on despite our frantic efforts made with more than two letters forwarded to the mine management and human resources - Participant 6 from the first focus group discussion.

Unki have responded to most of our issues since 2008 except the issue to pay us the remaining displacement allowance, providing us with farming inputs, employment of our children. When we requested and pressured them on providing us with farming inputs for eight years they responded to us by introducing a bee-hiving project as a direct income-generating project, which is not what we wanted to our community - Participant 7 from the second focus group discussion.

CONCLUSION

The study found that Unki mine's SPI projects implemented at Rietfontein are focused on education, agriculture and environment, the economy, water and sanitation, and social issues. The general findings indicate that sustainability for stakeholder relationships by mining companies to its embedded community is a welcome move

for sustainable development. Moreover, various strategic communication approaches are used by the mine to engage the community. Such communication approaches prevent the mine from dominating and imposing its will on the community where they do business.

The study also established that all the SPIs implemented by the mine at Rietfontein are in tandem with the UNDP Sustainable Development Goals. The results further indicated that the embedded communities expressed dissatisfaction on the failure by the mine to fulfil their previous agreements and for not employing their children, as per the relocation agreements.

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