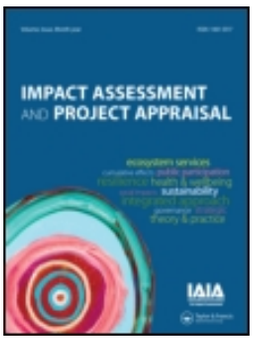

Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal

ISSN: 1461-5517 (Print) 1471-5465 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tiap20

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To cite this article: Martin Brueckner, Angela Durey, Christof Pforr & Robyn Mayes (2014) The civic virtue of developmentalism: on the mining industry's political licence to develop Western Australia, Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal, 32:4, 315-326, DOI: 10.1080/14615517.2014.929784

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14615517.2014.929784

Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal, 2014
Vol. 32, No. 4, 315–326, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14615517.2014.929784

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The civic virtue of developmentalism: on the mining industry's political licence to develop Western Australia

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(*Received 10 February 2014; accepted 26 May 2014*)

This paper examines the social licence to operate (SLO) of Western Australia's (WA's) mining industry in the context of the state's 'developmentalist' agenda. We draw on the findings of a multi-disciplinary body of new research on the risks and challenges posed byWA's mining industry for environmental, social and economic sustainability. We synthesise the findings of this work against the backdrop of the broader debates on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and resource governance. In light of the data presented, this paper takes issue with the mining sector's SLO and its assessment of social and environmental impacts in WA for three inter-related reasons. A state government ideologically wedded to resource-led growth is seen to offer the resource sector a political licence to operate and to give insufficient attention to its potential social and environmental impacts. As a result, the resource sector can adopt a self-serving CSR agenda built on a limited win–win logic and operate with a 'quasi social licence' that is restricted to mere economic legitimacy. Overall, this paper problematises the political-cum-commercial construction and neoliberalisation of the SLO and raises questions about the impact of mining in WA.

Keywords: developmentalism; political licence to operate; Western Australia; mining industry

Introduction

The exploitation of the state's natural assets has been a policy priority in Western Australia (WA) since white settlement in the mid-1820s (Walker et al. 2002) and as such has been an 'objective of all Western Australian governments' (Layman 1982, p. 149). To this day, WA is a resource-based and resource-dependent economy with its economic performance closely tied to that of the resource sector (Lawrie et al. 2011). The most recent resource boom underscored the significance of mining and drilling in the state. The boom is widely seen to have enabled the state, and indeed the entire country (CommSec 2013), to prevent the economic fallout from the global financial crisis and to produce GDP growth figures that were unmatched by most other Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries at the time (OECD 2013).

Much political and media attention was focused in recent years on the economic performance of WA, and the importance of the resource sector to the state's economic well-being. Record investment and export figures in the minerals and energy sectors (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012d) and correspondingly high state revenue data served to reinforce the political support the industry received and resulted in a very positive portrayal of the sector in the mainstream media. To illustrate, the state's conservative Coalition government has committed very openly to making WA 'the world's biggest resource industry [. . .] economy' (APPEA 2011) and to ensure that the resource industry's 'future growth is not hampered by structural impediments or red tape' (Barnett 2009). In addition, strong income and employment growth in the resource sector (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012a, 2012c) helped shape dominant perceptions that mining in the state is positively associated with the prosperity and well-being of West Australians (Barnett 2011; Hajkowicz et al. 2011; Storey 2012). It will be argued here that these positive associations provide the basis for the industry's 'social licence to operate' (SLO) in WA. These associations aid the political framing of the economic benefits of mining as an acceptable trade-off for the industry's potentially adverse impacts. While these frames may be resisted locally, as this paper will illustrate, they nonetheless help to create a dominant discourse that renders the resource sector both benign and beneficial with normalising and depoliticising effects.

Debates on SLO in mining are commonly seen to have grown out of concerns about the sector's social and environmental impacts and the resultant need for mining companies to protect their image and public support base (MMSD Project 2002; Jenkins & Yakovleva 2006; Prno & Slocombe 2012). Yet, this paper will show that, instead of focusing on social and environmental harm minimisation, both the mining industry and the state government are seen to place greater emphasis on the resource sector's contribution to the developmentalist agenda in the form of investment, employment creation and royalty payments. It is thus our contention that SLO in WA mining is better understood as a political licence to operate (PLO).[1] This is a politically derived licence that stands for the government approval of, and support for, an industry based on its contribution to the state's development agenda. The issuance of a PLO reduces the broader SLO agenda to a matter of mere economic legitimacy, which overall bespeaks the neoliberal logic that shapes WA's resource governance system.

At the same time, the potentially adverse social and environmental effects of mining have a history of being

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overlooked, downplayed or even ignored under existing regulation governing social and environmental impacts and their assessment throughout Australia (Franks et al. 2009; Michell & McManus 2013). Even though environmental regulation in WA enjoys a strong international reputation, monitoring and enforcement are found to be weak (Chandler 2014) with alarming environmental consequences (Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) 2007; Roche & Mudd 2014). In addition, the social impact space has been left unregulated in the state, leaving many decisions concerning social impact assessment (SIA) work to industry (Wesley 2014). Despite government claims to world-class regulation and a good balance between development and broader community concerns (Moodie 2010; McHugh 2014), not only are the benefits of mining prone to be overstated, the potentially negative impacts of mining are in danger of being un-assessed, undervalued or invisible. Impacted communities thus face a government with a strong pro-development bias and a firm belief in the adequacy of current impact assessment (IA) protocols and regulatory safeguards. This in turn provides a platform for a potentially self-serving corporate social responsibility (CSR) agenda on the side of industry.

Arguably, the narrow construction of SLO by government, coined PLO earlier, enables resource companies in WA to adopt an equally narrow CSR platform. The dominant CSR literature has long been promoting the business case for CSR (World Business Council for Sustainable Development 2000; Berman & Webb 2003), which rests on the interdependencies that are said to exist between business and society for the creation of jobs, wealth and the improvement of living standards (Hoque 1985). Proponents of this brand of CSR theory refer to the existence of shared interests between business and society, translating community well-being into companies' long-term interest. Good company conduct is argued to result in various direct and indirect business benefits (Margolis & Walsh 2003; Kotler & Lee 2005; Orltizky 2005; Schreck 2009) and is thus seen to reconcile social responsibility with shareholder interests. However, this logic has attracted strong criticism for being self-serving, self-limiting and to still be adhering to a 'Friedmanite' position that sees the key social welfare contribution of business in its ability to maximise shareholder value (Blowfield 2005; Banerjee 2008; Brueckner & Mamun 2010). The point here is that firms' economic contributions to society are at risk of being re-framed as CSR initiatives and to be in the social interest (to an extent they certainly are). As we will suggest in this paper, WA's resource sector employs the discourse of enlightened self-interest, which serves to legitimate the sector and its activities. At the same time, the discourse is very narrowly and economically framed, allowing for a business-as-usual approach with a mere social twist.

Overall, the paper questions the robustness and validity of claims in WA's mining sector to SLO and minimal social and environmental impact. We present recent data derived from a multi-disciplinary research collaboration to show the extent to which industry and government assertions of SLO in mining are at odds with community perceptions of the industry in light of its locally felt social and environmental impacts. The data will be used to support the argument that WA's resource sector is not pressured to earn its SLO based on processes that build legitimacy, credibility and trust (see Meyer & Rowan 1977; Thomson & Boutilier 2011; Bice 2013). We suggest instead that SLO in WA mining is often based on an 'economic legitimacy' (after Boutilier & Thomson 2011) sanctioned and supported by government. We therefore speak of a PLO, which can belie and mask the very social and environmental impacts that would normally affect the issuance of an earned SLO. Weaknesses in state regulation, monitoring and enforcement serve to compound what Bice (2013, p. 138) calls 'crises of identity and sustainability'. These crises refer to the plight of communities most affected by resource development and thus most likely to benefit from a SLO but who are 'often forgotten, frequently misunderstood, and [. . .] comparatively less researched' (Bice 2013, p. 138).

Against this background, we commence the paper by offering an overview of the SLO, IA and CSR literature and provide an insight into WA's dominant development ideology to establish the requisite context for the ensuing discussion. Following a brief description of the methods employed, attention will be directed to a selection of cases which will illustrate the discrepancy between the dominant win–win discourse in mining and its lived experience at the community level. In a final discussion, we consider the implications of the paper's findings to SLO and IA research, industry practices in mining and resource governance. We argue that society's interests need to be genuinely framed more broadly beyond employment, income and taxation by industry and government alike with proper recognition given to the adverse impacts of resource-based development. Only then can claims of SLO and minimal impact be meaningful, social and environmental interests be fully served, and CSR as well as resource governance systems be sustainable and effective.

IA, social licence and civic virtue

IAs in various forms have become commonplace around the world (Esteves et al. 2012). In WA, for example, environmental impact assessments (EIAs) have been mandated by law for over 30 years (Chandler 2014). Since the 1970s, with the rise of EIAs, many other forms of IA have emerged – including SIAs – as a subset of, or in addition to, EIAs (Michell & McManus 2013). Methodologically, EIAs are deemed more robust and refined than SIAs, more frequently mandated by environmental law and codified under uniform and more exacting standards. EIAs can broadly be defined as the assessment of (Morgan 2012, p. 5):

> proposed actions (from policies to projects) for their likely implications for all aspects of the environment, from social through to biophysical, before decisions are made to commit to those actions, and developing appropriate responses to the issues identified in that assessment.

Environmental laws commonly require of project proponents to demonstrate their awareness of the impact potential of their projects and demand that any adverse

negative impacts be minimised and positive impacts emphasised (Michell & McManus 2013). Despite codification, regulatory safeguards and best practice guidelines, however, EIAs are inherently political and influenced by reputation and profit among other drivers (O'Faircheallaigh & Corbett 2005), prompting some commentators to speak of EIAs as the maiden hand of development (e.g. Du et al. 2012 cited in Michell & McManus 2013). In this context, this paper will show that – notwithstanding tight environmental standards – project approvals in WA mining seem to have been largely driven by a pro-development ethos in recent years. This approach to IA led to a record number of project approvals and manifested also in a discernible lack of post-approval surveillance of industry compliance and performance.

The status of SIAs is arguably even more controversial. SIAs harbour considerable potential to contribute to better development outcomes for communities (Esteves et al. 2012) and as such can be used as a tool for successful and sustainable development (Michell & McManus 2013). Indeed, SIAs have gained in both sophistication and standing. Best practice guidelines suggest that SIAs should (Esteves et al. 2012, p. 34):

- be participatory;
- support affected peoples, proponents and regulatory agencies;
- increase understanding of change and capacities to respond to change;
- seek to avoid and mitigate negative impacts and to enhance positive benefits across the life cycle of developments and
- emphasise enhancing the lives of vulnerable and disadvantaged people.

SIAs no longer need to be limited EIA subsets and restricted to a once-off, bureaucratic assessment (Franks & Vanclay 2013). Indeed, the SIA literature now speaks of ongoing, participatory processes that actively involve affected communities and are accountable and responsive to their interests; processes that draw on local communities' agency and utilise their 'ideas, energy, social capital and knowledge' (Michell & McManus 2013, p. 438) based on a genuine desire to understand and cater for local needs and aspirations.

However, there appears to be a putative gap between SIA theory and praxis as SIAs rarely assume this participatory form, and their full potential is thus rarely realised (Prno & Slocombe 2012). Further, the social effects of development continue to receive far less attention than biophysical impacts (e.g. Morrison-Saunders & Retief 2012; Franks & Vanclay 2013), and both the definition of SIA success (O'Faircheallaigh 2009) and the capture of complex and dynamic social impacts remain problematic methodologically (Weaver et al. 2008). In WA, SIAs are not regulated and are undertaken only as a component of EIAs. As such, this paper will show they are at risk of being perfunctory only without having substantive impact. Overall, by way of creating a façade of acceptability, weak IAs can assist companies in their quest for a SLO.

The obtaining of a SLO, according to business analysts, is one of the most significant challenges resource companies are currently facing (Deloitte Global Services 2010; Ernst & Young 2011). Despite its obvious importance to industry, the concept remains abstract, devoid of a single, clear definition and open to interpretation (Bice 2014). In contrast to matters of legal compliance, social licences are not formally issued, and the issuance or refusal of SLO is occurring in dynamic settings and thus highly time and context dependent (Prno & Slocombe 2012). In broad terms, SLO can be defined (Nelsen 2006, p. 161)

> as a set of concepts, values, tools and practices that represent a way of viewing reality for industry and stakeholders. Its purpose is to create a forum for negotiation whereby the parties involved are heard, understood and respected. SLO is a means to earn accountability, credibility, flexibility and capacity for both stakeholders and industry.

The aforementioned definition portrays SLO as both process and outcome, focused on conciliation and finding common ground. In the mining context, Moffat and Zhang (2014, p. 61) offer a more instrumental definition, describing SLO as 'the ongoing acceptance and approval of a mining development by local community members and other stakeholders that can affect its profitability' so as to reduce social risks and the potential for conflict. For companies, SLO creates project certainty and helps 'avoid potentially costly conflict and exposure to social risks' (Prno & Slocombe 2012, p. 346). For communities, SLO is about the acceptability of a company and its local operations (Boutilier & Thomson 2011). This includes the acceptance of certain costs (e.g. noise, pollution) and benefits (community investments, royalty payments) associated with a company and its operations as well as the acceptance of the processes through which agreement was reached between a company and its host community. Good IA processes in this regard will help firms build trust with local communities and facilitate SLO obtention.

While regarded by some as a desperate bid for survival by the mining industry (Owen & Kemp 2013), others see in the uptake of the SLO concept across the resource sector signs of a maturing industry that has understood the importance of gaining and maintaining its social legitimacy (Goodland 2009). This broad spectrum of opinion is reflective of the divisions visible in the broader debate on CSR in mining, in which the resource sector receives a highly polarised treatment either seen as a leader or laggard in the CSR space (e.g. Frynas 2009a, 2009b; Idemudia 2010; Kemp et al. 2011).

Over the years, CSR in mining has proven to be a popular but equally problematic issue. While resource companies are often seen to be vocal champions of CSR, they also attract considerable criticism in connection with highly visible resource conflicts (e.g. Calvano 2007; Bebbington 2010; Kemp et al. 2011). In this context, Frynas (2005, p. 581) speaks of a discernible gap between 'stated intentions of business leaders and their actual behavior and impact in the real world', and Palazzo and Scherer (2008) point to the failure even of 'good CSR

companies' to address the adverse impacts of their operations. Critical commentators attribute these ongoing failures to the fact that CSR has remained subservient to firms' dominant economic objective and – despite high-minded rhetoric – failed to change corporate values and to correct the efficiency–legitimacy dichotomy (Blowfield & Frynas 2005; Frynas 2005; Banerjee 2008).

The focal point of the above critique is the dominant, so-called capitalist strand of CSR theory (Korhonen 2002; Amaeshi & Adi 2007). Its proponents treat interchangeably company and community well-being on the basis of assumed shared interests. In short, interests of the firm can only be met if the firm meets the interests of society and vice versa. This brand of CSR is underpinned by neoclassical economic theory (Blowfield 2005) to which the 'leitmotif of wealth creation' is central (Windsor 2001). The profit-focused approach to CSR breaks down any separation between corporate self-interest and social responsibility as social and ecological concerns can be reframed as economic concerns under the banner of 'enlightened value maximisation' (Jensen 2002). The so-called business case for CSR rests on the belief that firms can strategically link their business capabilities with the opportunities their social environment presents. As a result, firms can realise both societal benefit as well as competitive advantages (Collis & Montgomery 1995; Miles & Covin 2000; Munilla & Miles 2005; Porter & Kramer 2006). However, opportunities for these kinds of 'double dividends' are limited as many CSR, SLO and IA issues (e.g. pollution, health impacts) are beyond arguments of economic efficiency. This explains calls for a CSR beyond the business case, as in many CSR cases the interests of business do not merge with the interests of society (Newell 2001; Banerjee 2007). It is in situations such as these that companies' SLO and their ability to reconcile differences with company stakeholders come into sharp focus.

The sales pitch of 'doing well whilst doing good' (see for example Lev et al. 2010) may well have aided the mainstreaming of the CSR agenda and the proliferation of the dominant win–win CSR logic across industry (Lee 2008). However, to our reading it also has helped legitimate an approach to CSR that amounts to little more than reputation management and legitimation efforts, which in turn provide only a weak SLO basis (Slack 2012). Due to its nature, the resource sector faces many social and environmental CSR issues (Jenkins & Yakovleva 2006) and thus needs robust CSR frameworks to meet regulatory, social and environmental requirements and expectations. However, as will be shown in the WA mining experience, the adoption of market-driven, economic CSR approaches does not automatically translate into impact minimisation, social responsibility or the issuance of a social licence.

The WA data will also illustrate the ways in which company and project acceptance are strongly built around economic business contributions such as income and employment generation. While economic benefits matter to local communities, they only form one of a number of components deemed necessary to achieve social acceptability of resource development companies and their projects (see Goodland 2009; Boutilier & Thomson 2011; Thomson & Boutilier 2011). Economic legitimacy is vital yet insufficient to building credibility and trust necessary for lasting community support, especially when communities are faced with considerable adverse impacts. In WA, the dominance of the economic approach to IA, SLO and CSR in mining can be explained by way of reference to the state government's commitment to developmentalism which sanctions and supports industries that contribute to the state's development agenda. The developmentalist mindset and agenda will be briefly explored further in the text.

Resources and developmentalism in WA

Developmentalism in WA became the state's dominant development ideology under former Liberal Premier and Industrial Development Minister Sir Charles Court from the 1960s onwards (Layman 1982). Kellow and Niemeyer (1999) describe developmentalism as a form of political conservatism and the tendency by government to pursue interventionist development policies. In WA, developmentalism took the form of government pursuing economic growth by committing 'to resource development by large-scale private capital undertaking large scale projects with assistance at all stages by state planning' (Layman 1982, p. 163). It is a development approach that favours light-handed industry regulation and low-level taxation where the benefits of development are meant to be captured by material diffusion through employment and income generated by resource development projects (Harman 1982). On that basis, successive WA governments have played an important role in the development of the resource sector as one of the state's economic cornerstones (Phillimore 2014).

Economic development in the state is strongly driven by a belief in the urgent need for development, to tame WA's physical environment and to overcome its isolation and remoteness (Moon & Sharman 2003). This is what Harman (1982) describes as the 'frontier mentality', which still characterises development policy in WA today. It is a mindset that drives government policy designed to encourage resource projects and 'discourage companies from "sitting" [sic] on mineral tenements or gas reserves without developing them expeditiously' (Phillimore 2014, p. 31). This sense of urgency is reflected in the stance taken by current Premier Colin Barnett, who strongly supports resource development and warns of WA missing out in the global commodity race (Barnett quoted in Maumill 2013):

> [i]f we don't grasp this opportunity of China's growth and perhaps India following, we won't get a chance again [. . .] If we don't do it this decade, we can't just leave things [. . .] There are a whole lot of competitive developing countries coming up and this is our one chance.

The mantra of development has been underpinned by the belief that economic growth automatically delivers social benefits and that any environmental impacts need to be treated as a necessary trade-off for progress and prosperity. With the underlying assumption that resource extraction will automatically benefit society, WA's

tradition of developmentalism has meant that the social and environmental dimensions of resource development have largely been ignored owing to the political failure to reconcile this economic growth perspective with community well-being and environmental health (Beresford 2001; Brueckner & Pforr 2011). We suggest here that WA's dominant political mindset affects IA, SLO and CSR outcomes due to its framing effects, which serve to normalise the narrow economic understanding of the mining sector's contribution to the state.

Comments on method

The research presented in this article is based on a collaboration involving 24 researchers from a wide array of academic disciplines including ecology, health, ethics, political science, sociology, Indigenous studies and economics (see Brueckner et al. 2014b). Building on the work of Harman and Head (1982), the aim of this joint project was to assess the sustainability of resource-based development in WA by gauging the social, economic and environmental costs and benefits of mining. Overall, the project brought together 17 contributions based on both desktop reviews and empirical work. Combined, these contributions offer a holistic assessment of mining and its impacts in the state.

In this paper, we introduce four select cases taken from this collaboration to highlight the fragility of IA and SLO in WA mining. The cases presented will illustrate how a politically derived licence to develop the state can bring about adverse social and environmental impacts. Attention will be directed to the way in which both government and industry frame the role of business in WA society and the corporate practices this framing gives rise to.

Western Australian SLO and IA experiences

James Price Point

James Price Point is located in the Kimberley region in the northwest of WA near the township of Broome, an internationally renowned tourist destination. The attractiveness of the region is based on its rich history and culture, in particular Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (hereafter Aboriginal) and pastoral heritage (Fryer-Smith 2002) as well as outstanding landforms, geology and geomorphology, including rugged coastlines and large expanses of spectacular wilderness areas (Hughes 2010, 2014).

In 2009, Woodside Energy proposed a large liquefied natural gas (LNG) processing facility at James Price Point, about 40 km north of Broome, which prompted strong public debate over its potential environmental, social and cultural impacts. Nonetheless, the WA government strongly supported Woodside Energy's plans highlighting the company's SLO based on its commitment to world class environmental standards and the promise of improved livelihoods in the region, in particular of employment and training opportunities for Aboriginal communities and financial benefits for Aboriginal Traditional Owners. These close business-government ties were in line with successive WA governments' ideology of developmentalism and rapid economic growth that has stimulated and facilitated resource development projects in the past. As highlighted earlier, this specific economic and political climate in WA has shaped the meaning of CSR in a way that the public tends to accept contributions to economic growth as a form of social responsibility (Wesley & MacCallum 2014). In the context of the proposed James Price Point development, the WA Premier Barnett (2010), for instance, highlighted that the LNG plant would provide 'real jobs, real improvements in housing, education and health', implying a win–win situation for everyone.

Nonetheless, the proponents of the development faced a very strong and vocal local opposition, which questioned the project's perceived benefits. In an attempt to gain its SLO, Woodside negotiated a $1.5 billion package of payments to Aboriginal Traditional Owners of the affected land with Woodside's Chairman emphasising, considering these benefits, that further opposition to the development 'would be an immoral act' (Chaney 2011).

Despite this rhetoric, after more than four years of negotiations and protests, in 2013 Woodside Energy announced that it would not proceed with the LNG project at James Price Point purely based on economic considerations (Wesley & MacCallum 2014). This decision was made without any further regard of the possible social impacts it might have, highlighting the tensions between 'local' and 'global' interests and the mismatch between a corporate strategy merely focused on profit maximisation and the social well-being of a community. This decision meant not only that the promise of economic betterment in particular to the affected Aboriginal communities remains unrealised but that the bitter conflict between proponents and opponents has divided the wider Broome community and undermined its social cohesion.

In response to Woodside's decision, Aboriginal spokesperson Wayne Bergmann, who had played a pivotal role in the negotiation of the benefits package to Aboriginal Traditional Owners, highlighted that in his view the company and the WA government had a moral obligation to honour the agreement. For him, this was not an issue of legal rights but 'about their social licence to operate' (AAP Financial News 2013). Nonetheless, neither the WA government nor Woodside has since taken any responsibility and seen a need to act on that matter.

The controversy surrounding the proposed James Price Point development that was briefly outlined above was closely investigated and analysed by Wesley and MacCallum (2014) who were able to demonstrate in their study that in the James Price Point case, despite a prevailing CSR rhetoric and strong claims to Woodside's SLO, in reality Aboriginal development and social cohesion were subordinated to a parochial economic perspective. These economic and pro-development biases were also detected in the environmental and SIA work carried out as part of strategic assessment for the LNG processing plant (Department of State Development 2009), which were seen to downplay and marginalise

concerns raised in connection with the project (Wesley & MacCallum 2014). As will be discussed later, not only are adverse impacts prone to be understated in WA's pro-development climate, the economic benefits of mining also strike as inflated.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and the mining boom in WA

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians make up about 2.6% of the Australian population and over 3% of the population in WA (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012b). Health disparities between Aboriginal and other Australians have been well documented with morbidity and mortality rates still at unacceptable levels (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2011). The social determinants of Aboriginal health include the detrimental impact of unemployment on mental health and well-being (Shepherd et al. 2012). The 2011 census indicated that Aboriginal participation in the Australian workforce has decreased overall since 2006 with those living in cities proportionately more likely to be employed than those living in remote areas where the employment rate was lowest (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013). Around 40% of the Aboriginal population in WA live in very remote areas (Dockery 2014). In theory, the proximity of mining companies to remote Aboriginal communities provides opportunities to engage a local Aboriginal workforce who can also maintain their cultural obligations such as kinship ties, ceremonies and connection to their land and sacred sites (O'Faircheallaigh 2008, 2013; Langton & Longbottom 2012; Dockery 2014). The mining industry is the tenth largest employer of Aboriginal people with the highest proportion of Aboriginal people in its workforce (3.1%) compared to other industries (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013). Mining companies such as Rio Tinto and FMG have been praised for their efforts to increase Aboriginal employment (Langton 2012).

With mining companies now seeking SLO on Aboriginal lands to secure access to resources, sustainable development and CSR are firmly on the industry's agenda increasing expectations that economic benefits will be shared with Aboriginal communities located alongside mines (Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining n.d.; Altman 2009; Langton & Longbottom 2012; O'Faircheallaigh 2013; Dockery 2014). Other changes in the relationship between the mining industry and Aboriginal communities include the Native Title Act 1993 (NTA) which gave Aboriginal people who were recognised as Traditional Owners the 'Right to Negotiate' future grants of exploration or mining interests on their land. While Traditional Owners have the right to negotiate, they have no right of veto over development nor have special rights over mineral resources, and in most jurisdictions governments can allow mining to proceed without the permission of Aboriginal Traditional Owners (O'Faircheallaigh 2008; Altman 2009).

A recent study (Dockery 2014) using census data investigated the extent to which the latest mining boom in WA led to better employment opportunities for the Aboriginal populations living near mining sites. It was found that despite the NTA and reported commitments to CSR towards local Aboriginal populations, Aboriginal employment opportunities as a result of the mining boom were minimal (Dockery 2014). Notwithstanding industry claims to boosting Aboriginal employment (Hooke 2013), 2011 data reveal that for every 100 mining industry jobs in remote and very remote WA, only 4.6 were held by Aboriginal residents living in those areas, with a further 4.6 Aboriginal residents unemployed. For every 100 mining industry jobs located in outer regional WA, only 3.9 were held by Aboriginal residents while a further 11.3 Aboriginal residents were unemployed. Dockery (2014) suggests that the raw data confirm that several mining intensive areas also display high rates of Aboriginal unemployment. While these findings illustrate the complexity and contested nature of this terrain, they also raise questions about the extent to which the principles underpinning mining companies' SLO (e.g. improving the lives of vulnerable and disadvantaged people and those affected by mining) are translated to empirical evidence of widespread improved employment outcomes for remote Aboriginal communities.

Environmental politics and policy in WA

Despite heightened awareness of the mining sector's environmental and social impacts as well as the existence of a comprehensive regulatory framework, concerns have been raised that the social and environmental dimensions of resource development in WA might not be given the attention they warrant. At first glance, calls for greater consideration of environmental and social impacts in the face of strong regulatory authority are at odds. In what way and to what extent these control mechanisms have been applied in the state has therefore been subject to critical scrutiny (Chandler 2014).

Managing the potential negative environmental and sociocultural impacts of resource extraction is without any doubt a complex and challenging undertaking that necessitates a strong evaluation, regulation, monitoring and management framework. Relevant authorities in WA can indeed draw on a range of regulatory mechanisms, although their bias towards environmental over social impacts has already been noted earlier. The evaluation of environmental impacts of the state's resources sector, for example, fall under the legislative framework of broader EIAs and are therefore scrutinised by WA's EPA, an independent agency providing recommendations to the state government on a range of environmental issues (EPA 2014).

> The EPA has statutory obligations under Part III and Part IV of the *Environmental Protection Act 1986* to conduct environmental impact assessments, initiate measures to protect the environment from environmental harm and pollution and to provide advice to the Minister on environmental matters generally.

The large number of EIAs the Authority has prepared in regards to the resources sector in recent years reflects the extraordinary growth of the mining industry in WA over the past decade. Chandler (2014), however, questions

the effectiveness of this regulatory framework and its ability to adequately balance economic interests with environmental concerns. In her view, it is not so much the existence of control mechanisms but rather the way they are implemented and enforced that lead to more even-handed and adequate outcomes.

She highlights further that the current regulatory system does not provide for an effective control of compliance with EPA approval conditions nor does it allow gauging environmental outcomes although both instruments would very effectively complement the statutory powers that are in place in WA. Thus, despite the existence of a comprehensive framework for regulating the sector, the system has not been evaluated on a regular basis, industry adherence to set conditions is not adequately monitored and social impacts appear to be largely ignored by the legislative framework. It can therefore be concluded that despite the resource sector's prominent position in WA, certainly in economic terms, it appears to be rather difficult to establish the degree of its environmental and social impacts. Recent assessment work seems to suggest that impacts are understated (EPA 2007; Majer 2014; Roche & Mudd 2014).

It has been suggested (Chandler 2014) that political barriers and powerful industry interests are the main impediments to an effective functioning of WA's statutory framework. In the face of strong industry lobbying and the prospect of economic benefits, governments might be inclined to give approval to proposed mining projects; since EPA recommendations are not binding, environmental concerns (and possible negative social impacts for that matter) might be pushed aside by government's doctrine of developmentalism and a dominant economic rationality.

As Chandler (2014) demonstrated, WA's poor environmental governance does not provide a solid footing for the sustainable development and operation of the resource sector. Equitable regulation of the environmental and social impacts of mining rests on how regulatory authority is implemented, highlighting the need for meaningful, measureable sustainability indicators that are assessed on an ongoing basis.

Living down-wind from 'world's best practice'

The town of Yarloop, 125 km south of Perth – the state capital – has been the centre of a long-running conflict between local residents and its corporate neighbour Alcoa World Alumina. The conflict has been about Alcoa's Wagerup alumina refinery, which is located just 5 km away from the Yarloop township and believed to be the source of ongoing health impacts experienced in surrounding communities (Brueckner & Mamun 2010; Brueckner & Ross 2010; Brueckner 2014).

Since 1997, the Yarloop community has been agitating against Alcoa on a raft of issues relating to impacts on community health and well-being. The focus here is on the issues of noise, dust and refinery emissions. Alcoa, one of the world's largest producers of aluminium, has been operating in Wagerup since 1984 and long been refuting claims of adversely impacting the community. The company prides itself as a significant contributor to the WA economy and as a socially and environmentally responsible business. Its achievements in the CSR and environmental management space are recognised nationally and internationally (Reputex 2003; Corporate Knights Inc. and Innovest Strategic Value Advisors Inc. 2007). The company portrays itself as being 'committed to world's best practice' (Alcoa 2014) in all its operations and considers CSR to be part of the company's DNA (Alcoa 2008).

Over the last decade, successive state governments have been siding with the company defending its actions as 'fair and equitable' (Carpenter 2006) and been quick to highlight Alcoa's role as a 'substantial employer in [the] state' and the 'huge amounts of dollars [the company spends] to support activities in the community' (WA Legislative Council 2007). In fact, former Premier Alan Carpenter went as far as to dissuade the community from taking action against Alcoa, warning that community agitation could become 'a serious disincentive to further investment' which would be 'detrimental to the economic and social benefits that the local and state community as a whole [would] obtain' (Carpenter 2006).

Nonetheless, after over 10 years of community campaigning, the community has recently been vindicated on questions of noise and emissions, and Alcoa's dust suppression practices have also attracted criticism. In expounding, air monitoring revealed possible underestimates in Alcoa's emission inventory. Refinery emissions containing up to 260 chemicals were found to be lingering close to the ground for up to 18 hours within 7 km from the refinery trapped against the local topography leading to the possible exposure of the community (Calhoun et al. 2008; Retallack et al. 2010). The findings led to a tightening of Alcoa's licensing conditions, and more stringent air quality controls (Department of Environment and Conservation 2008). They also help explain persistent community calls for a comprehensive and independent health survey in the region.

Furthermore, Alcoa's controversial Land Management Plan (Alcoa 2001, 2002), which over 10 years ago divided the town of Yarloop into two discrete land management areas, was recently being challenged. Alcoa's Land Management Plan was purportedly based by noise contours, distinguishing between two types of noise-affected areas (Areas A and B). Residents closest to the refinery (Area A), who were known to be exposed to night-time noise levels above 35 dbA from the refinery, received generous buyout offers from Alcoa. In contrast, people outside Area A received either lesser offers (in Area B) or failed to qualify for company buyout altogether despite claims of being noise affected (outside Areas A and B). WA's Minister for the Environment acted on the advice received in response to community appeals against Alcoa's noise approval application and now requires the company 'to publish details of its efforts to purchase "noise affected properties" [sic] in the vicinity of the refinery, rather than under Areas A and B' (Jacobs 2013).

The decision effectively questions the validity of Alcoa's Land Management Plan and acknowledges the potential for the refinery's noise footprint to be extending beyond Alcoa's land management area.

Finally, despite claims to best practice, Alcoa has repeatedly failed to stay within its dust limits and has been sued and fined for negligence (Alcoa 2002/2003; Towie 2008, 2009; Australian Associated Press 2009). Overall, community reactions show that there are questions surrounding both Alcoa's SLO and the company's community impacts. Despite Alcoa's attempts at promoting itself as a CSR champion and key driver of regional sustainability (Alcoa 2008), company practices were found to be at odds with community sentiments (Brueckner & Ross 2010). Alcoa enjoys a strong CSR reputation nationally, and it was shown here that the company receives considerable government support for its operations and current expansion plans in WA. Yet, local community opposition points to a disjuncture between government and industry claims to, and local experiences of, 'best practice'. Alcoa's contributions in terms of income and employment generation as well as philanthropic community investments cannot be denied. However, in the Yarloop case, these contributions strike as the principal means through which Alcoa sought to support claims to its commitment to CSR. At the same time, local community impacts were underestimated and downplayed by both government and industry. Only after years of persistent community agitation could local residents be vindicated. The case also illustrates the power of positive framing by industry and government. The conflict has been ongoing since 1997, and despite significant and regular media coverage and a parliamentary inquiry into the refinery, the Wagerup controversy did not resonate with the wider public that continues to be reassured about the importance of mining to WA's economy.

Discussion and concluding comments

The data presented earlier reveal a strong economic focus on the side of industry and government in connection with SLO in mining, one that was largely restricted to the sector's contributions to the generation of jobs and income and philanthropic community investments. These SLOs were portrayed here as PLOs on the basis of the government's overt industry support and pro-development mindset. When juxtaposing this economic logic with lived SLO experiences at the local community level, a discernible gulf could be detected between community understandings of, and expectations for, SLO in mining and those of industry and government. In addition, certain SLO claims could not be supported empirically.

Specifically, the impact of multinationals was shown on the lives of people in small country towns and the way in which corporate self-interest can run counter to community well-being and aspirations. Attention was directed to local discontinuities resulting from industry encroaching on small towns and the power asymmetries at work in industry–community conflicts exacerbated by an overt pro-industry and pro-development stance by government, as illustrated through a focus on PLO. The conflicts we described in the towns of Yarloop and Broome are by no means isolated to WA, and indeed bespeak an emerging pattern of industry–community conflicts across Australia in the context of an expanding mining sector (see Higginbotham et al. 2010; Cleary 2012; Duus 2013; Scambary 2013; White 2013). This trend stresses the need for critical reflection on current SLO approaches and on their underlying assumptions.

WA's dominant development narrative, of which resource development forms a central part, was shown to have given rise to narrow SLO constructions in mining coupled with a somewhat cavalier treatment of mining impacts. SLO constructions such as these are at risk of merely reflecting a singularity that offers only one best way for advancing the state and its people. However, the aforementioned data revealed the potential for conflict when these development aspirations collide with social, cultural and environmental interests at the local level. The conflicts reported here largely arose in response to failures in addressing fully the social, cultural and environmental concerns surrounding resource developments where the economic benefits were meant to speak for themselves. In addition, claims to best practice were expected to be trusted and to be taken on face value.

Especially for Aboriginal communities, SLO in mining ought to be questioned. With resource extraction in the state occurring on Aboriginal land, mining companies want to negotiate directly with Traditional Owners to gain a SLO on Aboriginal land and ensure access to resources (Altman 2009). In negotiations with Traditional Owners, mining companies often propose a share in the economic benefits mining will generate in an attempt to offset the impacts of mining on Aboriginal communities that are felt both physically and culturally. In recent years, Aboriginal employment in mining has widely been portrayed as a principal goal for resource development in WA and served as a key pillar of mining companies' SLO. However, the promise of Aboriginal employment in mining has gone largely unfulfilled. Indeed, the research cited here suggests that Aboriginal employment growth in WA was largely a function of labour relocation as opposed to genuine job creation (Dockery 2014). In this sense, the state's most recent mineral boom did not translate into the material diffusion hoped to accompany it and thus – contrary to industry claims – failed to improve Aboriginal disadvantage. In addition, while we agree that Native Title legislation has strengthened the position of Aboriginal Australians in negotiations with mining companies (Altman 2009; Langton 2012), we would argue that a SLO should not be restricted to facilitating access to employment and economic opportunity. It should also be about supporting the control and consolidation of pre-colonial heritages in home communities. These twin objectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive as pre-colonial heritages provide the currency for Native Title agreements. Yet, this cultural capital also needs investment and maintenance (Scott & Durey 2014).

The data presented and arguments advanced in this paper point to a legitimacy crisis in mining arguably in spite of, and because of, what strikes as the dominant

approach to SLO in the sector. We see the legitimacy crisis arising from the narrow, economically underpinned construction of SLO and the assertion of such a licence. The data made plain that the SLO agenda extends far beyond questions of income and employment and that social licences need to be earned locally. It is the places of resource development, the often out-of-sight peripheries that are central to any debate on SLO in mining. Mining in WA tends to take place in the periphery, away from urban centres and industrial core zones. PLOs in this regard skew SLO as questions of acceptability are largely determined politically and not by the host communities likely to be affected by mining operations. This exacerbates the aforementioned centre–periphery dynamics, which drive central decision-making with fateful local consequences and enhance power asymmetries between communities, industry and government. The places of resource development have much to tell us about 'the clash of industrial, environmental, cultural and geopolitical dimensions not found in cores' (Hayter et al. 2003, p. 19). It is in these places – at risk of becoming industrial 'sacrifice zones' (after Lerner 2010) – where companies need to earn their SLOs.

Resource extraction is territorially embedded, which draws attention to the role of the state in ameliorating the effects of resource development (Bridge 2008). It was shown here that state governments wedded to developmentalist goals risk legitimating forms of development that are disconnected from their intended beneficiaries. What we see as the neoliberalisation of the SLO space in WA has created a benign rendering of resource development and a blinkeredness to the impacts of mining. Thus, in the place of SLO, we see the rise of a developmentalist PLO. Despite growing evidence of, and public disquiet about, developmentalist shortcomings and the weak basis of SLO in mining, the neoliberal project in WA proves perversely resilient, owing to the deliberate use of political and corporate power (e.g. structural power of resource companies) for the benefit of select interests at the expense of others and the environment (Ráez-Luna 2008). Even though its social and environmental fallout has attracted growing criticism, as evidenced by the examples cited in this paper, it is fair to suggest that neoliberalism in WA has been able to retain its hegemonic status. Resource-led development remains a legitimate and largely unchallenged political priority that has become normalised, as evidenced by the PLO (Brueckner et al. 2014a).

Mining in WA is poised to continue and grow (Murray & Chesters 2012), which is why the long-term social acceptability of the industry is paramount both for resource companies and their host communities. In terms of resource governance, whilst raising broader questions about the very nature of globalised western capitalism, the data presented here support calls for the critical re-evaluation of the state's development agenda. In light of the socio-ecological problems confronting resource development in WA, state governments can ill-afford an ideological blinkeredness when engaging with global mining capital whilst also needing to take care of development concerns at the local level. Both resource governance and SLO in mining require people and community-centeredness to ensure that resource development can deliver on its promise of societal benefit that permeates all layers of society in all places.

Note

1. This is not to suggest that WA's resource sector does not require SLOs from its host communities. PLOs, however, can diminish the need for SLOs or facilitate their issuance.

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