

Mounting pressure between businesses and communities in various parts of the world is creating serious social and economic risk, demanding intervention by highly skilled practitioners. A new course offered by the Centre for Sustainability in Mining and Industry at Wits University will hone and expand these vital skills.

While government, business, and labour have come a long way in forging constructive ways of working together, the interface with communities is less well-explored and has seen some violent outbursts in recent years – especially in the extractive industries.

Mindful of this, Wits University's Centre for Sustainability in Mining and Industry (CSMI) and Synergy Global Consulting have entered into a partnership to offer a four-course Certificate Programme in Community Relations Practice, focused on understanding and relating to the local area and community.

'The course aims to create a new generation of highly-skilled professionals that can impact on community relations in Africa, who are capable of identifying and managing social issues,' said Nancy Coulson, stakeholder engagement programme manager of the CSMI.

'There is great potential for Africa in leading its own development process, and the management of resource wealth is a vital element of this journey; we face an urgent need to engage communities on this front.'

Standards governing the behaviour of mining companies have proliferated in the past couple of decades, according to Synergy Global director Paul Kapelus, and these have had a positive impact on the sector's approach to community issues.

'But the real challenge remains the actual implementation of good practice, to unlock the value of these standards to the full benefit of all stakeholders,' said Kapelus. 'This gap on the implementation side is what we aim to fill with this programme.' Pitched at Level 6 on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), the course is aimed primarily at hands-on community relations practitioners responsible for this function within their organization – be it a company, an NGO, government, or trade union.

'Beyond this, however, it is also aimed at those managers who are responsible to ensure that community relations outcomes are achieved,' said Kapelus. 'So this could include mine managers or site managers; rather like the issue of health and safety, the achievement of a sound relationship with communities is not the domain of only one department.'

He emphasized that the practice area of community relations involves different disciplines within an organization, each of which could contribute to better relationships between a mine and its community – and would benefit from this kind of training. Coulson highlighted the current scarcity of trained and experienced community relations practitioners – not only in mining but in most sectors.

'We underplay how important this work is, and what a powerful impact it has on the efficient

functioning of societies and businesses,’ she said. ‘People who are good at this work are very scarce – I think that any organization that employs people in this field would attest to that.’

Apart from building skills upon a university-accredited foundation, said Coulson, the training now offered by CSMI and Synergy Global raises the visibility of the people doing this difficult work. It also provides practitioners with more ‘language’ to explain the importance of their work to others in their organizations who may be in more technical professions.

Mining companies have come forward to support the intervention, recognizing its value to the future sustainability of the sector, said Kapelus. The first course, entitled How to Understand Community Situations, is supported by Anglo American and Xstrata and runs from 20 to 24 May at the Wits campus in Johannesburg. Key areas to be covered are context, situation, and community profiling.

A second course, on Developing and Maintaining Stakeholder Relations, is planned for 9 to 13 September this year, and is supported by Anglogold Ashanti.

Two more courses – one on Designing and Implementing Management and Monitoring Interventions, and another on Capacity and Socio-Economic Development for Communities – will complete the certificate programme.

‘While each course is very useful on its own, we would really like to see people doing all four,’ said Coulson. ‘Having certified people working in the field is an important start to improving the credibility and impact of this work – through creating a more professional fraternity of experts.’

The programme is not just in lecture format, but includes comprehensive content and innovative training formats like role playing, case studies, external speakers, and video footage analysis to embed learning, said Kapelus. These learning methodologies are especially useful when delegates are from different stakeholder groups.

‘Our experience shows us that the interaction between course delegates from government, business, and NGOs, for instance, can become a great learning opportunity,’ he said. ‘It opens up key issues for them to discuss among themselves, and gradually brings everyone onto the same page.’

The Centre for Sustainability in Mining and Industry is a centre of excellence in Africa for the training and education of managers, practitioners, and regulators in sustainable development. It was formed in 2004 as a partnership between the School of Mining Engineering at the University of the Witwatersrand and mining companies BHP Billiton, Lonmin, and AngloGold Ashanti.

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