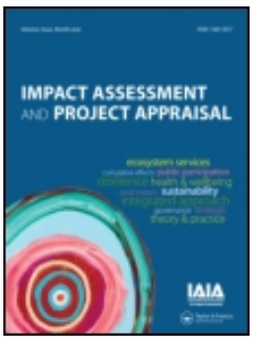

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Community engagement and social licence to operate

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Achieving 'a social licence to operate' is important for organisations with long time horizons, high exposure to global markets and with a wide range of interested stakeholders. Community engagement is critical to achieve a social licence to operate, but its capacity to influence social licence is not well understood. Using case studies from forestry in New Brunswick, Canada and Tasmania, Australia, this article considers what social licence is, how community engagement plays a role in achieving social licence and how an alternative conceptualisation of social licence may improve the influence of community engagement in achieving a social licence to operate. Social licence is often conceived of as a single licence granted by a 'community'. We argue that social licence is better conceptualised as a continuum of multiple licences achieved across various levels of society. Viewed in this way, we can consider what is needed to achieve social licences at given points along that continuum, and identify the strengths and weaknesses of specific engagement techniques in achieving particular social licences.

Keywords: public participation; social license to operate; community forestry; social forestry; natural resource management

Introduction

Long-term business success requires a 'social licence to operate', particularly in sectors with highly visible business activities, long time horizons, high exposure to global markets or a wide range of stakeholders keen to influence practice (Vidal et al. 2010; Esteves et al. 2012; Langbroek & Vanclay 2012; Vanclay 2012). An organisation is deemed 'legitimate' and granted a social licence when its operations and the organisational values and processes underpinning them meet stakeholder expectations and satisfy societal norms (Gunningham et al. 2004; Siltaoja & Vehkapera 2010; Thomson & Boutilier 2011). The concept of social licence is important to those involved in impact assessment for many reasons, two of which we highlight here. First, the extent to which an activity is deemed socially acceptable will affect how it is experienced, in other words, the impact it will have (Williams & Schirmer 2012), reflecting the important conceptual difference between social change processes and the social impacts such changes may lead to (Vanclay 2002). Second, social licence considerations are important for the community engagement and public participation processes that form part of Social Impact Assessment (SIA); considering when and how a social licence occurs can usefully guide the practice of engaging around new developments (Baines et al. 2013; Vanclay et al. 2013). In this article, we consider the concept of 'social licence to operate' in the context of forest management, but we note that our observations about social licence are relevant more generally.

Community engagement is an important component of forest management, providing opportunities for dialogue between forest managers and interested and/or affected stakeholders (see Dare, Vanclay, & Schirmer 2011, 2012). Within forest management there are essentially two forms of community engagement, operational engagement and strategic engagement, although the line between then may be blurred in some instances. *Operational community engagement* is a key vehicle by which forest managers engage with stakeholders to achieve social acceptance of their day-to-day operational activities, i.e. a social licence to operate. It typically occurs in the field (i.e. on the ground) with those stakeholders likely to be directly impacted by forest management activities, i.e. neighbours and local community groups (Dare et al. 2011a, 2011b; Dare, Vanclay, & Schirmer 2011, 2012). In contrast, *strategic community engagement* engages those stakeholders who may not be directly impacted by operational activities, but who have an interest in influencing these activities. Community engagement is well recognised as being a key vehicle for achieving a social licence (see Joyce & Thompson 2000; Prno & Slocombe 2012; Measham & Fleming 2013), and is an important part of SIA (Vanclay 2006; Esteves et al. 2012). However, we found no studies that critically assessed the usefulness and limitations of operational community engagement in achieving a social licence. In this article, we address this gap by critically considering what 'social licence' is, how community engagement plays a role in achieving social licence and how an alternative conceptualisation of social licence may help to improve the influence of community engagement in achieving a social licence to operate. Through this new understanding of social licence to operate and with the improving effectiveness of the community engagement approaches now typically being

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used (Dare et al. 2011b), improvements in the practice of SIA can also be realised.

Social licence is often erroneously conceived as a single licence, granted by all members of a 'community' at a given point in time, and renegotiated over time as people's experiences, perceptions and opinions change (Joyce & Thompson 2000; The Social License to Operate 2010; Thomson & Boutilier 2011). This collective concept of community does not readily apply to forest management or other situations where project staff work across large and socially diverse geographic areas, and engage with varying stakeholders operating at multiple, overlapping scales of influence, such as in most SIA contexts (Vanclay 2012). In this article, we argue that to operationalise social licence, it needs to be understood as a continuum of multiple licences achieved across various groups within society. Viewed in this way, it is possible to consider what is needed to achieve social licences at given points along that continuum.

It is important to distinguish our concept of a continuum of multiple social licences from that of Boutilier and Thomson (2011) who present what they describe as a 'continuum' based on the three normative components of social licence – legitimacy, credibility and trust – further developing their earlier model with its four levels of social licence (i.e. withdrawal, acceptance, approval and psychological identification) (Thomson & Boutilier 2011). While their work helps to inform the various engagement needs to obtain social licences, the continuum presented in this article furthers the understanding of social licence through the recognition that, just as there are multiple levels within a social licence, in fact, multiple social licences need to be considered.

We first examine the 'social licence to operate' construct, focusing primarily on how it can be interpreted within forest management. We establish that forest management stakeholders represent a broad range of interests across a range of geographic and political scales, and based on this review of existing knowledge we propose that a 'social licence continuum' needs to be considered to better reflect the reality of social licence in practice. Findings from our case studies in Australian and Canadian forest management are then used to critically explore the role of operational community engagement in achieving social licences across this continuum, with attention given to the limitations of the current community engagement processes used in forest management. Forest management provides a suitable case to explore the value of the social licence continuum and the role of operational engagement in achieving various social licences.

Forest management has a long history of social contention and associated social licence issues (Affolderbach 2011). It, therefore, implements a range of engagement approaches that are common to other resource-based industries, including mining, water management and broader community development projects. Experience in the forest sector can provide learnings to a wide range of industry and development sectors and the broader practice of SIA. We finish with a discussion outlining how the continuum concept can be used to improve the design of community engagement processes within impact assessment more generally to facilitate achieving multiple social licences to operate across a spectrum from local communities to the broader civil society.

Social licence to operate and forest management

Social licence to operate is an industry-based concept based on a risk-management perspective (Boutilier et al. 2012; Owen & Kemp 2013). Although the concept is not new, arguably originating in the fifth century BC (Keeley 1995), in recent years there has been increasing interest in it by companies and governments (Vanclay & Esteves 2011; Esteves et al. 2012; Vanclay 2014). Social licence to operate refers to the 'demands on and expectations for a business enterprise that emerge from neighbourhoods, environmental groups, community members, and other elements of the surrounding civil society' (Gunningham et al. 2004, p. 308). The perceived business advantages of a social licence include improved corporate reputation, ongoing access to resources, reduced regulation, improved market competitiveness, strengthened stakeholder relationships and positive effects on employees (Joyce & Thompson 2000; Gunningham et al. 2004; Esteves & Vanclay 2009). If a business loses its social licence, it will face increased pressure from stakeholders potentially leading to outcomes such as additional regulation or reduced market access (Gunningham et al. 2004; Vanclay 2014).

It is important to appreciate that the perceived acceptability of an organisation is based on the overall practices and image of the organisation, not solely on the specific operational practices or planning process a particular community engagement activity seeks to address. Other factors potentially influencing social perceptions (i.e. social licence) include labour conditions, corporate contributions to the community, environmental stewardship practices and public commitment to international environmental and human rights standards and expectations (Luning 2012; Hanna & Vanclay 2013; Kemp & Vanclay 2013). Social, legal and economic constraints as well as company history and culture all affect stakeholder perceptions, resulting in multiple influences which community engagement cannot control, highlighting why social licence cannot be considered in isolation (Gordon et al. 2013a; Williams & Walton 2013).

Social licence to operate is a business-oriented social construct, and has obvious linkages to stakeholder theory, which explicitly addresses morals and values in business management (Phillips et al. 2003). Stakeholder theory provides two main ethical functions which ultimately lead to a social licence: (a) to facilitate distributive justice beyond narrow shareholder interests and (b) to understand corporate social responsibility and business obligations to the wider society (Kaler 2006). This has important similarities to the underpinning values of SIA, which seeks to manage the social issues of development (Vanclay 2003; Esteves et al. 2012).

Stakeholder theory is based on the understanding that different stakeholder groups have diverse perspectives regarding the acceptability of activities. In order to achieve

a social licence, the forest managers considered in this article need to negotiate agreed norms with each of the stakeholder communities in which they operate, including the various communities of place (e.g. local geographic communities) and communities of interest (e.g. particular stakeholder groups with a shared interest, such as environmental activists) (see Hammersley-Chambers & Beckley 2003). Given that social licence to operate is a form of social contract which requires compliance with social expectations and norms, the negotiation of these expectations and norms with multiple communities will result in a range of overlapping micro-scale social contracts, rather than a single contract with the whole of society (Keeley 1995; Deegan & Blomquist 2006; Owen & Kemp 2013). In other words, forest managers must negotiate a range of social licences, rather than the one singular social licence that is usually implied. This range is best conceptualised as a continuum from small micro-scale social licences negotiated between individual parties or stakeholder groups, to broader societal-scale social licences achieved through the accumulation of several smaller-scale overlapping licences (see Figure 1).

This continuum assists forest managers (and others interested in social licence) in designing and implementing engagement practices by highlighting three important issues that influence social licence: (a) the diversity of expectations across the various scales and social groups, (b) the interactions between and within communities and (c) the utilisation of stakeholder influence. Moving across the continuum from left to right, the range of stakeholder interests and stakeholder influence increases, reflecting the larger population base being represented by stakeholders as social licences shift from the local community to the broader society. This larger population has an increasing diversity of forest management interests and expectations that forest managers must meet to obtain the various social licences, highlighting the sensitivity of each social licence to its given context, and the need to match management practices and communication techniques to those diverse contexts and expectations (Lynch-Wood & Williamson 2007; Gordon et al. 2012, 2013a, 2013b).

The continuum recognises the existence of multiple and often overlapping social licences across diverse and interlinked communities influenced by previously established relationships and experiences (Cornwall 2004; Hickey & Mohan 2004). Recognising this cumulative influence of multiple interactions, the continuum acknowledges the positive influence of reputation capital. Improved reputation capital resulting from compliance with micro-scale social licences brings credibility and trust to organisations, and helps promote positive dialogue and relationships at larger scales (Joyce & Thompson 2000).

In addition to highlighting the cumulative nature of social licences to operate, the continuum describes the various levels of stakeholder influence from local to regional interests. Thus, rather than act independently, stakeholders often act in concert to exert additional influence on organisations at local, regional or societal levels. For example, neighbours to a forest operation may be unsatisfied with their negotiations with the forest management organisation and therefore contact a local or regional NGO active in monitoring forestry operations, or the government agency responsible for approving operations. In joining with other stakeholders, the neighbours increase their capacity to influence forest management activities, leveraging these relationships to exert maximum impact.

It is important to recognise that these multiple licences may be at odds with each other. What is acceptable within a single location may not be acceptable at other localities or at a broader societal scale due to the perceived risks and benefits associated with the negotiated management practices. These contradictions may lead to increased tension

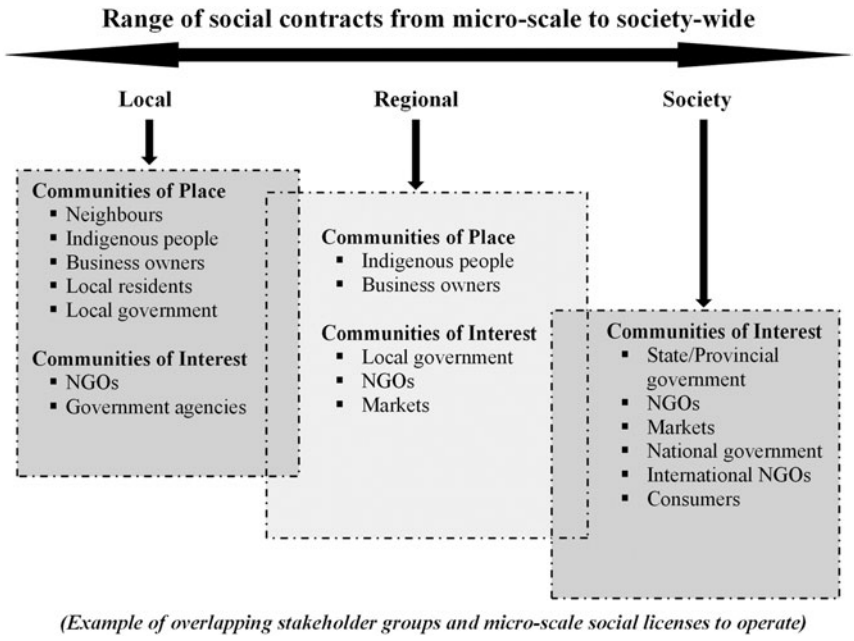

Figure 1. A schematic framework for understanding the social licence to operate continuum. *Source*: Authors.

between stakeholder groups in some locations and increase the difficulty in achieving multiple social licences across the range of geographic and political scales (Prenzel & Vanclay 2014). In this article, we consider how the concept of social licence to operate, and especially the continuum, relate to forest management practices and what lessons can be drawn for other sectors, such as impact assessment.

Methodology

Our research involved case studies of community engagement within forest management in New Brunswick (NB), Canada and Tasmania (TAS), Australia. In-depth interviews and document analysis were used to gain an understanding of the community engagement practices utilised by forest managers and to consider the role of these practices in achieving social licences. The interview discussion topics were developed from the literature and designed to encourage participants to discuss their engagement experiences, particularly how community engagement affected their relationship with other stakeholders. Documents analysed included relevant regulations and forest certification standards prescribing engagement activities, and internal company policies and procedures. Qualitative data analysis was undertaken using NVivo7, with data coded to identify key themes regarding the use of community engagement to achieve social licences.

In total, 21 interviews were conducted in TAS and 19 in NB. We interviewed 25 operational and senior forest managers from 11 large forest management organisations, and 15 community members including rural residents, advisory committee participants, government representatives and stakeholder group members (e.g. ENGOs, industry lobby groups and academics). The forest management organisations involved had been operating from three years to several decades, and included both domestic and internationally based organisations. Some employed staff specifically for community engagement functions; while in other organisations all foresters undertook engagement roles.

Interviewees in the forest sector were identified using professional networks within the forest industry, accessed strategically via the contacts of fellow forestry researchers and through our research project's steering committee members. Community members were selected using publicly available information and snowball sampling methods where participants help identify and contact other people relevant to the study. To ensure that no key viewpoints were excluded, a purposive or theoretical sampling process was utilised (Glaser & Strauss 1967) in which stakeholders with differing views were deliberately identified. More detail on our methods is provided in Dare et al. (2012).

Community engagement in the case study locations

In both TAS and NB, ongoing controversy over forest management highlights the challenges of achieving social licences. In Tasmania, there is long-term debate over the use of native forests for the production of export woodchips, and criticism of the establishment of plantations on agricultural land for woodchip production (Affolderbach 2011; Schirmer 2013). In NB, a similar debate exists regarding the use and management of native forests for fibre versus non-timber forest values (Kennedy et al. 2007).

In Tasmania, forest products are sourced from both native forests and plantations. State-owned forests account for 70% of the commercially available forest cover, with the remaining 30% spread across industrial growers and approximately 1600 private growers (Schirmer 2008). Under the Tasmanian Forest Practices Act 1985, forestry operations on public and private lands are regulated by the Tasmanian Forest Practices Code (Forest Practices Board 2000), and a range of other legislative provisions govern different aspects of forest management. The majority of Tasmania's forests (including all State-owned forests) are voluntarily certified under the national Australian Forestry Standard (AFS).

NB primarily utilises native forests for forest products, with very few plantations established. Provincial forests account for 51% of the forest estate, with the remainder owned by industrial growers and an estimated 40,000 private woodlot owners (DNR 2008). Management of the public forest is allocated to Crown timber licensees, primarily large industrial forest processors, with significant investment and employment in local communities. The Provincial Department of Natural Resources sets forest management objectives and operational regulations that are applicable only to public forest lands. Current legislation requires that all licensees operating on public lands be certified, with most certified under the industry-based Sustainable Forestry Initiative standard, which is prominent in North America. A number of smaller woodlot owners have achieved certification under other schemes including the international Forest Stewardship Council which has regional standards (e.g. Maritime Standard), or the national Canadian Sustainable Forest Management standard developed by the Canadian Standards Association.

Operational community engagement is a well-established practice in both regions, required by government-mandated codes of forest practices, voluntary forest certification requirements, and internal corporate policies and procedures (Dare et al. 2011a). It includes engagement activities undertaken as part of forest operations, e.g. when establishing a plantation or harvesting a forest stand. It typically occurs in the rural locations where forest operations are conducted and usually involves small numbers of people in each interaction (often only the forest manager and the neighbouring landholder). Table 1 describes the typical operational community engagement techniques used in each region as identified in the research interviews (see also Dare et al. 2012).

The role of community engagement in achieving social licences to operate

Our analysis of forestry identified that the ability of operational community engagement to facilitate achieving social licences across all scales of the continuum, and on a continuous basis, is limited due to: (1) the low levels of

Table 1. Community engagement techniques typically used by the forest industry.

Community engagement technique	Description	Used in NB	Used in Tasmania
Letter notifications	Letters sent to landowners describing the proposed forestry operations and inviting them to contact the forest manager with any concerns or questions	✓	✓
Telephone conversations	Direct phone conversations between forest managers and affected or concerned community members	✓	✓
Face-to-face meetings	Meetings with individuals or small groups, often on the site of forestry operations or in the home of a concerned community member	✓	✓
Field trips	Organised trips to forest operations or processing sites, usually with specific groups of stakeholders (e.g. local government)	✓	✓
Public meetings	Meetings predominantly conducted in public facilities such as town halls, often involving large groups of people	✓	✓
Open house	Public access to a dedicated location where information regarding forest management is shared using displays, formal or informal presentations, or other forms of communication	✓	✗
Advisory groups	A committee of stakeholders who discuss and provide advice and recommendations to the forest managers	✓ (mandatory)	✗

Source: Authors.

trust in forest managers by community stakeholders; (2) the limited capacity of current engagement practices to reach a broad range of stakeholders and (3) the lack of capacity in forest management organisations to respond to change in social expectations about forest management practices. Although our discussion pertains to forestry, we believe it has general relevance to all project developments, including the way impact assessments are conducted.

(1) Trust in organisations

The first critical issue identified in our analysis was trust. Trust is integral to all decision-making processes, impacting on people's perceptions of risk, influencing the way they approach engagement opportunities (Dare et al. 2011b), and influencing the level of support stakeholders accord a management activity (Thomson & Boutilier 2011). Community engagement activities build trust through both direct involvement in engagement activities, and as a consequence of the flow-on effects of this involvement to others not directly involved. Achieving trust through direct involvement depends not only on the engagement process, but also on the legacy of past activities and relationships (Cornwall 2004; Vanclay 2012). Where this legacy is negative with consequent low trust, it will be challenging for forest managers to attract and engage stakeholders (Singleton 2002; Luning 2012), with stakeholders questioning whether the engagement is genuine, and particularly whether it will provide them with real influence in decision-making (Singleton 2002; Tippett et al. 2005).

Extreme levels of trust (very high or very low) can lead to category-based perceptions, in which a specific trust issue is generalised across a broader category of actors (Montijn-Dorgelo & Midden 2008), for example the whole forest industry. This was revealed by several interviewees but particularly by one community member who had been engaging with the forest industry over a significant time period:

> I've had nothing but bad experiences from forestry, I've been battling them over every single [harvest] that they've done for 10, 15 years. They've done nothing good as far as I'm concerned. (TAS Community Member 2)

This generalisation to the whole of the forest industry creates further challenges for forest managers and engaged stakeholders who face barriers created by past relationships they were not necessarily part of:

> I feel that it [a previous poor engagement process] really led to a rift between the people … socially it was harmful to the way that our society looks at forestry and it sort of gave the companies a bad reputation that still lingers today. (NB Environmental Group Representative 1)

In some instances, operational community engagement was successful in overcoming this generalised distrust. Consistent with previous research, we found that a greater level of trust was developed when forest managers actively listened to and acted upon community concerns, rather than relying on formulaic approaches to engagement that largely involve the one-way flow of information (Hailey 2001; Shindler et al. 2002; Hammersley-Chambers & Beckley 2003). When asked if she was happy with the outcomes of an engagement process, one Tasmanian community member described a shift from distrust to trust, indicative of the granting of a micro-scale social licence:

> Absolutely, I thought it showed that they had listened to our concerns and had dealt with them … My perception of the whole process has changed from one of negativity and fear, into "I can do this". I can discuss things with these people and I can get a resolution, or get someone to hear me. (TAS Community Member 1)

Despite not successfully negotiating for all of her requests, the community member felt that her concerns had been considered in a respectful manner. In previous engagement processes with forest industry representatives, the community member had felt alienated and ignored, with concerns often going unrecognised. By deliberately engaging the community member and actively discussing potential management concessions, the forest manager

enabled her to express her concerns in a manner that overcame this mistrust and enabled the development of an ongoing working relationship.

(2) Capacity to engage stakeholders

Forest managers in both regions felt their operational community engagement reached only some of the stakeholders granting social licences, largely due to operational engagement methods only targeting small numbers of locally based people, and the relatively low numbers of people who participate:

> Out of 100 [letter] notifications you would be lucky to have 10 [responses]. (TAS Forest Manager 8)

> We were thinking about having an open house again. But nowadays you have to do something that draws people in. … Sometimes you have open houses and it's just not the huge amount of people you would expect [to come]. (NB Forest Manager 2)

Low participation in operational community engagement activities may occur for many reasons and under some circumstances may actually indicate that social licences have been granted – if stakeholders trust managers they may not feel a need to engage. However, continuing conflict over forestry operations suggests that this is not the case and that operational community engagement is failing to reach many stakeholders who influence the various levels of social licence (see Dare 2013). As Parkins (2006, p. 200) indicates, local-scale operational community engagement activities often 'function well below the [broader] public's attention' and consequently rarely impacts wider public opinion. Despite this, forest managers felt that positive word-of-mouth enabled good community engagement to achieve social licences beyond those people directly engaged:

> If we're doing business with a land owner or one neighbour, often that neighbour will reflect the concerns of a community. … So, often we can address those issues and they can relate it [back] to the community. … It's effective because people listen to them rather than listening to us, which is strange but you tend to trust the people that you know better than, you know, a faceless company. (TAS Forest Manager 6)

This understanding of community networks was supported by some community members who readily passed information amongst their local community:

> Usually when they're [forest managers] doing something, they'll send a letter … Well, one of us will get a letter and then the "gazette" [meaning "word-of-mouth"] goes round and we go and talk to each other. I mean, if only one person got a letter, that's enough for up here. (TAS Community Member 3)

This flow-on effect from local engagement activities to broader social networks was also observed by Bull et al. (2008, p. 713), with participation in engagement processes found to have 'directly affected participants' behaviour and the behaviour of people they came into contact with'. Participants in community engagement activities act as 'gatekeepers' or sources of information (Bull et al. 2008), providing an opportunity for community members to seek independent information on forest management activities, and subsequently form judgements as to the acceptability of these activities.

Community members who do not have contact with forest managers or engaged stakeholders – who are the majority of stakeholders especially at increasing geographic scales – source their information regarding forest management from alternative sources including friends, interest group networks, the Internet and the media. When asked where her low level of trust in a forest management organisation originated, one community member was quite adamant:

> Media, basically the media, because where else does it come from? (TAS Community Member 1)

As a dramatic and economically important phenomena, the forest industry attracts a significant amount of media interest, resulting in the media becoming an important arena where the (il)legitimacy of forest management practices is constructed (Slovic et al. 2004). Through its selection and framing of viewpoints and facts, the media portrays and consequently affects the creation and acceptance of social norms, which in turn influence social licence (Siltaoja & Vehkapera 2010). Some forest managers believed the media mostly reported negative messages about the industry, adversely impacting on their ability to achieve a wide range of social licences:

> Forestry gets a lot of negative press, so suddenly they [general public] are thinking this is going to be the end of the world … So we're coming from probably a poor position and we have to sell our case each time. (TAS Forest Manager 6)

The capacity of the media to portray negative, or positive, images of the forest industry at the broader societal scale highlights the potential conflict between the various scales of the continuum. Negative media stories may be perceived as portraying a lack of social licence at the societal level, influencing people's decisions at the local or regional levels regardless of the typical lack of information provided regarding the grounds on which such images were based. Local engagement activities are rarely mentioned in the media, limiting the extent to which operational community engagement can influence positive perceptions of forest management. Therefore, while operational community engagement can influence the small numbers of people it directly engages, and to a lesser extent the people in their immediate social circles, it has limited influence on broader societal perceptions of the forest industry, and hence limited ability to influence broader levels of social licence.

(3) Ability of organisations to respond to changing expectations

Changing social norms and expectations have significant impact on judgments of acceptability of a project or activity and the granting of any social licence (Phillips & Johnson-Cramer 2006). Management practices perceived as legitimate at one point in time may not be legitimate at another time, or in another place due to variations in norms

across communities (Shindler et al. 2002; Deegan & Blomquist 2006). Therefore, achieving and maintaining social licences requires organisations to continuously adapt to changing stakeholder expectations (Luning 2012).

Many forest managers spoke of the difficulties of responding to changing social expectations, with markets, business structures and governance frameworks not able to respond in a timely way. While operational community engagement enabled changes in localised social expectations to be identified, the adaptation of local operational practices to reflect new social expectations was often difficult due to the multiple processes required to change practices, resulting from both regulatory and market forces (e.g. codes of practices, contractual obligations). In addition, some expectations may be unrealistic within the commercial environment of forest management – for example, a demand for the immediate cessation of forest harvesting operations. In circumstances with unrealistic expectations, forest managers can do little to satisfy stakeholder expectations, develop trust, and consequently achieve relevant social licences.

New social expectations may deserve action beyond the local scale of operations, and require larger-scale response. Considerable delays before changes in social expectations are reflected in forest management practices – or the inability to reflect them at all – results in stakeholders becoming disgruntled with their influence on forest management practices. This inability to have a real influence was expressed by an environmental group representative in response to the five-year planning process in NB and the perceived poor uptake of concerns and ideas raised during the associated engagement activities:

> You know, there might be a lot of participation in Canada, but we don't actually feel that the Government implements much of what they hear. (NB Environmental group representative 1)

In these cases, the social licence continuum helps to assist forest managers and other community engagement practitioners balance the diversity of views and management priorities, 'tensioning public interests and concerns against what is practicably achievable' (Bull et al. 2008, p. 711). The continuum encourages practitioners to identify and achieve the relevant micro-scale social licences operating in practice, while simultaneously recognising the need to continually highlight the outcomes and lessons of these micro-scale licences at other levels of the continuum to gain traction for, and recognition of, necessary and/or desired changes in management practices. This is continual information loop from across a range of contexts helps to build an understanding of the potential individual and cumulative impacts of management practices and their preferred management solutions – information that is essential for resource management and social impact assessors alike (Esteves & Vanclay 2009).

Using the social licence to operate continuum

We identified three key challenges that inhibit operational community engagement processes from achieving various social licences, namely issues of trust, representation and changing expectations. While operational community engagement is effective at achieving social licences at the local level, it fails to effectively move across the continuum to achieve social licences at the broader level of society. Current engagement approaches do not incorporate appropriate mechanisms to attract the range of stakeholders required to improve trust, update practices and ultimately facilitate the integration and development of broader-scale social contracts. Despite facing challenges, community engagement has a unique role to play in achieving social licences at multiple scales. Good engagement practices that respond to community concerns will assist in achieving community acceptance and a social licence to operate; and this will result in fewer negative social impacts and more positive benefits emerging from forest management. The potential for operational engagement to build reputation capital, as well as the movement of participants between social spaces, help facilitate the attainment of social licences from the local to regional and societal scales (Joyce & Thompson 2000; Cornwall 2004; Hickey & Mohan 2004).

The social licence continuum does not specifically solve the problems associated with operational engagement. However, the continuum does shed light on these challenges and helps practitioners better consider what level of social licence is being sought, what the potential influence of this social licence is on attaining other licences, and consequently what relationships and actions need to be prioritised to achieve social licences across local, regional and societal scales, and hence to reduce the experience of negative social impact associated with forest management. Providing an alternative and expanded conceptualisation of the social licence construct, the continuum encourages managers to consider not only localised expectations and interests, but also broader and interacting expectations, interests, impacts and influences across the scales. This broader consideration of social licence will help users target the design and implementation of engagement processes, to achieve not only locally based social licences, but also to influence the achievement of social licences at the regional and societal scales.

As highlighted previously, key challenges faced by forest managers in achieving a social licence include mistrust and the limited representation of stakeholder interests. As also found by others (e.g. Joyce & Thompson 2000; Bull et al. 2008), successful engagement experiences create positive reputation capital which influences the development of trust, credibility, and consequently social licences to operate, with both those stakeholders directly and not directly involved in engagement activities. The continuum recognises the potential for such reputation capital and, when coupled with effective stakeholder analysis, can help identify individuals and stakeholder groups that are the most connected within the community or broader network, or have the most influence on social perceptions (positive and negative) or decision-making processes across the continuum. The identification of key stakeholders is contextually based; relevant stakeholders will change between communities and between issues of concern (e.g. use of chemicals, protection of recreation trails). The continuum guides the design of engagement

processes, reminding users of the scales of social licence to be obtained, the likely stakeholders providing those licences, and the interactions of those stakeholders which affects trust and reputational capital and ultimately the granting of social licences.

Similarly, the social licence continuum not only helps to identify who and what interests are involved in dialogue and decision-making, but also who and what interests are currently excluded, an issue critical to the design of community engagement processes that are such an important part of impact assessment. For example, interests may be represented at the regional or societal scale, but not at the local scale, and hence are at risk of not being identified by localised operational engagement processes (e.g. concerns regarding the use of specific chemicals or pest management systems which may be commonly used and accepted at the local level in some rural areas). Similarly, interests at the local scale may not be represented at regional or societal scales and consequently overlooked due to pressing political or market pressures being exerted by stakeholders at these levels (e.g. ongoing maintenance of firebreaks or pest control, decline in local employment opportunities). The recognition of, and effective response to, changes in expectations across geographic and temporal scales is essential for achieving social licences across multiple scales. The continuum provides a catalyst for those considering issues of social licence, and social impact, to deliberately consider and engage with the challenges associated with a diversity of expectations, helping to conceptualise changes in stakeholder interests and expectations, and consequently identify the required changes in practice to accommodate such expectations.

Conclusion

Social licence to operate is not a singular licence granted by all of society, but a range of licences based on prevailing social norms and expectations that are applicable across society, from local communities to the broader public. Each individual social licence is achieved through the sequential and cumulative attainment of social legitimacy, management credibility and trust (The Social License to Operate 2010), achieved primarily through communications associated with effective and genuinely conducted community engagement activities.

We presented a new framework for approaching the social licence construct, providing an opportunity for those who engage with natural resource management and impact assessment to consider the reality and validity of multiple social licences. The social licence continuum provides a schematic conceptualisation of multiple scales of social licence, from the local, through regional, to societal scale. Community engagement can be effective in achieving local-scale social licences; however, the capacity for community engagement activities to achieve social licences across regional and societal scales is limited. Key obstacles to achieving social licences across the scales using community engagement approaches include low levels of existing trust, limited stakeholder representation and the difficulties associated with evolving social expectations. The continuum does not specifically overcome the challenges of community engagement, but instead provides an alternative vision of social licence. This vision deliberately moves away from the notion of a single social licence and the need to comply with a single set of norms and expectations, to the acknowledgement that expectations and interests change, people interact and move across scales, and therefore engagement processes need to be deliberately designed and implemented accordingly.

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Notes

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