Case study: Century mine, Queensland—Planning for post-closure sustainability with the community

MMG’s Century mine was a large zinc mining and processing operation in the lower Gulf of Carpentaria region of north-west Queensland, a remote area with a substantial Indigenous population. The mine operated on a fly-in, fly-out basis, drawing its workforce from Townsville, Mount Isa, Cairns and other parts of Australia, as well as from the Gulf communities. Century processed its first ore in January 2016 after 15 years of operation.

Seeking to demonstrate leading practice in how it managed the cessation of mining and production at Century, MMG began planning for that purpose several years in advance. MMG’s closure planning for Century included community participation in a review of the operation’s impacts and in planning for the future.

The Gulf Communities Agreement (GCA) is a comprehensive land-use agreement negotiated in 1997 between the developers of the mine (Century Zinc Ltd), the Queensland Government and four groups of traditional owners in the region: Waanyi, Kukuja, Gluthaarn and Mingginda. The agreement was reviewed every five years after 1997. MMG commissioned the Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining of the University of Queensland to undertake the third five-yearly review in 2012. The Century Liaison Advisory Committee, established pursuant to the GCA, had representatives from all signatory parties to the GCA and had prime oversight responsibility for the review. This case study has been compiled from the several reports published as part of the review and closure planning process plus inputs from Century’s Community & Stakeholder Partnerships team.

The GCA states the aspirations of the native title groups in agreeing to mining on their land, under four main headings: economic improvements; protecting the land and environment; keeping Aboriginal culture and traditions strong; and social improvements and stronger communities. This was a succinct expression of what was important to the Aboriginal parties at the time that the GCA was negotiated and a basis for exploring progress in a number of areas. Although the 2012 review found that some aspirations of the native title groups had not been achieved, that did not mean that the GCA had ‘failed’ or that there had been a lack of compliance. Rather, the review and closure planning process provided an opportunity to consider what other actions could be taken to progress those aspirations in the time remaining for the Century mine. Key among these as-yet unfulfilled aspirations were means for improving the economic independence of the communities while still maintaining their cultural foundations and links to the land.

Having taken the major step of concentrated research and engagement with community members about their aspirations, needs and priorities, and with additional stakeholders about challenges and requirements for sustainable community development planning, Century moved forward to begin work with its host communities towards a sustainable and participatory closure and post-closure plan for the mining project.

1 Everingham et al. (2015).
One of the main preoccupations of the communities when considering the closure of the Century mine had been future employment prospects for young people. Consequently, in 2014, Century changed to a host-employer model for all new trainees and apprentices. Previously, all trainees and apprentices were given roles onsite at MMG Century’s mine at Lawn Hill or its port operation at Karumba.

Century recognised the limitations of site-based roles for limited-tenure trainees, as mine jobs were not sustainable in the long term because production would cease in mid-2015. It decided to explore a new model, in which host employers outside the mine would be invited to take on trainees and apprentices.

In 2014, 32 local young people were placed with employers in their home towns, and more were placed in 2015.

Under the new model, Century paid the trainees’ and apprentices’ wages and provided support and mentoring. As far as MMG Century was able to determine, the company was unique among resource companies in establishing a host-employer model for its trainees and apprentices.

The initial 10-week training program at Myurma, near Camooweal in north-west Queensland, followed by a week onsite at Lawn Hill before trainees started their jobs, also allowed the participants to mix with other young people from different companies and organisations across the state. This was vital for building personal networks and resilience.

MMG Century’s host-employer model kept talent in communities where it can be best used, as well as adding greater variety to the range of jobs and areas of study available to apprentices and trainees.

The training program was a practical way for Century to support sustainable communities by building local capacity and, at the same time, reducing dependence on the mine as the major source of jobs in the region.

The 2016 graduates of Century’s Work Ready Program will work offsite in non-mining jobs.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT