

The 'gas apa' and his dilemmas in dialogue

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Abstract

'Apa' is a Huli word for father and the Hulis of Hela Province see themselves as the father of the gas resources being extracted by a petroleum company from their land. Indigenous landowner concerns in the resource extraction project sites in Papua New Guinea (PNG) have been highly emotive national development topics in the public since the onset of Bougainville copper mine in the late 1960s. Sifting through the myriad of narratives concerning landowners' issues it can be noticed that many of what is raised by the local people have their genesis in the lack of 'open, dialogic and participatory' communication about the rights and responsibilities of landowners in the projects. This article addresses the communication dilemma faced by indigenous landowners in the PNG LNG Project sites in Hela Province.

Keywords: liquefied natural gas, indigenous landowners, mining, Papua New Guinea, Communicative Action Theory

Introduction

This article discusses the communications dilemmas between the indigenous landowners in three project areas in the upstream end of the Papua New Guinea Liquefied Natural Gas (PNG LNG) Project in Hela Province and the project developer ExxonMobil PNG Ltd (previously known as Esso Highlands Ltd) and the Government of PNG. The article is based on two findings chapters of my Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) thesis (Pamba, 2018). The PhD thesis is titled "*Communicating with Indigenous landowners in a liquefied natural gas (LNG) project: A Papua New Guinean case study*" which addresses the communication and engagement issues that exist between the indigenous landowners and the company and the State. This was a qualitative case study as described below in the methodology section.

The PNG LNG Project is a US\$19 billion investment (pnglng.com, 2019) led by ExxonMobil (PNG) Ltd, a subsidiary of United States of America petroleum major ExxonMobil Corporation. ExxonMobil PNG Ltd built the project and operates it on behalf of five co-venture partners, namely: Oil Search Limited, the State through holding company Kumul Petroleum Holdings Ltd, Santos Ltd, JX Nippon Oil and Gas Exploration and Mineral Resources Development Company or MRDC (pnglng.com, 2019). The Project involves the extraction of gas in Hela, Southern Highlands and Western provinces, which is piped over 700 kilometres over land and sea via the Gulf province to a liquefaction and storage facility near Port Moresby in Central province.

The project agreement was signed between Esso Highlands Ltd (later renamed ExxonMobil PNG Ltd), the Government of PNG and other equity partners listed above in May 2008. A consequential development forum between the affected landowners, local level governments, provincial governments and the national government was held when the Umbrella Benefit Sharing Agreement (UBSA) was negotiated and signed between these entities in May 2009. The UBSA “is an overarching agreement that outlines how a number of the State (PNG LNG) Project revenue streams will be shared with Project area landowners, local level governments and provincial governments (pnglng.com, 2019).

According to the company, the UBSA “ensures fair distribution of the benefits and was negotiated and executed between the State of PNG, landowners and local government representatives in May 2009” (pnglng.com, 2019). The company further notes that, “following on from the UBSA, license-based benefit sharing agreements (LBBSA) were completed in early December 2009. “These agreements outline how landowners within each license area will allocate their share of the Project’s benefits” (pnglng.com, 2019).

The Hela Province is host to 80 percent of the gas for the project (Noho, 2010) mostly located in the Komo Local Level Government (LLG) area of Komo-Margarima District and this is where my PhD study was located. The indigenous landowners who participated in the study are from villages around three project facilities, the Komo airport in Petroleum Development License (PDL) 8, the gas conditioning plant in Para in Hides 4 in PDL 7 and the gas-to-electricity power plant at Nogoli in Hides 1 in PDL 8.

This article briefly recaps the PhD study design to provide relevance to the discussions hereunder relating to the four communication dilemmas in the project area in Hela that were found among other findings in the doctoral thesis.

Methodology

The research project was a qualitative case study that engaged several theoretical lenses, principally Development Communication (Bessette, 2004; Melkote, 2010; Mefalopulos, 2008), particularly its more recent variant that emphasizes participation, dialogue and empowerment (Mefalopulos, 2008) along with Jurgen Habermas’ Communicative Action Theory of 1984 and indigenous knowledge systems. A qualitative approach was used because the study is situated within the subjective experiences of people and their socially constructed views of reality (Cohen, Lawrence & Morrison, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This allowed the researcher to consider the words and actions of participants and report their situations through their narratives (Burton, Brundrell & Jones, 2008). The methods used by the study were interview (in-depth/unstructured), focus group discussion, observation, document analysis and photographs. Data gathered were coded and analysed using NVivo 10.

Focus group discussion

The landowners were involved in the study through the focus group discussions. Focus group discussions “are efficient in the sense that they generate large quantities of data ... (and) ... often produce data that are seldom produced through individual interviewing and observation and that result in especially powerful interpretative insights” (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2008: 397). This method was considered appropriate for landowners in the villages who are from a traditionally oral society who are culturally used to sitting down and talking about issues in groups in the village square or *palamanda* (Huli for men’s meeting house or *haus man* in Tok Pisin used for meetings).

Focus group discussions were conducted with pre-selected indigenous landowners, five male and five female over the age of 18, in three project sites to gauge their perspectives on the communication and engagement matters involving landowners, the company and government in the project areas. The participants were selected beforehand through contacts in the respective areas and they each signed a consent form to participate. The data gathered from the focus group discussions with landowners provided the findings discussed in this article.

Unstructured interviews

Unstructured or in-depth interviewing (Kumar, 1996) was used in this study as qualitative researchers rely quite extensively on it (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). They “can provide greater breadth than do other types given its qualitative nature” (Fontana and Frey, 2008: 129). Unstructured interviews were conducted with pre-selected key informants from the Government, namely the Department of Petroleum and Energy (DPE), the Hela Provincial Government and the Komo-Margarima District Development Authority. These key informants were also contacted beforehand and they signed a consent form to participate. This method was considered appropriate because they were professional individuals who could speak English and it was easy to arrange interviews with them at their preferred locations.

The study faced a major setback when the company declined to participate in the interview after repeated requests both via formal written communication and in person. After consideration and deliberation with my supervisors and the University Ethics Committee, it was decided that I should incorporate company perspectives using widely available information in documents, the company website and media reports. This also included data from a presentation by Mr Peter Graham, the Managing Director of Esso Highlands Ltd (later renamed ExxonMobil PNG Ltd), in a mineral and petroleum industries information workshop organised for journalists from the national media by the PNG Chamber of Mines and Petroleum in Madang in May 2014. The researcher attended this workshop and recorded the talk by Mr Graham, who also spoke about challenges in communication and engagement matters (part of which is used in the discussion section below).

Document search

A document search was conducted whereby data gathered either complimented those sourced through other methods and to fill in for data that could not be accessed such as in the case of the company being reluctant to participate in the study. According to Mason (2005), document search and analysis “is a major method of social research, one which many social researchers see as meaningful and appropriate in the context of their strategy” (p. 103). The document search also included gathering data from various websites including those of the company in PNG and its headquarters in the United States of America (USA).

Observation

The study included personal observation by the researcher of what was happening on the ground in Hela Province. Observation is another common method in social research and it involves the systematic noting and recording of events, behaviours and artifacts (objects) in the social setting chosen for the study (Marshall and Rossman (1999). The researcher made a couple of trips to Hela and observed what was happening on the ground in October 2009 and in December 2011 before the formal fieldwork in October 2013. Prior to that, the researcher has made numerous visits to Hela since December 1985 and is familiar with the area, the people and the changes that have taken place.

Photographs

The researcher took photographs throughout the fieldwork and these formed part of the data gathered. Photographs (and videos) are increasingly being used in social research (Posser, 2011; Bailey & McAtee, 2003). This is because, “increasingly, we live in a visual world, and currently, no topic, field of study, or discipline is immune to the influences of researchers adopting a visual perspective” (Posser, 2011: 479).

Discussion

This article discusses four communication dilemmas that confronted indigenous landowners of Hela. The four dilemmas were the:

- (1) landowners continued claim that they are the owners of the gas or in their Huli language, ‘gas *apa*’ (‘apa is father hence owner in Huli), when the Oil and Gas Act says the State owns it
- (2) lack of presence of the National Government via the Department of Petroleum and Energy (renamed Department of Petroleum in 2018 after the study)
- (3) non-completion of the mandatory social mapping and landowner identification prior to the start of the project, and,
- (4) company’s use of a traditional method of communication, ie, the employment of influential men as staff of its Community Affairs division to enhance its public relations efforts.

The 'gas apa' versus the State

The landowners who participated in the study communicated about ownership of the gas resource from their indigenous perspectives and not from the perspective of the modern resource ownership laws of the country, notably the Papua New Guinea Oil and Gas Act 1998. The Oil and Gas Act is a western derivative that rests ownership of petroleum resources in the State on behalf of the people of the entire country.

The dominant Huli-speaking people of Hela, who inhabit the lands where the PNG LNG project is located in the Komo Local Level Government (LLG) area of Komo-Margarima District, identify themselves *tindi apa* and *gas apa* interchangeably (Pamba, 2018). In Huli, *tindi* means land and *apa* literally means 'father' and *apa* is also used to refer to ownership of property such as land (Pamba, 2018). When a Huli speaking man calls himself *tindi apa* he means he is the owner of a piece of land or 'father' of that land. Likewise when he calls himself *gas apa*, he is saying that he is the 'father' or 'owner' of the gas. This claim of being the 'father' hence 'owner' of the gas has strong spiritual overtones with traditional customs and myths, particularly the Gigira Lairepo prophesy.

During the course of the study, it was apparent from the landowners' presentations that they were adamant that they were the *gas apa* and whatever mandated or perceived benefits owed by the State and company were because they were the *gas apa*, not as mere recipients of compensation payments and benefits as project 'impacted' communities.

Amidst this unfortunate misunderstanding among landowners, there was no indication that the company and the government had communicated frankly with the landowners that they were not the *gas apa*, but that the State was the owner of the gas resources and to explain why this was the case. The Minister for Justice and Attorney General, Sir Arnold Amet, reiterated the State's ownership of all petroleum and mineral resources at the height of the debate over the now aborted Boka Kondra Bill. This called for resource nationalization with indigenous landowners to have equity participation and more say in the exploitation of the resources on their land (The National, 2011). Sir Arnold did not provide the reasons why the State owns all the petroleum and mineral resources on behalf of the country except to say that the State owns the petroleum resources according to the Oil and Gas Act 1998 and mineral resources as per the Mining Act 1992 creating an impression that the status quo is non-negotiable.

Across the three study sites in Hela, the indigenous landowners did not indicate communication by the government and company to explain to them that the State, by law, owns the gas and they were only being compensated for the company trespassing to extract the gas (Pamba, 2018). This was an example of a failure in the communication processes with the landowners in the project areas being 'open, dialogic and participatory' (Mefalopulos, 2008).

Lack of government presence

The Government or the State, as representatives of all citizens, was not present in the project sites in Hela to engage with the landowners and update them about the project and this added to the communication challenges faced by the landowners (Pamba, 2018). Any engagement by the Government apparatus with the landowners was on a fly-in, fly-out basis, where the government officials from Port Moresby would fly to Hela when there were matters to be addressed. Conversely, landowner representatives would fly to Port Moresby at their own expense when they had pressing issues to discuss with DPE officials.

The State as a representative of the people owns the petroleum resources as highlighted above and by the letter of this stewardship, the government is supposed to be physically present on the ground to engage with landowners. In the structure of the government system of PNG, nearly all government departments have representation in the provinces and districts. However, the primary agency responsible for petroleum resources, the Department of Petroleum and Energy (which was changed to Department of Petroleum after my study ended in January 2018) did not have an office in Hela Province and other petroleum resource hosting provinces.

According to participant “5A” from DPE, his department closed its office in Hela Province in 2009 (Pamba, 2018). Participant 5A pointed out that the office, which was housed within the Oil Search Ltd base in Nogoli in Petroleum Development Licence 8 (PDL8) in Komo LLG, was closed because of “security reasons” and the DPE not keeping up with office rentals to Oil Search.

The study also found that the Hela Provincial Government did not have an office or mechanism in place to handle landowner issues in the project sites. A key Hela provincial government representative identified as “4A” said the Southern Highlands Provincial Government (when the three districts of Hela were part of Southern Highlands Province until the 2012 National Election when Hela Province came into formal existence) offered to provide an office in Komo government station for the DPE staff to be based and deal with landowner matters. However, the department did not take up the offer.

Participant “4A” and a representative of Komo-Margarima District Development Authority identified as “4B” were of the view that the National Government through DPE takes carriage of all matters relating to petroleum resource development and the provincial governments and local levels governments came under the wing of the National Government as per the present legislative arrangements (Pamba, 2018). Thus, “4A” and “4B” pointed out that any hands-on regular engagement with landowners were the responsibility of the Coordination Branch of the Petroleum Division of the DPE.

Staff shortage in Department of Petroleum and Energy

One of the critical factors that inhibited DPE from performing its functions optimally and being at project sites was the shortage of resources, in particular manpower (Pamba, 2018). This was a concern to participant “5A” (Pamba, 2018) and the DPE itself who came out publicly about it (Department of Petroleum and Energy, 2013). The DPE stated that government under-funding affected its operations and plans to convert the department to the Petroleum Resources Authority and that there was a “brain-drain” of well-educated and long serving officers of the department who left for greener pastures, particularly the petroleum and mineral sectors (Department of Petroleum and Energy, 2013).

Company acknowledges communication problems

The company has a defined process of engaging with stakeholders at the different levels and its community affairs division at the project sites leads the engagement with landowners when required. In practice, the company encountered difficulties with its defined stakeholder engagement strategies particularly with landowners in Hela and had to reconfigure its approaches (Garrett, (2011)). The company executive management acknowledged that many of the issues in the project areas were due to lack of communication with landowners about their rights in terms of benefits and responsibilities as citizens, therefore it had increased its effort to engage more with the landowners in the project sites (Garrett, 2011). Peter Graham, as Managing Director of Esso Highlands Ltd (later renamed ExxonMobil PNG Ltd) in 2014, pointed out that an important lesson they learnt was to “communicate, communicate, communicate” (Pamba 2018: 118) with landowners because ‘we are on people’s land’ (p118).

Non-completion of the social mapping and landowner identification

The Oil and Gas Act (1998) stipulates in Section 47 that prior to a petroleum development licence being granted to a developer or company, landowner beneficiaries must be identified through a social mapping and landowner identification study done by the company (Pamba, 2018). In the case of the PNG LNG project, this was not done. The Government issued the project licence and signed the project agreement with the developer and equity partners on the basis of data gathered mainly from the existing oil projects in the Hela and neighbouring Southern Highlands provinces, coupled with a rudimentary deployment of the concept of ‘who you know’ or local knowledge of local leaders.

This legal anomaly was still not brought to a legal close by the PNG government at the conclusion of the thesis in January 2018 and it is still pending even at the time of writing this article in 2019. This remains a significant problem that adds to the communication dilemmas faced by the landowners. The lack of identification of legitimate landowners also led to other problems. Notable among them is the emergence of the infamous “paper

landowners”. This is a PNG euphemism for urban-based persons who claim to be landowners on paper but do not live on the indigenous lands, and well-connected people who participated in the Umbrella Benefit Sharing Agreement (UBSA) signing in Kokopo in May 2009 and benefit from the Government monetary grants that were issued as a result of the UBSA.

Use of indigenous communication processes

The company extended its engagement strategies to include indigenous methods of communication through the employment of outspoken men, referred to in Huli as *agali timbuni homoko* and *waijeli*, in the community affairs division to be the middlemen between company and the landowners (Pamba, 2018). Glasse (1968) records the *agali timbuni homoko* in traditional Huli speaking society of Hela, as ‘important’ tribal leaders who had material wealth and were also great warriors and orators who spoke with such authority that their people and tribal foes listened to and respected them. Wolfers (1969) referred to the *waijeli* as tough young men who were warriors and great orators needed for tribal warfare and to speak for their tribes in ceremonies. Both the *agali timbuni homoko* and *waijeli* play important roles with their oratory skills in Huli-speaking society in times of tribal war and peace.

The company corporatized this proven indigenous form of oral communication by employing selected *agali timbuni homoko* and *waijeli* to work in its public relations programs managed by its community affairs division as community affairs officers and village liaison officers (Pamba, 2018). The *agali timbuni homoko* and *waijeli* as employees of the company were required to vouch for their employer more than being the voices of landowners in the villages in an ‘open, dialogic and participatory’ manner. The *agali timbuni homoko* and *waijeli* worked at the tail end of the top-down communication and or reporting structure of the company that goes all the way to the headquarters of Exxon Mobil Corporation in the United States of America where the corporation has its ‘Code of Ethics and Business Conduct’ that all employees follow (ExxonMobil Corporation, 2017).

The company’s decision to employ the *agali timbuni homoko* and *waijeli* is a public relations strategy for itself. However, it runs counter to the Habermasian notion of communicative action that ought to enable emancipation where, in his words, “actors (stakeholders) in society seek to reach common understanding and seek to coordinate actions by reasoned argument, consensus, and cooperation rather than strategic action strictly in pursuit of their own goals” (1984:86). The *agali timbuni homoko* and *waijeli* also feature as executives of landowner associations and companies. The record of the *agali timbuni homoko* and *waijeli* as executives of landowner associations and companies going back to the petroleum projects in the pre-PNG LNG project days is a checkered one. These mandated landowner leaders who acted as powerbrokers were often absent in the project areas due to their relocation in Port Moresby and were “less transparent in their communications with indigenous landowners or individuals of organisations” (Goldman cited in Haley & May, 2007: 81).

The landowners who participated in my study were generally apprehensive about the conduct of the *agali timbuni homoko* and *waijeli* who worked for the company and being executives of landowner associations and companies. The company may have demonstrated itself as a good corporate citizen to provide employment to the outspoken *agai timbuni homoko* and *waijeli* as its intermediaries to communicate with landowners, however this does not fully address the ongoing sentiments of deprivation and delaying of landowners' benefits, particularly given the absence of the DPE in the province. The company as a well-resourced business enterprise, like other large foreign investors that have come to PNG, is here to do business on terms least inconvenient to its aspirations to extract gas, sell and make money (The National, 2015). It did and will find its way to work in the most convenient way to ensure its primary objectives were realized. This means employing the *agali timbuni homoko* and *waijeli* to act on its behalf when engaging with landowners in the villages next to its project sites are some of the things it has done to get its way around and realise its primary objectives.

Conclusion

The State or government and its guest, the developer or company reneged on their responsibility to communicating with landowners in an 'open, dialogic and participatory' manner on a number of areas. Firstly, they (State and the company but more so the company) did not carry out the mandated social mapping and landowner identification before the project started. Secondly, the State through DPE failed to have a presence on the ground in Hela to engage up front with landowners during the critical times of the project and instead relied on a fly-in, flow-out mode of engaging with landowners only on an occasion when an issue arose. The company attempted to be a good corporate neighbour to the landowners by corporatizing a traditional communication method through the employment of outspoken men, the *agali timbuni homoko* and the *waijeli*, to be the middlemen between it (company) and the landowners. The State supposed to be a responsible steward as owner of the petroleum resources by being on the ground through DPE having an office in the provinces like Hela that host the resources. The State's lack of presence on the ground essentially inhibits all other effort at ensuring landowners remain informed, calm and await their various benefits.

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