

## WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

THE MINING INDUSTRY AND INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES



## WORKING BOTH WAYS

### ALCAN'S SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY IN GOVE, NORTHERN TERRITORY



Australia is Alcan's major capital base outside of Canada, where the company is headquartered, and plays an important role in the company's international portfolio. 2007 marks the anniversary of forty years of Alcan's corporate presence in Australia. Its corporate activities worldwide range from the mining and processing of bauxite, primary metal smelting, power generation, aluminium fabrication, engineered solutions and flexible and specialty packaging. Alcan is known for its world-class technology, its research and highly developed environmental management initiatives.

Alcan believes that social sustainability is the part of our corporate responsibility. No longer is it enough for corporations to focus on one or two areas of support or interest. This is especially the case in areas that involve working closely with Indigenous communities. Rather, corporations must explore each of the individual aspects that have an impact on their business, whether that be local employment, profitability, or partnerships. Then the possibilities for all parties require examination, as does working towards a strategy that ensures the best possible outcome for each.

Alcan Gove's bauxite mine and alumina refinery are on Aboriginal land in a remote, culturally and environmentally sensitive location in north-east Arnhem Land. The company has been operating there since 2001, when it acquired 100% ownership of the operation. Since then, there have been significant improvements in the relationship

between the Traditional Owners and Alcan. It is important to note that these improvements have been built over time, and as with all good relationships, encouraged throughout with an exploration of interrelated issues, built on mutual trust and interdependence.

There are, of course, particular sensitivities demanded of a corporation when working with an ancient culture, which values its own traditions and has a highly complex clan system. First, of course, is the responsibility to ensure that the commercial needs of a modern corporation does not endanger – or be seen to endanger – the traditional way of life of tightly-knit communities. This is particularly the case when members of those communities are seeking ways for themselves and for their children to have access to a more secure future through the business activities of the corporation.



It is widely acknowledged that the most accessible way to put in place gradual and lasting change is through a specifically designed education program. Alcan took this direction in 2001 in Gove, with its YNOTS training program, which aimed to prepare the local Indigenous people, the Yolngu, to take their place in Alcan's mainstream workforce. Publicly recognised by a number of awards, YNOTS received the Prime Minister's Award for Excellence in Community Business Partnerships, the Northern Territory Government's Special Recognition Award and Alcan's highest international corporate recognition, the Nathanael V. Davis Award.

It is a mark of Alcan's commitment that even with these accolades, it constantly examined the progress of YNOTS and, working in close consultation with Yolngu representatives, has now developed a new program, based on the successes of the earlier program but with significant changes.

This new program is called ALERT. It has been developed to provide training and through this, a means to mainstream employment for Yolngu people of North East Arnhem Land. An integrated and comprehensive program, it will give participants experience and skills to be fully engaged in the economic cycle. The program is in three stages and can take up to 36 months for successful completion. Scheduled to begin in July 2007, ALERT has been the subject of extensive collaboration between Yolngu people, their organisations, Alcan, Charles Darwin University and the Commonwealth and Northern Territory Governments.



ALERT seeks to address much more than skills and competencies. It attempts to address the frustration and hopelessness felt by many individuals and communities, which are often the result of people feeling unable to fully participate in society, both economically and socially. Partly, this is because an adequate comprehension of English literacy and numeracy, suitable for the workplace, rests with a few. Another factor is the reported breakdown of culture and traditional governing structures in communities. For young people, particularly young men, the result of living between these two worlds is frustration. Its expression is often through violence towards others, and towards property, or escapism through drugs and alcohol.

ALERT seeks to redress these impacts and feelings by providing an alternate path. It aims to bring about generational change and capture some of the traditional structures that serve the people and community well. It does not underestimate the time this will take: up to a generation.

A significant feature of ALERT is that it has been locally led as a partnership, which has resulted in several of its highly individual features. For example, in each of the three stages there is dedicated time for intensive English literacy and numeracy training. These will both be taught throughout the day, with practical work tasks to reinforce the learning. This focus makes this program special, with literacy and numeracy training embedded through intensive training and integrated in all stages over the 36 months.



ALERT is a leadership program. It aims to conserve traditional culture, including language, by giving people the means to transfer Indigenous language into its written form for its long-term preservation. Graduates will become role models both for the next round of recruits and for the next generation. Developing these models locally will encourage others and make the step more accessible.

Other features of ALERT are that it is specific to the Yolngu people but has the potential to be applied to other areas. The key learning areas are focused around work but to ensure readiness for full participation in the mainstream workplace, the training will address skills, behaviours and experience that reflect all areas of life. This will ensure once trainees move from ALERT, they are comfortable and feel fully able to participate in all areas of their work life (including its social aspect) while continuing their participation and obligations to family and traditional culture.

Training will be given in areas where real and long-term permanent local jobs exist. ALERT has a wide base for entry, encouraging semi-skilled and those as yet without work skills. It welcomes currently unemployed young people and school leavers. Recognising that a supportive workforce is essential, another important aspect of ALERT is that the existing mainstream work force will receive preparation so they support and 'buddy' the new Yolngu recruits on the job.

One of the other ways in which large corporations can show leadership is by engaging compatible smaller businesses, thereby assisting both to achieve their goals. The Gove-based company, Deltareef Pty Ltd, is a family owned business offering building services to the Nhulunbuy region. Its goals are to have a quality Indigenous building team which can offer viable and sustainable employment for Yolngu people. Deltareef has ongoing work with Alcan, including the current Housing Improvement Program, which uses a high degree of labour. Deltareef and Alcan have a relationship which has a built-in flexibility, enabling work to be carried out which takes into account the particular needs of Yolngu people.



Another Alcan business initiative is a partnership with Bunuwal Investments Pty Ltd, whose commercial housing venture is taking place on the first Indigenous-owned residential subdivision on Traditional Aboriginal land in the Northern Territory. Others in the partnership are the Aboriginal Investment Group and the Northern Territory Government, with support from the Aboriginal Benefits Account, Northern Land Council and the National Australia Bank. The central idea behind the project is that Yolngu people invest part of the royalties received from Alcan for sustainable projects. This first project, Malpi Village, is a \$10.2 million, 32-accommodation unit complex. The Northern Territory Government has agreed to lease 13 of the units over the next 15 years and the Federal Government and Department of Defence have entered into similar agreements.

Partnerships, relationship building and mutual goodwill are key elements of the development of new ways of working that combines Alcan's corporate success and shareholder satisfaction with social sustainability. Time is an essential ingredient, as is a genuine desire to understand as fully as possible the needs and goals of the Yolngu people, their life and business aspirations and the ways in which these can be achieved. Other ways in which Alcan supports social sustainability is its support of local cultural events, from sponsorship of the Garma Festival and its membership of many related bodies from the Youth Interagency in Gove to the Laynhapuy Homelands Association Council. And Alcan's local initiatives are not confined to Australia. They make a significant contribution to the policy directions of Alcan Inc. whose international Indigenous Peoples Policy has recently been developed.

Alcan's commitment to social sustainability is one that builds in flexibility and the ability to adapt to change. The company has a history of years in remote and challenging locations and day-to-day relationships with Traditional Owners of the land where its operations are based. It looks to the future with confidence and in the proven knowledge that cooperation, partnerships and consultation, combined with the essential ingredient of time, have the potential to give the best possible results for all involved.

## CONTACT DETAILS

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