

Crafting a Public Involvement Plan

HidroAysén

Dialogue Partners analyzed environmental and community factors and conducted situational and conflict assessments for HidroAysén. We worked with HidroAysén to shift internal organizational culture toward an increasing reliance on community engagement.

“Internal culture of engagement matters. Inside an organization there must be alignment of the goals, objectives and potential outcomes of a community engagement process.”

- Kim Hyshka

What happened?

Background: With many years of planning, HidroAysén proposed to build 5 hydroelectric power plants in Chile’s Aysén Region in 2011: 2 on the Baker River and 3 on the Pascua River. This project would make a significant contribution to Chile’s stressed energy market, potentially generating 21% of demand by 2020. Chile’s main transmission system was simultaneously facing serious challenges; it did not have the capacity to transmit the amount of power required for the country’s current rate of development, nor did it have clear regulations for expansion. The Chilean government’s efforts to clarify policies and legislation surrounding the construction of infrastructure to transport power had been the subject of heated debate, speculation and criticism. Eventually, the Government approved the Environmental Impact Statement for HidroAysén’s generation phase of the project in 2011, subject to 2 conditions: a 50% reduction to the energy bill for the region of Aysén; and that a minimum of 20% of the labour force would come from the region of Aysén.

However, in 2012, amid growing uncertainty and delays by the government, HidroAysén suspended further work on the transmission line approval process until clarification could be provided. In 2014, a new government was elected, and the new President called for a review of the project, ultimately announcing that the project could not proceed in its current state. While HidroAysén may have made a contribution to Chile’s stressed energy supply, it faced significant social risks. These encompassed dynamic social, political and regulatory environments and included issues such as unclear legislation, increased community activism at national and international levels, and a polarized situation with a clear clash of economic versus environmental values.

Dialogue Partners Entered the Scene: Working with our partner Southern Gateway in Chile, Dialogue Partners collaborated with the Executive and Community Relations teams at HidroAysén to assess the project from a community engagement perspective. We created revised strategies and options for future action pending the government's decision on the project, post 2014 election.

We conducted a situational and conflict assessment of the project to date, worked with the organization to build capacity for community engagement and participatory leadership, and designed a series of strategies for re-thinking the project, should it need a re-start.

Don't Leave Me Hanging: What happened next was one of America's most formidable NGO campaigns. Patagonia Sin Represas (PSR) waged an efficient battle at national and international levels establishing itself as a well-recognized brand in opposition to the project. PSR's campaign was supported by other NGO's such as Greenpeace Chile, International Rivers Network, Ecosistema and many others. PSR demonstrated its capacity to mobilize thousands against the project. With influence, power, funding and support internationally from Tompkins Conservation (founded by Doug and Kris Tompkins, business people involved in The North Face, Esprit and Patagonia clothing companies) the campaigns took on an international flavor. The environmental causes and values promoted by these campaigns was powerful and extremely hard to question, but left little room for local voices of impacted and affected residents, dividing communities in Patagonia and marginalizing local people.

In the run up to the 2014 elections, the HidroAysén project became even more politicized. The campaign to "Vote without Dams" rallied to obtain signatures from presidential candidates to declare their opposition to the project. During the election campaign, Michelle Bachelet (now President) stated that she did not think the project was viable in its current condition, and that if Chile wanted to become a modern country it must adequately combine the needs of a growing economy with the needs of the environment and communities.

In the face of the swirling controversy, the voices of local and directly impacted communities in Aysén were marginalized, ignored

and silenced. In an attempt to be heard, a number of communities joined together to create the Voz de la Patagonia social movement (Voice of Patagonia) to ensure that the needs, views and values of local communities were heard. The group worked actively to balance respectful, sustainable development with environmental stewardship. They launched their own campaign in opposition to the well funded PSR campaign, producing stickers with “Patagonia sin Tompkins” (Patagonia without Tompkins).



Things we learned along the way.

Internal culture of engagement matters. Community engagement is risky business. To engage authentically you must be willing to be vulnerable, open and to walk unknown paths with others. This requires courage, leadership and a capacity to create solutions with affected and interested communities. This means that **INSIDE** an organization there must be alignment of the goals, objectives and potential outcomes of a community engagement process. There must be a clear and present desire to build trust and social license

to operate, and to develop solutions that allow for benefits for all. And everyone inside the organization must be on the same page, at the same time, in alignment with approach, objectives and values of the community engagement process – or it won't work.

A polarized debate is like a pendulum. If you try to persuade or convince people of the benefits of a given course of action, the likelihood is high that they may end up reacting negatively to the proposed actions – and swing the other way. No one likes to be told what to do, or to feel manipulated via fear, concern or promises of benefits. People feel coerced, controlled and manipulated and this will invariably backfire.

You need everyone at the table early on. Engaging everyone who is interested, affected or impacted early on is crucial to a meaningful conversation and project. Sounds simple and like basic common sense, but so often we see projects planned, mapped out, funded and announced BEFORE the values, needs and interests of community and stakeholders are considered. And once that is done, it requires a total re-set to engage in meaningful conversation.

Power and influence always sway the conversation. Often we think about power and influence being in the hands of the proponent who is advocating for a project, but more and more frequently, power and influence also resides in the hands of interested and affected stakeholders. We think this re-balancing of power is a good thing, and can equalize the scales to make the conversation fuller and reflective of more values. In this case, the involvement (and in particular the international funding and support) of Tompkins Conservation served to bring to light important environmental, ecological and wildlife issues – at a price. That price was to divide local communities, marginalize the interests, values and needs of many Patagonian residents and to silence the voices of thousands of local community members. The long-term impacts of the divisiveness and conflict of the PSR campaign in local communities will likely remain for many years to come.