Building social licence to operate

The following questions were asked during our live webinar with Dean Stronge, Robyn Kannemeyer and Peter Edwards but due to time restrictions, we were unable to answer these in the session.

How do communities grant SLO – what does this look like?

'Social licence isn't a 'formal licence', but something informal. It is probably easier to say when you don't have a social licence - there may be forms of community backlash or protest (e.g., lawsuits, loss of markets, blockades) that indicate that it has been lost. An example from the British Columbia forest industry - some of the elements that demonstrated social licence existed included jobs and other benefits for local communities, including First Nations, strong environmental protections, open and transparent communication, and independent oversight. (The independent oversight, through the Forest Practices Board, provided communities with a way to 'test' whether companies were living up to their commitments).

Can the process be applied to productions sectors? E.g., farming.

Yes - the framework can be applied to any entity that is proposing to "do" something that could have an impact on stakeholders or communities of interest. The forthcoming Our Land and Water National Science Challenge project "Navigating the social licence to operate (SLO) nexus between farmers, agribusinesses, consumers and citizens in Aotearoa New Zealand" is specifically focused on the production sector.

When an organisation has 'partnership and engagement teams' how can a whole organisation be involved in building social licence? Many teams in an organisation cannot practically be out in the community building relationships a lot of the time, because they need to be researching and writing documents.

We are not suggesting that every person in an organisation has to be out there building relationships and social licence - rather that organisations need to have a common purpose and awareness regarding SL. Those researching and writing documents still have a role to play by ensuring that their work doesn't hinder engagement processes

The concept of social licence suggests a process for obtaining a tangible outcome. I think there is a risk in applying this framing because it sounds like a job someone has to do rather than being a whole-of-organisation focus on building trust and confidence at every contact point. That work belongs to all members of the organisation, not limited to area that believes it needs 'social licence' to achieve a purpose. Your presentation seems to support my point of view so is it helpful to continue to use the term 'social licence' and focus more on ensuring the integrity and quality of all interactions of the organisation? I'd be interested in your thoughts on this.

'Social licence' is a label (like sustainability) - it has common usage and can be interpreted in many different ways. Not everyone likes the term, but the fact is it persists and there is a demand for it. The goal of our framework is to put the focus on the intent - what is it you are trying to achieve in your quest to build and maintain SL? This is why we start with the socialising phase - which includes the purpose. For us the intent is to build social acceptance, reputation and trust, through as you say, ensuring the integrity and quality of all interactions of the organisation. If that is not the intent of the organisation then we are probably not the right people to be advising them.

Can you point to resources and or mentors for social processes with remote communities? E.g. Rakiura / Stewart Island?

We can email our Engagement for social licence - Predator Free Southland Report to you. This paper by Taylor et al. (2020) may be of interest. A strategic social impact assessment for Predator-Free Rakiura, New Zealand, with a human–ecological approach: https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s42532-020-00049-0.pdf.

When you refer to organisations, what organisations are being referred to?

This could be any company, individual farmer/forester, non-profit group, government entity that is proposing to "do" something that could have an impact on stakeholders or communities of interest.

Please remember, sometimes a community simply does not support certain proposals and/or such things may not be appropriate and so this process however robust and sincere may not work and that is fine also as SLO should not be seen as a mechanism for manipulation

Yes, exactly. This is why the 'purpose' is part of the socialising phase of our framework. Organisations need to reflect on why they want or need SLO. As we mentioned in the seminar achieving and maintaining a SLO requires a desire to do what is right by stakeholders and the community, rather than just doing what is required to reduce risk to the organisation

How do you think teams within an organisation can be encouraged to prioritise SLO in their community?

Do they need to? You don't need SL for everything you do. The critical first step in our framework is socialising - with and within organisations. If teams become familiarised with the concept that puts them in a better position to judge the implications of their activities and whether those activities may or may not be relevant to any SL issues circulating in the community

TRUST - An important corollary is that the staff must trust the organisation before that trust can be extended beyond the organisation.

A key stakeholder for any organisation is its staff. As we noted in our presentation the purpose of the socialising phase (the critical first step) is to socialise the concept of SLO with and within the organisation looking to gain and maintain SLO. The framework can equally be applied to an internal SLO issue.

How does an organisation maintain relationships (and SLO) in the face of rapid staff turnover?

It probably won't. If SLO is required then it highlights a barrier/issue that the organisation will need to address. This is why the socialising phase is the critical first step - organisations need to reflect on what influence their own internal processes etc have on building the conditions for trustworthiness before they start.

How to you genuinely 'listen' and take account of the views of a minority that may have illogical/negative/destructive attitudes that do not advance the cause. How do you make them feel valued without fobbing them off?

SL is not some Utopia where everybody likes you or what you do. Some people may always be fundamentally opposed to what you do on a range of philosophical grounds - you don't have to take account of everybody's views. The key point is you need to 'listen' so you can understand what criteria they are judging you by - so that you can critically reflect on whether it is truly illogical/negative/destructive or if it is due to something that you are doing. If it's the former - then you just need to accept that and figure out ways of managing it. If it's the latter then you need to start reflecting on what changes you need to make. In some cases, those with illogical views are made 'happy' simply by knowing that their views have been heard, critically considered, even if not implemented.

Is there room within the framework for co-development of concepts/technologies/desired outcomes with a community as opposed to approaching a community with a fully-formed concept that may well require un-picking to suit the community in question, or not be accepted. i.e. what is the value of obtaining SLO over putting the effort in early on to develop relationships for co-development?

Yes, this would potentially allow stakeholders and communities of interest to be 'brought along' on the whole journey. Through co-developing a 'project' there is much greater opportunity to build strong relationships, demonstrate trustworthiness and build trust. One needs to consider that expectations on both sides are able to be met.

How does this framework work for NFPs and local community organisations?

It would work in the same way as with other organisations; the community group or NFPs would reflect internally on what social licence means to them, why they want or need it, and work with their stakeholders and communities of interest to ensure that their aspirations are incorporated in the planned activity.

How do less senior staff build rapport and negotiate licence when the senior leadership and the community are socioeconomically or culturally diverse and may hold opposing worldviews and ideas on prioritisation of knowledge?

If there isn't the support from senior leadership, it can be quite difficult for less senior staff to negotiate social licence. These staff can still build trusting relationships with community members though e.g. positively meeting their expectations (being clear on what you are able to do/deliver, and following through). Where there are opposing worldviews within the community, it may not be necessarily a barrier, if people have similar aspirations or goals; the challenge of how to achieve those aspirations may be negotiated. Again, this can be constrained if senior leadership is not on board with the idea of social licence.

Do you have any insights/recommendations about how to restore the suggested broken science-society contract for climate change (refer https://theconversation.com/scientists-call-for-a-moratorium-on-climate-change-research-until-governments-take-real-action-172690)

This is quite an interesting question, but goes beyond the scope of social licence. This reaches into the breakdown of public trust in science, which is a large, and rather thorny issue on its own.

What areas of the sector or customer segments did you work on with Te Uru Rakau? For many in the agriculture land business there are many things to work through such as minorities views. How does a government department learn to work with that in their rigid timeframes and process?

We worked only with Te Uru Rākau staff. These ranged from the Director level, down to front-line staff, and included their partnerships team, policy teams and others. As you say, there are many issues to work through, with many different views. This is where it is important to have buy-in and support from the senior leadership, so that social licence can be incorporated into their processes and ways of working, and be reflected in e.g., timeframes and processes. This is where the socialising phase and internal reflection play a key role, leading to an organisation (or teams) committing to the social licence journey.

Is there a detailed process descriptor on your website? I work in the field of best practice engagement and would appreciate to see the overlap. Agree with your key messages, would be good to integrate it into best practice community engagement.

Yes, the website has links to our full report that gives the detail of the framework, as well as links to examples of tools that can be used in many of the steps: (https://www.landcareresearch.co.nz/discover-our-research/environment/sustainable-society-and-policy/slo-framework/).

You say bi-cultural but NZ is multicultural with immigrants and refugees bringing very diverse new ways to engage.

We use the term bicultural to refer to Māori and non-Māori - recognising that in Aotearoa, Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Treaty of Waitangi) provides a constitutional basis that establishes and guides the relationship between the Crown in New Zealand (embodied by our government) and Māori.

Questions & Answers

What level is the frame work design for? Business? Industry body? Both?

Currently, the framework is designed for an organisation (business/govt department/community org), and it could be used by an industry body for particular projects or programmes. The project with the Our Land and Water National Science Challenge will be used to test the framework and it's use and validity at higher scales, e.g., a particular sector or industry.

Is the socialization phase an entirely internal phase? Or is it also about socializing the concept with your industry or community?

The socialisation phase is primarily internal - ensuring that there is a common understanding of the concept and why the organisation needs/wants to gain or maintain social licence. There shouldn't be any harm in going out to your community or stakeholders to get a sense of their understanding of the concept so that there are then similar high level expectations on all fronts.

Suggestions as to how forestry can respond to very strong opposition to afforestation from the broad based 50 Shades of Green , Local Councils who are farmer dominated and well-funded advocacy from Levy funded Beef and Lamb organisation, plus EDS and prominent NZers like Dame Anne Salmon?

Fundamentally many organisations start with the wrong first question when it comes to SLO. Most start with the question how can we make people like us/like what we are doing? Instead, what they should be asking is what can we do to make ourselves likable/what are we doing to make ourselves disliked? Our socialising phase - the critical first step in the process - highlights the need to look internally first. While we are not suggesting that this is the cause of all SLO problems it is a significantly overlooked part of the problem.

Who are the entities that are best in class re social license?

This can be a bit difficult to answer - as social licence is an informal approval or acceptance, organisations don't necessarily advertise that they have social licence - usually you know if you don't have it, through community 'backlash'. However, from some work done four to five years ago on the aquaculture industry, we found that Akaroa Salmon and High Country Salmon appeared to have a high level of acceptance/approval/trust in their communities. We are unsure of others that may be 'best in class' at the moment.

Does this framework differ when working with iwi?

SLO has similar outcomes to kaupapa Māori research, which also requires the building of credibility and reciprocity when establishing relationships, empowering communities to build capacity or leaving something tangible for the community when the project is completed. While our framework was developed with significant te ao Māori (Māori worldview) input and recognises the importance of building relationships and trust with iwi, we acknowledge that more work needs to be done to better account for SLO development across knowledge systems. This is an area that is now being investigated for further development of the framework.

Where can we find the Te Uru Rakau handbook?

The Te Uru Rākau handbook is still going through their internal approval process. We will be able to share it through the MWLR website as soon as TUR advise us that it has been approved.

Would SLO be necessary if projects were developed in partnership with communities in the first instance? It seems a bit one-sided where an organisation is looking how to bring the community onside for something the organisation wants to do (rather than communities being involved from the outset).

Yes, social licence is still important, however developing projects in partnership with stakeholders and communities of interest would potentially allow them to be 'brought along' on the whole journey. Through co-developing a 'project' there is much greater opportunity to build strong relationships, demonstrate trustworthiness and build trust, potentially leading to a strong social licence. One needs to consider that expectations on both sides are able to be met.

The fine line is to avoid perceptions of SLO as overdone PR/Spin, yep? Authenticity is key. So core to the profession of communications and engagement

Yes - building trustworthiness to achieve and maintain a SLO requires a desire to do what is right by stakeholders and the community, rather than just doing what is required to reduce risk to the organisation.

How would you approach SLO for a programme that is delivered by a collective, rather than one specific organisation/agency? Would you build SLO for the programme itself as opposed to a particular lead delivery agency?

Yes, you would build social licence for the programme, rather than a particular organisation or partner. The approach would be fundamentally the same, however, the partners would need to work through the socialising phase carefully to make sure that all partners are on the same page. Constantly re-evaluating the partners' positions and maintaining unity of purpose and understanding is crucial. This will likely require more work 'internally' between the partners.