

02. July 2021



NEXT shares outcomes of interviews with mineral exploration companies

On the occasion of the Exploration Seminar that was organized by the **Horizon 2020 New Exploration Technologies (NEXT)** project in Rovaniemi on 9 October 2019, the participating representatives of exploration and mining companies were invited to take part in short semi-structured interviews.

The interviews were conducted by Dirk De Ketelaere, Senior Researcher at Integrated Resources Management Company Ltd., IRMCo, an environmental research company based in Malta, and Toni Eerola, Senior Specialist at the Geological Survey of Finland, GTK.

The cover picture for this write-up shows Markku Iljina, who runs an independent exploration company based in Finland being interviewed by Dirk De Ketelaere (Photo by Toni Eerola).

We invited Dirk and Toni to provide us with more information about these interviews.

What was the main motivation for your interviews with exploration and mining companies?

The delivery of a Toolkit addressed to exploration companies presents itself as the final, practical outcome in the research that is being conducted under the umbrella of the Social License to Explore thematic in the Horizon 2020 NEXT project. Hence, we wished to obtain first-hand knowledge what the expectations of such a toolkit would look like on the part of our target audience.

How many interviews were conducted and what was the area of expertise of the participants?

We conducted a total of ten interviews, with mainly exploration geologists (nine) and one geophysicist accepting to take part. The interviewees represented Finnish, Swedish and Australian companies, among which seven were exploration and three consultancy companies.

How would you describe the main outcomes from your interviews?

Many of the interviewees were not aware whether their corporate websites address Social License to Operate (SLO) related aspects, and referred to other people in the company for a detailed answer.

Half of the company representatives considered the SLO-related issues as an important topic to be considered in the first place when going to a new area to explore, while the other half considered the technical aspects to be more important.

The new technologies were mainly reflected upon regarding their cost and time efficiency, but also in relation to a further reduction of the environmental footprint. The ones most mentioned were drones. The interviewees held the view that local communities may be interested in drones and their lower environmental impact may help companies to be accepted in their mineral exploration activities.

Some company representatives stressed the importance of considering land use issues when planning and selecting targets to explore, i.e. to avoid operations in nature conservation areas, Sámi homeland, tourism destinations, to avoid the risk of conflicts and increase the chances of obtaining SLO.

The stakeholder engagement of the companies seems to be restricted mainly to information sharing. Interviewees largely converged on the need to first meet with the landowners, residents, and other stakeholders, and then to organize meetings with the local communities. However, none of the interviewed company representatives mentioned participation and collaboration as important for obtaining an SLO at the local level. The stakeholders mentioned included reindeer herders, mayors, landowners, community, road maintenance associations, and municipalities.

The need for raising public awareness about mineral exploration was recognized by many, as well as the need for guidance on how to communicate and ensure active stakeholder engagement.

If we can draw two main conclusions from these interviews, these would be that already existing toolkits were not known and need to be disseminated in a more effective way, particularly among the mineral exploration companies in Finland, and, secondly, there was a clear expectation for any toolkit to be process-oriented, i.e. provide answers to the questions of what to do, when, where and why.

To conclude this interview, Dirk and Toni invited us to share this summary overview of the ten main points that were the subject of their interviews with mineral exploration companies

- 1) **Types of technologies:** Conventional technologies and methods are mentioned by most of interviewees. Drones are mentioned by some as a new technology that they have been using. Two mentioned the technologies developed and tested within NEXT, such as snow and soil sampling and the use of drones.
- 2) **The first issues to consider in exploration of a new area:** Around half of the respondents mentioned data collection, choice of technologies, study of structural controls and elaboration of geophysical models, selection of target and commodity, fulfilling shareholders' expectations and reconnaissance with geophysics and soil sampling. The other half emphasized social aspects, such as interaction with the local community and landowners, consideration of land use and social and environmental impacts.
- 3) **Meaning of Social License to Operate (SLO) for the company:** Specific reference to the term SLO did not feature often in the interviews. However, for some interviewees, social acceptance is a big issue. This was not the case for one Swedish company representative, who considered the authorities as the main issue in Central Sweden. However, another Swedish representative did not share this view and asked the NEXT project to offer guidance for their community relations in Northern Sweden. Consideration of competing land uses in the selection of exploration targets, e.g. to avoid Natura 2000 and Sámi areas, is mentioned by representatives from Finland, while others emphasize co-existence and active company-community engagement, including interaction, contacting landowners, meeting the local community and informing what they are doing and consideration of the environment and existing land use to avoid conflict. Some also stated that foreign companies need to be better informed about the local issues at hand. The need for information sharing was considered as the main issue, whereas active engagement and collaboration were not specifically mentioned.
- 4) **Strategies for SLO:** A consultant with only junior experience "reflected about" SLO related topics and actions to be taken in response to the contractor's request for pro-active engagement with the local community; to be open, to be the first person to inform about activities, to talk with mayors with a view to organize Information Days.

- 5) **Personal interaction with the local actors:** Some of the interviewees stressed the need to have the required skills when contacting local people. Several interviewees advocated sharing information. The use of “common sense”, i.e., starting by meeting landowners and then organizing community meetings when applying for the exploration permit and contracting local people were recommended to be part of the exploration activities. Even if the way of contacting may vary with the type of project; gaining social acceptance was essentially seen as fundamental to running the operations. In relation to the nature of personal interaction, talking with the municipalities and road maintenance associations, presence at community meetings, discussions with reindeer associations about their expectations / issues; and the organization of geology courses were mentioned.
- 6) **Communication channels:**
- a) **Targeting investors:** carried out by specialized personnel, websites (usually in English), newspapers, quarterly newsletters.
 - b) **Targeting local actors:** direct contacts, announcements in local newspapers to “spread the word” about community meetings, maintain websites to make the data on water and soil sampling publicly accessible and guide people to send their CV for job applications, and the use of email to contact landowners. The consultants interviewed held the view that although they may have their own company website, this could not bring information about their clients’ projects. On the other hand, they stated that they could meet landowners and send letters to the municipalities explaining about activities; bring announcements in the local newspapers, but would not rely on journalists.
- 7) **SLO-related issues addressed on the company website:** On this topic the answers were quite evasive: many informed they were not aware whether SLO-related content featured on the websites of the company they represented. Some of the interviewees stated that the respective companies they worked for did not have its own corporate website, but that of the parent company; some preferred not to use the term SLO at all because it might not be known by the local people - “technological research and development are the main focus on our website”. One company mentioned the SLO-concept directly in its Swedish pages (pages also in Norwegian for general audience and in English for investors); another interviewee held the view that since most of the people are elderly in the exploration area, they do not visit a website.
- 8) **Influence of new technologies on the SLO:** Interviewees mostly agreed that technologies matter a lot. Some mentioned their use of surface soil sampling as a technology not leaving any traces of activities behind. Others considered that the local community would be interested to learn more about the use of the drones that are being developed in NEXT. An interviewed consultant stated he would advise his clients to both use and advertise new technologies in their websites after learning about the new technologies in the NEXT seminar, and expressed the view that if it is possible to demonstrate that the technologies

reduce the environmental impact, this would bring a clearly positive aspect to share with the local community.

- 9) **Other benefits of new technologies:** Responses varied between: maybe too early to answer; they are cost-effective and faster, cost is the main issue when it comes to mineral exploration; it would drive innovation in the sector; it is important to train local people in the use of such technologies in order to be able to be hire them. Moreover, the aspect of efficiency is emphasized; new technologies are developed to minimize the environmental footprint (probe to detect cosmic ray particles in boreholes and use of solar and thermal energy to reduce energy consumption); the choice of technologies should be considered on a case-by-case basis, drones do not serve all purposes.
- 10) **Assistance needed for community engagement:** Communication is seen as the main issue. Any toolkit should be process-oriented, i.e. provide answers to the questions of what to do, when, where and why. There are companies that come to an area just for a quick trip to check out mineral potential and then move on, not spending time with community issues. Companies need to be guided how to conduct stakeholder engagement, and there should be guidance on tools to communicate and inform people better about exploration as they do not know about that. A toolkit about general practices and standards would be welcome and companies can advertise that they are following such standards. It is important to keep the local community informed also because they can offer services and, in this context, it is important to have a local person on the ground who speaks the local language, and be the company's face for the community.

A personal reflection from Dirk and Toni:



“Whilst a majority of our company’s research projects over the past 25 years have dealt with various aspects of water resources management, my involvement in the Horizon 2020 NEXT project and in the FP7 ProMine project reinforces my viewpoint that there is a clear need to directly involve local communities in all matters that pertain to their land and water resources. Regulatory frameworks set by national authorities or self-declared corporate responsibilities set by companies are simply not sufficient to ensure and safeguard the social well-being of society. As a hydrologist, I do not see access to water as a source of conflict but rather a means to build lasting bridges among competing users. To think of it, access to land should be viewed in the same way.”

Dirk De Ketelaere is a Senior Researcher at Integrated Resources Management Company Ltd., IRMCo, an environmental research company based in Malta.

“My work as a geologist in Finland and abroad made me observe and learn the importance of stakeholder engagement and communication with local communities and other stakeholders since I was student and trainee in the field. I have been practicing and developing stakeholder engagement and related toolkits and standards not only through the Horizon 2020 NEXT and MIREU projects, but also directly with mineral exploration companies, and through collaboration with the Finnish Network for Sustainable Mining and the Finnish Mineral Exploration Network of the FinMin.”

Toni Eerola is a Senior Specialist at the Geological Survey of Finland (GTK).



More about NEXT:

www.new-exploration.tech

