

# Submission to review on improving community engagement and support for renewable energy infrastructure

1 October 2023

Authors:

Jonathan Pickering (Associate Professor, School of Politics, Economics and Society, University of Canberra) [jonathan.pickering@canberra.edu.au](mailto:jonathan.pickering@canberra.edu.au)

Pierrick Chalaye (Lecturer and Researcher, University of Pau, France; formerly Research Fellow, ANU Battery Storage and Grid Integration Program, Australian National University) [pierrick.chalaye@anu.edu.au](mailto:pierrick.chalaye@anu.edu.au)

Gareth Edwards (Visiting Associate Professor in the School of International Development at the University of East Anglia, UK; Visiting Fellow at the Sydney Environment Institute, University of Sydney) [gareth.edwards@sydney.edu.au](mailto:gareth.edwards@sydney.edu.au); [Gareth.Edwards@uea.ac.uk](mailto:Gareth.Edwards@uea.ac.uk)

## Overview

The shift to renewable sources of energy not only reduces greenhouse gas emissions but can also yield other benefits such as better health, jobs and lower energy prices. However, if communities are not included and listened to in decision-making, this shift could undermine energy affordability, exacerbate inequalities and undermine community cohesion. Early identification of potential equity impacts from energy transition policies and timely steps to prevent or minimise those impacts could help combat those inequalities and bolster community support for the transition.

This submission builds on a workshop involving researchers and practitioners on 28 September jointly convened by the University of Canberra and the University of Sydney, as well as on analysis conducted by researchers at the two universities. This includes a case study of the implications for community well-being flowing from the rollout of large-scale renewable energy infrastructure in regional New South Wales (Pickering & Chalaye, Forthcoming), an analysis of prospects for a just transition from coal (Edwards et al., 2022). The views in this submission reflect only those of the individual authors of the submission and do not necessarily reflect the views of all the other workshop participants or authors of the studies or their organisations.

There have been some promising developments at both federal and state levels on policies for community engagement and support, including First Nations guidelines developed under the New South Wales Electricity Infrastructure Roadmap, plans under the National Energy Transformation Partnership for a co-designed First Nations Clean Energy Strategy, and a stronger focus among project proponents on providing payments to landholders of neighbouring properties adjoining renewable energy developments.

However, multiple sources of evidence indicate that there is an urgent need for deeper and more effective engagement with communities on renewable energy (see e.g. Cass et al., 2022; O'Reilly & Nemes, 2023; Pickering & Chalaye, Forthcoming). While there remains significant in-principle support for the energy transition, there is substantial concern in regional communities about how they will be affected by the rollout of large-scale renewable infrastructure in their areas. Community members in regional NSW have also raised concerns about how community engagement practices have been conducted to date (Cass et al., 2022; O'Reilly & Nemes, 2023; Pickering & Chalaye, Forthcoming), with interviewees frequently commenting on:

- lack of sufficient early information for community members about proposed developments that affect them (including the creation of Renewable Energy Zones [REZs] and individual projects in their area);
- limited availability and accessibility of accurate and up-to-date information;
- limited physical presence of coordinating agencies in regional areas; and
- community cohesion being undermined by landholder negotiations.

At the same time, there is growing concern in communities about consultation fatigue, particularly in Renewable Energy Zones. This should not be interpreted as a sign to avoid or minimise consultation but as a reason to improve the quality and coordination of community engagement.

Understandably policy-makers have had a strong focus on engagement with regional communities, given that the expansion of large-scale generation and transmission infrastructure is already having significant impacts on these communities, and these impacts will only increase as the energy transition scales up. At the same time, the transition will affect communities across Australia, not only through the expansion of renewable energy infrastructure in urban areas but also through effects on electricity prices, the phase-out of fossil fuel extraction and burning, and the social and economic implications of household electrification. Even if the expansion of renewable energy should reduce electricity prices, the outcome could still be inequitable if some groups benefit disproportionately while others benefit far less. Accordingly, it is vital to think about community engagement and support both within and beyond regional communities and to ensure that the costs and benefits from the energy transition are equitably distributed across those communities.

# Recommendations

The remainder of this submission highlights a series of recommendations for how community engagement in and community support for the renewable energy transition could be built and sustained. Where possible we cross-reference to recommendations from other reports and research.

## Overall approaches to the energy transition

- 1. An integrated set of policies and measures.** The energy transition needs to be designed and framed as part of an integrated package of policies and measures to improve community wellbeing and environmental sustainability. Integrative frameworks on wellbeing or sustainable development (e.g. state/national wellbeing frameworks or the Sustainable Development Goals) may offer useful ways of envisioning connections across policy objectives.
- 2. Overall narratives.** Policy-makers should adopt narratives for the transition that set reasonable expectations about the economic and social benefits of the transition while acknowledging the potential for adverse impacts and committing to address them (see also NSW Agriculture Commissioner, 2022, p. 45).
- 3. Fair effort-sharing across geographies and scales.** The effort of expanding renewable energy infrastructure needs to be shared fairly across rural and urban areas, with an appropriate mix of strategies at all scales (from individual households to community-level and utility scale) and corresponding attention to social equity across all of these dimensions. Policy-makers also need to communicate more effectively why regional areas of Australia are expected to host a large expansion of energy infrastructure in their areas, and how this fits into the overall effort that communities across the country will need to shoulder during the transition.
- 4. Equity across the board.** Equity in the energy transition should be addressed not only in terms of minimising adverse impacts and maximising benefits for those worst off or most adversely affected, but also minimising disproportionate benefits to those who need them least (e.g. subsidies or super profits for fossil fuel industries). Taxation or redirection of disproportionate benefits can in turn strengthen the capacity of governments to support those most heavily affected by the transition.
- 5. Strategic coordination.** Government bodies coordinating the renewable energy transition should ensure that stakeholders representing different community wellbeing sectors (e.g. Indigenous affairs, regional development, employment and housing) and civil society are adequately represented. Transition authorities at national and state levels can have an important role to play in coordinating the transition (Edwards et al., 2022; Colvin, 2023) but they should be designed to have direct connections with communities and avoid institutional duplication.
- 6. Resourcing and implementation capacity.** Government and private investment in the renewable energy transition needs to be greatly scaled up to meet the goals of the Paris Agreement. Against this backdrop, adequate resourcing to sustain and improve community

wellbeing throughout the transition is vital. Key bodies involved in the transition should have sufficient technical and staffing capacity and the right skills mix to manage additional workloads associated with REZ development and community engagement (see also NSW Agriculture Commissioner, 2022, pp. 8, 49-50).

## **Community participation and engagement**

**7. Principles for community engagement.** Engagement that organisations undertake with communities needs to be early, sustained, authentic, empowering and adequately resourced. Engagement should seek to build relations of trust and dialogue rather than being transactional and extractive. It should be tailored to different community groups, recognising their different strengths, challenges, histories and knowledge.

**8. Community awareness.** Policy-makers should invest in community awareness and education initiatives on renewable energy both inside and outside REZs regarding issues such as aims, rationales, timelines, benefits and risks, and how to engage in decision-making processes, ensuring that information is balanced and accessible through a range of media (see also NSW Agriculture Commissioner, 2022, p. 8). Initiatives could include mobile outreach to schools and community gatherings, hands-on opportunities for people to become more familiar with renewable technologies, and profiles of community leaders on renewables.

**9. Sustainable funding for community organisations.** Non-government organisations that are supporting communities' participation in the energy transition require longer-term, sustainable funding to build and maintain relations of trust. Governments should explore opportunities for longer-term partnerships with community organisations and less reliance on ad hoc grant programs.

**10. Early engagement in network planning and establishing new REZs.** In parts of Australia where renewable energy zones are yet to be established or expanded, communities should be engaged as soon as possible in decisions about the geographic scope and scale of infrastructure in each potential zone. Levels of community support and potential community benefits should be key factors in deciding whether to establish a REZ.

**11. A coordinated approach to engagement.** Coordinating agencies and project proponents should pool engagement activities across geographical areas and projects where possible to minimise duplication of effort and consultation fatigue (Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner, 2023, p. 51).

**12. Local presence.** Coordinating agencies should maintain a physical presence in regional centres and other highly affected areas within REZs, and where possible recruit local staff (O'Reilly & Nemes, 2023, p. 103; see also Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner, 2023, pp. 52, 54).

**13. Consultation timeframes.** Approval authorities should provide flexibility on community consultation timeframes, particularly on complex projects, while ensuring that overall approval timeframes are not unduly prolonged.

**14. Incentivising high-quality engagement.** Planning authorities and coordinating agencies designing project tenders should ensure that high-quality community engagement is mandatory and/or given substantial weighting in selection criteria. Investors assessing potential projects should likewise stipulate high-quality community engagement as a precondition for investment. Particularly for hard-to-reach groups it may be appropriate to recompense outreach participants for their time.

**15. Landholder negotiations.** To minimise the divisiveness often caused by proposed projects, proponents should be open to negotiating with potential host landholders as a group rather than through one-on-one interactions (Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner, 2023, p. 41) and should refrain from confidentiality clauses that prohibit landholders from talking to one another.

**16. Transparency in landholder and neighbour agreements.** To improve consistency and transparency and reduce power imbalances in negotiations between landholders and project proponents, government agencies should develop standard templates for landholder and neighbour agreements (Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner, 2023, pp. 34, 47) and publish details of average prices for such agreements (NSW Agriculture Commissioner, 2022, pp. 10, 59).

**17. Mapping and visualisation.** Coordinating agencies and planning authorities should work with project proponents on improving integrated mapping and visualisation of project locations to enable community members to better assess cumulative impacts (see also NSW Agriculture Commissioner, 2022, p. 9).

**18. Deliberative forums and co-design.** There is a need to diversify the ways in which communities can be empowered to discuss and participate in the future of the energy transition, for example deliberative forums (e.g. citizens' juries or citizens' assemblies) where citizens deliberate together to come up with an agreed solution to a problem they face (Willis et al., 2022) and co-design of policies and programs. Deliberative forums could be initiated by communities themselves or supported by government agencies, NGOs or project proponents.

**19. Countering misinformation.** Policy-makers, project proponents and community organisations need to be proactive in countering misinformation about the energy transition, including by communicating reliable sources of evidence in accessible and engaging ways, and investing in trusted communication channels between decision-makers and communities (Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner, 2023, p. 50).

**20. Monitoring of community engagement processes.** Approval authorities should invest adequate resources in monitoring the progress of project proponents' community engagement activities throughout the lifetime of projects (Cass et al., 2022, p. 10).

**21. Tracking community attitudes.** Researchers and policy-makers should develop and invest in longitudinal surveys of community attitudes to renewable energy, including disaggregated analysis of attitudes based on region, income group, gender, age and other demographic dimensions. We understand CSIRO is working on a survey of this kind.

22. **Complaints handling.** Complaints mechanisms relating to all relevant aspects of renewable infrastructure should be accessible to all community members, including bodies such as the Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner, complementary independent bodies administered by state governments, and project proponents' complaints handling procedures (see Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner, 2023, p. 76).

## **Gender, cultural and other dimensions of diversity**

23. **A diversity lens on engagement, impact assessment and benefit-sharing.** Policy-makers, coordinating agencies and project proponents should ensure that people of different genders, cultural and linguistic backgrounds and other dimensions of diversity are included in decision-making, are not disproportionately affected by the renewable energy transition, and have meaningful opportunities to benefit from the transition.

24. **Diversity in the renewable energy workforce.** Governments and businesses need to invest further resources and commitment into promoting greater diversity in the renewable energy workforce, particularly when it comes to (a) expanding the share of women in leadership/board positions and in the trades and (b) promoting inclusive work cultures (Clean Energy Council, 2021, p. 17).

## **First Nations participation and engagement**

25. **Prioritisation of First Nations participation.** First Nations communities are vital partners in the energy transition and also stand to be affected significantly by it. Accordingly, engagement with First Nations communities should be a high priority.

26. **Free, prior and informed consent.** Engagement with First Nations people on renewable energy should be informed by principles of free, prior and informed consent in accordance with Australia's obligations under the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (O'Neill et al., 2021).

27. **Strategies and guidelines for First Nations participation and engagement.** Dedicated guidelines on First Nations participation and engagement at state and regional levels are vital. Guidelines should be co-designed with First Nations communities. The First Nations Clean Energy Strategy offers an opportunity to strengthen knowledge sharing and development of best practice in this area, and for bolstering First Nations participation in the energy transition more generally.

28. **Capacity-building support for First Nations groups.** Governments should support Local Aboriginal Land Councils and other First Nations groups to develop community roadmaps for renewable energy and strengthen their capacity to negotiate with project proponents (see section 5.1.5; Norman et al., 2023, p. 20).

## **Managing adverse impacts**

29. **Monitoring of cumulative impacts and coordinated strategies to address them.** Coordinating agencies and planning authorities should ensure that the cumulative impacts of Renewable Energy Zones – including on land use, housing, employment and social services – are regularly monitored, and that strategies to minimise and address impacts in a

coordinated way and build community resilience are put in place (see also NSW Agriculture Commissioner, 2022, p. 45).

**30. Sequencing of projects.** To smooth out peaks in construction impacts and provide more predictable employment opportunities, coordinating agencies should work closely with project proponents, trade unions and other industry stakeholders on the sequencing of construction in REZs, particularly in localities with a high concentration of proposed projects (NSW Electricity Infrastructure Jobs Advocate, 2022, pp. 6-7; Briggs et al., 2022, p. 11).

**31. Land use prioritisation and colocation.** Where viable, renewable infrastructure sites should be prioritised in areas such as marginal agricultural land, visually unobtrusive land, former mining/industrial land and land with lower biodiversity value. Where this land is unavailable, project proponents should, where viable, prioritise project designs that minimise impacts on concurrent land use and maximise ongoing usage of productive agricultural land, such as through agrivoltaic/agrisolar systems (Taylor, 2022; NSW Agriculture Commissioner, 2022, p. 62). Further trials of agrivoltaic systems should be undertaken to validate claims about their benefits and identify the most suitable design options for different regions.

**32. Employment and training.** Workforce development programs should ensure that employment and training opportunities for workers in low-income groups and workers living in or near REZs are broadened (Briggs et al., 2022).

**33. Housing and social services.** Coordinating agencies and project proponents should explore opportunities to address adverse impacts on areas such as housing and social services, e.g. for temporary housing for workers to be repurposed as long-term affordable and sustainable housing, or investment in health services (NSW Electricity Infrastructure Jobs Advocate, 2022, p. 6; NSW Agriculture Commissioner, 2022, p. 82; EnergyCo, 2023, p. 19).

## Benefit-sharing

**34. Identifying community needs.** Where possible, funding decisions on benefit-sharing should be based on strategic plans and roadmaps developed by communities rather than through ad hoc consultation. Some communities may need support with agreeing on and documenting needs, but any such processes should be inclusive and should not duplicate planning processes undertaken by local councils or other regional bodies.

**35. Pooled benefit-sharing schemes.** Government agencies should develop fair and transparent rules for REZ-wide or regionally pooled benefit-sharing schemes, with a view to ensuring that these schemes can complement and deliver more systemic benefits than project-specific schemes. Funding decisions should be made by bodies that represent key stakeholders in each region, including community groups, local councils, First Nations people and local businesses. Project proponents should also explore opportunities to pool project-specific benefit-sharing schemes for greater impact.

**36. Benefit-sharing guidelines.** Coordinating agencies should collaborate with stakeholders to develop further information and guidance for project proponents on how project-specific benefit-sharing schemes could be designed to complement REZ-wide schemes. These guidelines could provide advice on how to tailor benefit-sharing

mechanisms so that they are more likely to reach people who could benefit most, including low-income households, First Nations people, and culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

**37. Monitoring and review of benefit-sharing.** Project proponents and government agencies should report periodically on their progress in delivering on their benefit-sharing commitments (Cass et al., 2022, p. 9). Benefit-sharing schemes should be reviewed periodically to ensure that they remain aligned with communities' needs (Clarke et al., 2022, p. 26; NSW Agriculture Commissioner, 2022, p. 10). Communities should have an opportunity to be involved in monitoring and review.

## Community ownership and co-investment

**38. Incentives for community ownership and co-investment.** Federal and state governments should provide greater incentives and reduce regulatory barriers for communities to own and invest in renewable energy projects, construct community grids and connect to network infrastructure. This requires better availability of trusted information on how to set up community energy projects, additional government investment in services that can advise communities on how to design and finance projects, and financial support for critical project phases (e.g. prefeasibility assessments). Governments could also set minimum community equity requirements for new projects (drawing on international experience in this area) and harmonise processes for community energy across jurisdictions.

## Learning

**39. Cross-jurisdictional learning.** Policy-makers, project proponents, community organisations and researchers based in or working on Renewable Energy Zones should build networks, technical capacity and mechanisms to share knowledge across Australian jurisdictions on the community wellbeing implications of the renewable energy transition, including on policy options and lessons from implementation.

**40. Good practice guidelines.** Good practice guidelines on community engagement, benefit-sharing and other issues should be periodically reviewed to ensure that they are informed by the best available knowledge. Where appropriate, guidelines should be harmonised across jurisdictions (and both within and outside REZs), while recognising that many aspects will require sensitivity to local context (see also Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner, 2023, p. 66).

**41. Lessons from international experience.** Research and policy networks should harvest and disseminate international good practice on issues such as community engagement, the involvement of First Nations peoples in the energy transition, collocation of renewable energy infrastructure and other land uses, benefit-sharing and community ownership.



# References

- Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner. (2023). *Annual Report to the Parliament of Australia: Year ending 31 December 2022*.
- Briggs, C., Atherton, A., Gill, J., Langdon, R., Rutovitz, J., & Nagrath, K. (2022). Building a 'Fair and Fast' energy transition? Renewable energy employment, skill shortages and social licence in regional areas. *Renewable and Sustainable Energy Transition*, 2, 100039. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rset.2022.100039>
- Cass, D., Connor, L., Heikkinen, R., & Pearse, R. (2022). *Renewables & rural Australia: a study of community experiences in Renewable Energy Zones in NSW and the case for more equity and coordination of the clean energy transformation*. The Australia Institute; Sydney Environment Institute. <https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/P1176-Renewables-and-Rural-Australia-appendix-Dec-22.pdf>
- Clarke, D., Baldwin, K., Baum, F., Godfrey, B., Richardson, S., Robin, L., Soliman Hunter, T., & Taylor, M. (2022). *Australian Energy Transition Research Plan. Report Four: Social Engagement Dynamics*.
- Clean Energy Council. (2021). *Empowering everyone: diversity in the Australian clean energy sector*. <https://assets.cleanenergycouncil.org.au/documents/resources/reports/Empowering-Everyone-Diversity-in-the-Australian-Clean-Energy-Sector.pdf>
- Colvin, R. M. (2023). Contextualizing coal communities for Australia's new Net Zero Authority. *Nature Energy*, 8(8), 776-778. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41560-023-01307-7>
- Edwards, G. A., Hanmer, C., Park, S., MacNeil, R., Bojovic, M., Kucic-Riker, J., Musil, D., & Viney, G. (2022). Towards a Just Transition from Coal in Australia?
- EnergyCo. (2023). *Community feedback report: Coordinating impacts and benefits in the Central-West Orana Renewable Energy Zone*. Institution Retrieved from <https://www.energyco.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-06/cwo-rez-report-community-feedback.pdf>
- Norman, H., Briggs, C., & Apolonio, T. (2023). Advancing Aboriginal interests in the New South Wales renewable energy transition [Working/Technical Paper]. CAEPR Discussion Paper. <https://doi.org/http://hdl.handle.net/1885/287128>
- NSW Agriculture Commissioner. (2022). *Renewable energy generation and agriculture in NSW's rural landscape and economy – growth sectors on a complementary path*. [https://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/1449860/210395fd12ea058abf3b424f4370204d64e105bb.pdf](https://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/1449860/210395fd12ea058abf3b424f4370204d64e105bb.pdf)
- NSW Electricity Infrastructure Jobs Advocate. (2022). *Electricity Infrastructure Jobs Advocate's first report to the Minister for Energy*. Institution NSW Treasury Retrieved from <https://www.energy.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-11/electricity-infrastructure-jobs-advocates-first-report-to-minister-for-energy-for-publication.pdf>
- O'Neill, L., Thorburn, K., Riley, B., Maynard, G., Shirlow, E., & Hunt, J. (2021). Renewable energy development on the Indigenous Estate: Free, prior and informed consent and best practice in agreement-making in Australia. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 81, 102252. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2021.102252>
- O'Reilly, C., & Nemes, V. (2023). *Electricity Supply and Reliability Check Up*. Institution Marsden Jacob Retrieved from <https://www.energy.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023->

[09/NSW Electricity Supply and Reliability CheckUp Marsden Jacob Report 2023.pdf](#)

Pickering, J., & Chalaye, P. (Forthcoming). *Towards a coherent energy transition: expanding renewable energy and reducing inequalities in Australia*. University of Canberra.

Taylor, M. (2022). Planning the Energy Transition: A Comparative Examination of Large-Scale Solar Energy Siting on Agricultural Land in Australia. *Utrecht Law Review*. <https://doi.org/10.36633/ulr.814>

Willis, R., Curato, N., & Smith, G. (2022). Deliberative democracy and the climate crisis. *WIREs Climate Change*, 13(2), e759. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.759>