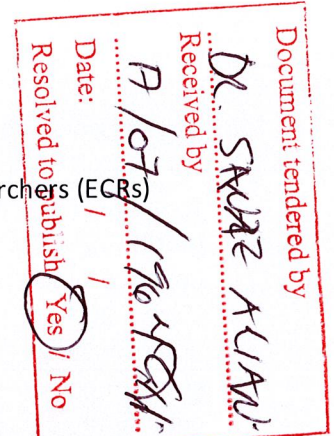


Renewable Energy Zones and Engagement

This project is funded by UNE Internal Funding Scheme for Early Career Researchers (ECRs)

Sanaz Alian

University of New England



Project Description

Background and significance

Drawing on the social and economic impacts of the Central-West Orana Renewable Energy Zone on its host communities, this project will explore the extent to which affected local towns and communities in the New England REZ have been meaningfully engaged with the highly complex planning framework associated with this renewable mega-project, and how levels of engagement and strategic involvement can be improved. In outline, this project aims to explore a key set of tensions that have arisen in relation to planning for renewable energy projects in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. On the one hand, these projects are responding to clear global imperatives to transition to carbon-neutral societies, along with the understanding that any further delays could prove disastrous for the planet. On the other hand, it is no less clear that these projects will significantly affect host communities and that wide-ranging community engagement is required to ensure that negative impacts are mitigated and positive impacts enhanced. On the one hand, there is an imperative to act 'now'; on the other hand, an imperative to conduct extensive and time-consuming community engagement processes.

Using renewable energy sources is not a new phenomenon in Australia. In 2023, 39.4 per cent of the country's total electricity generation came from renewable energy sources with NSW the highest user of renewables in Australian states in terms of megawatts (Clean Energy Council, 2024). Using more renewable sources for energy became a priority in Australia and many other parties involved in "The Paris Agreement". Australia lodged the 43% emissions reduction target by 2030 under this Agreement in 2022 and the *Climate Change Act (2022)* was in force in April 2023 to make sure that Australia will reach Net Zero emission by 2025. This also coincides with the closure of various coal-fired power stations in Australia.

In the meantime, Australian states had to devise ways of reaching this target as well. In early 2020, the NSW Government announced the first stage of its Net Zero Plan. To achieve this goal, it was suggested that many renewable energy generators would be required in five declared renewable energy zones (REZ). New England (NE) was declared a REZ formally in 2021. As a result of this, NE REZ is projected to create more than 800 operational and 1200 construction jobs.

These large-scale renewable energy developments are usually considered State Significant Developments (SSDs). In NSW, the Minister for Planning and Public Spaces (the Minister) or their delegate is usually the consent authority for SSDs. The process of assessing these applications is complex and comprehensive and requires an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to identify project impacts, along with extensive community consultation (McElnea & Alian, 2024). While this might be 'comprehensive', the International Association for Impact Assessment (2023) observes that "Traditional environmental impact assessment (EIA) conducted at the individual project level has proven to be insufficient to deal with the bigger picture beyond project level impacts".

National and State governments have published and released various policies, frameworks, and factsheets about the impacts of these projects including what they mean for the communities affected and how they can be 'involved' in the process of decision-making. At the state level, the recent *Climate Change (Net Zero Future) Act 2023* (Part 2, Section 8) specifies that: "Action to address climate change should be taken in a way that ... considers the impact on rural, regional, and remote communities in New South Wales". It should "involve appropriate consultation with affected persons, communities and stakeholders" and it should consider other matters including but not limited to the knowledge and perspectives of Aboriginal communities as well as the knowledge of

rural, regional and remote communities in NSW. Amongst other things, this Act also states the need “to support local communities, including Aboriginal communities, who may be affected by the action”. The importance of planning and planning policies in this process should not be overlooked. About a month ago, The Minister stated how the government “has accelerated the growth of renewable energy projects” and how “we need a planning system that supports this shift” (to Net Zero by 2050) (Scully, 2024, p. 12). He stressed the need to acquire social licence in communities which may become polarised as a result of energy distribution and storage, along with the importance of not just government policy development, but also continued engagement of project proponents with host communities (Scully, 2024). The Minister also touched on the new *Energy Policy Framework* which aims to “expedite decision making and offer greater certainty for the energy industry and communities” whilst also “highlighting community benefits and transparency in development” (Scully, 2024, pp. 12-13). The likelihood of tensions arising between expedited, accelerated decision-making processes (on the one hand), and community benefits and transparency (on the other), was not acknowledged. At the time of writing, much of the *Framework* is in draft form though should be finalised later in 2024.

As further context, it is worth noting that the Energy Corporation of NSW (EnergyCo) is a statutory authority established under the *Energy and Utilities Administration Act 1987* and is responsible for leading the delivery of REZs. This adds yet another layer of complexity to the ‘delivery’ of ‘accelerated’ renewable energy projects in NSW. EnergyCo also has a series of guidelines and factsheets about how things should be done in relation to REZ, including ‘Working with the community: New England Renewable Energy Zone’ (released August 2024) and ‘Delivering community benefits: New England Renewable Energy Zone’ (released July 2024).

Adding to the long list, in July 2024, another guideline was published at the Federal level by the Energy and Climate Change Ministerial Council (ECMC). This 61-page document ‘Community engagement and benefits for electricity transmission projects’ outlines 15 principles to gain social licence from communities, amongst other things.

Along with the various state and national policies and guidelines, local governments are - and have always been - the most proximate and responsive level of government for regional communities in NSW. In New England and Armidale specifically, we have seen various initiatives such as the creation of a Coalition of Renewable Energy Mayors (CoREM) in 2023 by Armidale Mayor Sam Coupland as well as various local-level frameworks such as the ‘Renewable Energy Community Benefit Framework’ in 2023.

‘Social licence’ is the common theme in many of the statements, policies, and guidelines mentioned above, though it is unclear how this might be achieved when projects are ‘accelerated’. Sometimes social licence may be an informal agreement and it may be different to the legal or regulatory licences granted by governments (Sy, 2014), though when it is not achieved, many of the human and economic costs of the project may not be repairable (Rooney et al., 2014). Social licence has been an interest of researchers since the 1990s, but there is growing research on different dimensions of the concept in relation to large infrastructure projects in Australia. This includes, but is not limited to, unconventional gas developments (Luke et al., 2018), big mining projects (Franks, 2010; Ivanova, 2014; Robinson et al., 2020) including the mining boom and bust and its effects on local communities (Argent, 2013), and renewable energy projects more recently (Hall, 2014; Lothian, 2020; Scovell et al., 2024; Simpson, 2018; Zander et al., 2024). However, since many of the State policies concerning renewable infrastructure are new (some still in draft) it is hard to know how communities in regional areas in NSW be engaged meaningfully as part of the process, especially when local governments can only partially influence project outcomes.

Aim

Against this backdrop, the broad aim of this project is to understand the extent to which local communities in the New England REZ might be meaningfully engaged within the context of an ‘accelerated’, yet highly complex, planning framework. More specific research questions include:

- What are the risks and benefits of the rapid rollout of such large-scale infrastructure in the New England region?
- What tensions are arising within local communities and how, if at all, are they being addressed through local planning processes?
- What lessons can be learnt from Central-West Orana REZ for the NE REZ?
- What are the tensions between State and Local governments in relation to planning for REZ and what are the policy gaps?
- What lessons can be learnt from the previous State and National Significant Infrastructure projects which were the subject of 'accelerated' planning?

Methodology

To address the aim and objectives of this project, a two-stage methodology will be followed. The first stage will include reviewing and summarising planning policies, guidelines, and factsheets relating to Renewable Energy and Renewable Energy Zones in New England and Central-West Orana. The second stage will involve conducting semi-structured, in-depth interviews with planners working in local councils in the two REZs, as well as the councilors in those areas and State Government staff working on policy for the REZ.

References:

Argent, N. (2013). Reinterpreting core and periphery in Australia's mineral and energy resources boom: an Innisian perspective on the Pilbara. *Australian Geographer*, 44(3), 323-340.

Clean Energy Council. (2024). *Clean Energy Australia Report 2023*. Retrieved from: <https://assets.cleanenergycouncil.org.au/documents/resources/reports/clean-energy-australia/Clean-Energy-Australia-2024.pdf>

Federal Register of Legislation (Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water). (2022). *Climate Change Act 2022*. Retrieved from: <https://www.legislation.gov.au/C2022A00037/latest/text>

Franks, D. M., Brereton, D., & Moran, C. J. (2010). Managing the cumulative impacts of coal mining on regional communities and environments in Australia. *Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal*, 28(4), 299-312.

Hall, N. L. (2014). Can the "social licence to operate" concept enhance engagement and increase acceptance of renewable energy? A case study of wind farms in Australia. *Social Epistemology*, 28(3-4), 219-238.

International Association for Impact Assessment. (2023). *Strategic Environmental Assessment Guidance for Renewable Energy*, USA.

Ivanova, G. (2014). The mining industry in Queensland, Australia: Some regional development issues. *Resources Policy*, 39, 101-114.

Lothian, A. (2020). A survey of the visual impact and community acceptance of wind farms in Australia. *Australian Planner*, 56(3), 217-227.

Luke, H., Brueckner, M., & Emmanouil, N. (2018). Unconventional gas development in Australia: A critical review of its social license. *The Extractive Industries and Society*, 5(4), 648-662.

McElnea, H., & Alian, S. (2024). Concurrent land use planning for minimizing cumulative environmental impacts in Renewable Energy Zone. *New Planner: Planning for the renewable energy transformation*, 139, September, 22-23.

New South Wales Legislation (NSW Government). (2023). *Climate Change (Net Zero Future) Act 2023 No 48*. Retrieved from: <https://legislation.nsw.gov.au/view/html/2023-12-11/act-2023-048#statusinformation>

Robinson, L. M., Fardin, J., & Boschetti, F. (2020). Clarifying the current role of a social licence in its legal and political context: An examination of mining in Western Australia. *Resources Policy*, 67, 101649.

Rooney, D., Leach, J., & Ashworth, P. (2014). Doing the Social in Social License. *Social Epistemology*, 28(3-4), 209-218. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2014.922644>

Scovell, M., McCrea, R., Walton, A., & Poruschi, L. (2024). Local acceptance of solar farms: The impact of energy narratives. *Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews*, 189, 114029.

Simpson, G. (2018). Looking beyond incentives: the role of champions in the social acceptance of residential solar energy in regional Australian communities. *Local Environment*, 23(2), 127-143.

Syn, J. (2014). The Social License: Empowering Communities and a Better Way Forward. *Social Epistemology*, 28(3-4), 318-339. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2014.922640>

Scully, P. (2024). Renewable energy projects in New South Wales: transforming NSW's energy landscape. *New Planner: Planning for the renewable energy transformation*, 139, September 12-13.

Zander, K. K., Mathur, D., Mathew, S., & Garnett, S. T. (2024). Public views about the world's largest proposed solar farm in remote Australia. *Energy Policy*, 191, 114197.