RP3023

COMMUNITY POWER:
UNDERSTANDING THE CONTRIBUTION OF COMMUNITY-OWNED RENEWABLE ENERGY TO SMALL REGIONAL COMMUNITIES

Research Questions

This research explores the outcomes & impacts from community-owned wind projects in small regional communities, as perceived & experienced by local people. It also considers the ways in which diverse community engagement practices, legal structures & economic arrangements affect outcomes.

Methodology

Qualitative methods explore the experiences & perceptions of people living in communities who have successfully established community owned wind energy projects. The researcher is able to access a depth of local knowledge & experience through fieldwork involving semi-structured in-depth interviews, focus groups & participant observation.

Four case studies:

Hepburn Wind & Denmark Community Windfarm (Australia)

Shapinsay Development Trust & Skye Renewables Cooperative (Scotland).

Picture 1: Hepburn Wind, a 4.1MW wind farm in Victoria cooperatively owned by 2,000 people.

Literature Review

CORE projects take many forms, from 50kW through to 20MW, across the spectrum of renewable energy technologies & using many different legal structures - from cooperatives, to trusts, to companies.

Two key characteristics of distinguish these projects from other forms of RE development:

Processes - on-going opportunities for community participation in decisions, including the ability to shape the project to local needs & values.
Outcomes - economic & social benefits are shared with local shareholders & the broader community.

Preliminary Results

CORE projects produce a range of social, economic & environmental outcomes & impacts in the local communities in which they are hosted & beyond. Some of these are unique from other forms of renewable energy development, including:

- Increased local economic benefit per MW installed;
- Building community & social capital;
- Increased support for & positive association with wind turbines;
- Increased local sense of empowerment & autonomy, partly through capacity development & local decision making processes;
- Increased participation in local & broader policy processes.

These outcomes & impacts a result of increased meaningful local participation enabled through community engagement practices, legal structures and economic arrangements. These outcomes occurred to varying degrees across the different case studies.

Legal structures can help to facilitate participatory processes (eg. democratic decision-making) & greater local financial benefit.

Economic arrangements can be configured to value local in-kind and voluntary contributions, as well as allowing for local investment. Profit generated is retained in the locally via returns to local shareholders & community grant funds.

Community engagement practices can create on-going opportunities for interaction, relationship building & education, as well as enabling feedback loops that influence project design.

Figure 2: Shapinsay Development Trust's 900kW turbine 'Whirly'. Sale of electricity generates $120,000 per year for community projects.

A community-ownership approach enables local people to participate in, benefit from & advocate for renewable energy in Australia.

Anticipated impacts

Research outcomes will be of use to community groups & industry who seek to develop community oriented renewable energy initiatives. It will also be of use in policy development in areas of regional development & renewable energy, as well as for organisations seeking to enhance positive engagement of communities in transitions to renewable energy.

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