

FIELD NOTE - NOVEMBER 2023

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND THE ENERGY TRANSITION IN NEW SOUTH WALES AND VICTORIA

ABOUT THIS FIELD NOTE: Orange Compass is a small consultancy that works to support change makers transform systems and build better futures. Our approach is underpinned by a commitment to participatory processes where we work with and alongside regional communities and their priorities. When it comes to the energy transition, we are committed to seeing the ways that communities are engaged with and benefit from the energy transition improved.

One of our roles is to advise industry, including Lumea, on community engagement strategies in NSW and VIC energy zones - and how to work differently to bring greater landholder and community benefits. We have also written a public *White Paper* ([Opportunities Cost](#) available on our website) and engaged with governments in New South Wales and Victoria to communicate different possibilities for engagement as well.

To gain an insight into recent progress on the ground, and to better understand community concerns, priorities and ideas, we recently spoke to local landholders and community members in several areas of NSW and Victoria that are being affected by new renewable energy projects and zones.

We are sharing what we have learnt in this *Field Note*. It is part of our commitment to give back to those we have learnt from.

The bottom line from our conversations is that industry and government still have a long way to go to achieve much better and fairer engagement of landholders and community in decision making. We have organised our insights below in the categories of:

- fairness and trust
- transparency
- trade-offs
- local solutions
- benefits

We are grateful for the insights of everyone who took part in conversations with us. We hope the recommendations below reflect the spirit of what you shared.

FAIRNESS & TRUST: There is a strong sense that decision making processes have not really been fair by community standards. In some cases, the resulting level of community resistance due to this lack of involvement in decision making is severe.

Put simply, community trust has been lost. Some of this trust was already lost, due to the legacy of poor processes and broken promises of government projects in the past. Communities have histories and are not a blank canvas. Even more trust has been lost in recent months with the inappropriate and insufficient ways that government has attempted to communicate with and consult community. Communities feel 'railroaded'. Without a radical change in approach, this trust will not be regained.

Some landholders also reported the inappropriate conduct of energy developers who seemed to forget agreed protocols once access agreements had been signed. Not only is this a failure to follow through on commitments, but there are few avenues for landholders to report this lack of compliance. This further erodes trust.

Recommendations:

- Communities are not being brought along by the process. In cases where community trust is at a record low, it would be essential to consider 'restarting' the entire process from the start, and involving the community early - even before route or zone selection.
- Engagement needs to occur in the places that it works for community, not just making community members travel to a distant town hall. Consultation should happen at the kitchen table and there should be evidence that there is a willingness to travel to meet community members. Currently it is interpreted as 'you come to us, but we won't come to you'.
- When consultation occurs, it is often with the most visible, vocal or powerful in community, including local government. Many small communities have had no engagement at all. Creating spaces for dialogue will also be important. At the moment, only the loudest voices are heard, which can marginalise others in the community who might otherwise wish to engage.

TRANSPARENCY: There was clear feedback that neither government nor industry had been clear and transparent on the reasons and logic for planning decisions being made so far. While misinformation is being spread on social media, this is partly in response to an information vacuum.

Landholders reported that when they have had questions and sought answers from official sources, including government agencies, no response has followed. Some are still waiting for a response from government more than six months later. Promises of follow up information have proven empty. The lack of accessible information or communication about energy plans and projects is so widespread, some community members assume this must be deliberate.

Recommendations:

- There needs to be a centralised and accurate source of information that is endorsed by key stakeholders on both 'sides' - those for and against renewable energy. This should most likely be an independent group.
- There needs to be locally appointed 'landholder advocates' who can provide information and liaise between the parties involved in energy projects. Planners and engineers are not always the most appropriate people for this engagement work. There needs to be meaningful engagement by people with agricultural backgrounds who understand farms as agri-businesses. These people need to be accessible locally, have decision making power to solve problems, and be present for the entire duration of the project from early stage works.

TRADE-OFFS: There is a strong sense that the likely trade-offs and local impacts that will result from energy projects are not being taken seriously by government or industry. Rather, it seems like projects will proceed no matter what any economic, environmental or social impact assessment might say.

Communities are concerned about unknown and unmapped impacts and are asking valid questions about the absence of cumulative impact assessment across the region, state and nation. It seems to them that the energy transition is occurring in an ad hoc way without a national strategy or reasoning for the location of energy projects.

Where impacts are assessed based on simple economic calculations, they imply a lack of understanding of landholder values - from a deep sense of belonging and attachment to the land - through to the complexities of running modern agricultural enterprises.

Recommendations:

- Governments and industry need to demonstrate an appreciation or understanding of the lasting impacts on both landscapes and communities of the energy transition, including social, environmental and agricultural impacts, all of which seem to be poorly addressed in impact assessments to date.
- Governments need to urgently reconsider impact assessment frameworks and require much more robust evidence and methods.

LOCAL SOLUTIONS: Local people are asking to be more involved in the design and implementation of energy infrastructure projects right from the start. Consultation after major planning decisions have already been made is seen as too little too late. This lack of engagement forces communities into either agreeing with the pre-determined plan or having to take up a veto role and blocking it outright. They are left with no room for negotiation or middle ground.

Communities should not only be viewed through a lens of risk or how they might block progress. Communities already have a lot of good ideas. Many of these have been formed via their local action groups. Much grief could have been avoided if communities were involved from the start, their concerns heard, and then their solutions incorporated as part of the process. Community members were puzzled why no one has even thought to ask or tried to employ local knowledge.

Recommendations:

- Community members (including landholders) should be valued as innovators and problem solvers
- Community members have practical and radical suggestions for government and industry to shift the way they both engage with communities and plan their projects. They have solutions that should be listened to and incorporated into project design.

BENEFITS: Landholders and communities report they can not see many (or any) benefits coming from many of the energy projects planned. As it stands, only negative impacts are apparent. The vague possibility of benefits has not been substantiated or communicated well. While there is mention of community benefits in government and industry statements, any benefit distribution so far appears to be limited to small funds controlled by industry and government. As many people have said, money will not buy support for these projects.

Recommendations:

- Benefits need to be identified in collaboration with the communities and landholders affected.
- Benefits should be clearly substantiated and communicated.
- Benefits should go beyond purely financial rewards or the result of land access negotiations.
- It is also important that communities and landholders are not played off against each other. Benefits for one shouldn't be traded over benefits or impacts for the other.