

Renewable Energy



Renewable Energy Development in Tasmania A Guideline for Community Engagement, Benefit Sharing and Local Procurement

Technical Supplement 1: Understand Social Context

1. a) Methods for gathering information on the social context

Understanding the social context will help the Government (at the Renewable Energy Zone level) and proponents (at the individual project level) to better engage, design benefit sharing frameworks and maximise local procurement.

The Tasmanian Government's role is in helping establish a context where the need for renewable energy, including the risks and benefits, are well understood. When developers arrive in a community, there needs to be a base level of understanding of the context and imperatives for renewable energy generally, and clear expectations for the way that specific projects can be planned and delivered well. The Tasmanian Government is delivering awareness raising programs and community engagement throughout the Renewable Energy Zones (REZ) to help build the foundation of understanding of how renewable energy developments are expected to be undertaken and the types of benefits that can be shared.

The Government will also coordinate between multiple projects to help reduce negative impacts that communities might experience (eg engagement fatigue, housing constraints) and increase positive outcomes (eg coordinating multiple projects in a region and government agencies to deliver larger legacy benefit sharing projects).

However, whether it be at a REZ or project level, a detailed understanding of the social context is necessary as it will inform the characteristics of the communities hosting renewable energy infrastructure and the likely impacts at the local level, which may vary between host communities.

Several methods can be used to gather the information needed to understand and assess the social context.

- Desktop studies: researching background information from sources such as Australian Bureau of Statistics, Local Government, Aboriginal organisations, historical societies, Chamber of Commerce, and local development agencies.
- Key informant interviews: such as with host landholders, neighbours, Aboriginal representatives, community leaders, existing businesses and industries and Local Government.
- Stakeholder mapping: processes to identify different segments of the community and different stakeholder types, as well as individual stakeholders, in order to 'map' their different levels of interest in the project.
- Social context mapping: developing a map that includes social features such as locations of houses, cultural and historical significance, recreational sites, reserves/parks/national parks overlaid with the map of the proposed project area.
- Surveys: doing online, phone or paper surveys to ask local people about defining features of the social context and their responses to renewable energy.

1. b) Methods for assessing social context

Once key information has been gathered, it should be used to undertake a social feasibility study and/or a social impact assessment.

These methods assess the social context to inform a strategic approach for project activities.

These processes can be used to complement each other, or either one of them may be sufficient.

Social impact assessment

Social impact assessments identify the range of positive, neutral, and negative potential impacts of a project in the local community and society at large. Social impact assessment is a process that will need to be renewed as the project evolves and as the local context changes overtime. A social impact assessment early in the development lifecycle will help inform social feasibility studies, whereas social impact assessment in other project phases might feed into development approval documentation. Social impact assessments are a required aspect of renewable energy planning in other states (eg NSW, VIC).

A social impact assessment asks:

- What are the anticipated range of impacts (positive, neutral, negative) of this project on the local community and local context (including ecological impacts)?
- Are these impacts acceptable and can they be mitigated?
- Will this project design, in this place, deliver net positive social, environmental, and economic value in the local community?

Impacts are the changes that happen in a community as a result of the project. Social impact assessment uses a consistent internationally accepted framework to capture:

- perceived and tangible impacts;
- beneficial and negative impacts;
- direct and indirect (flow-on) impacts; and
- cumulative impacts.

These include impacts on the local neighbourhood, society, culture, heritage, ecology, landscape, hydrology, and economy.

Importantly, the Government or proponent should ultimately ask the question of how negative social impacts can be ameliorated or offset and these should be part of the offering to the community. A social impact assessment may be done at various points in the lifecycle of the project, but would add significant value if completed to accompany the statutory approvals processes for an individual project and demonstrate how a proponent intends to deal with issues like housing and the impact of worker influx (particularly through construction) on local services/businesses.

Social feasibility studies

A social feasibility process identifies the risks, opportunities, benefits, and challenges associated with the social context in order to develop an understanding of the potential social impacts and implications of a project.

A social feasibility process asks:

- Are there areas we should avoid developing? (eg high ecological or social value)
- Is a renewable energy project desirable in this social context?
- How could we align this project with the local context and contribute to its unique character, identity, history, and ambitions for the future?

Along with other feasibility studies (eg resource, technical, economic), the social feasibility study will provide guidance as to: whether a site is desirable (or not), where and how a project might be desirable, and what might be appropriate ways to begin designing the project and involving the community in that process.

The social feasibility study should also identify the available networks and community development initiatives or community strategic planning underway in the host community. Understanding where a community is at along their community development journey will be critical to how the community engagement strategy is designed. It will be easier to engage with communities that are organised, have strong networks, have a clear sense of what they want and need and have the resources (time, capacity) to participate in engagement opportunities. In contrast, some communities may be substantially reliant on social services to survive and be experiencing community wide disadvantages with little capacity to respond to engagement requests. Other communities may have some capacity to respond but not have the social resources or networks to collaborate. Or a community may already have established community leaders and networks working actively on community development initiatives, have a good sense of the challenges their community face and possible solutions. Knowing where a community is at will greatly affect the way in which an engagement strategy and project are planned.

For more information on understanding social context see:

- Lane, T. and J. Hicks (2017). Community Engagement and Benefit Sharing in Renewable Energy Development. A Guide for Renewable Energy Developers pages 11-12 on 'Social Feasibility' and 27-34 on 'Social Risk Analysis'. Department of Energy, Water, Land and Planning, Victorian Government.
- Department of Energy, Water, Land and Planning (2021) Community engagement and Benefit Sharing in Renewable energy Development in Victoria pages 27-29 on 'Social Impact Assessment'. Victorian Government.
- Department of Planning and Environment (2021) Social Impact Assessment Guideline. NSW Government.

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