



Do the ends justify the means? Problematizing social acceptance and instrumentally-driven community engagement in proposed energy projects

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Abstract

Proposed energy projects across rural working landscapes play an important role in energy transitions. While community engagement has been increasingly a part of these projects, instrumental motivations for engagement and the emphasis placed on achieving social acceptance has remained uncritically examined. Here, we aim to highlight relationships between actor rationale, the structuring of engagement processes, and how communities perceive the driving forces behind engagement practices. To do so, we draw on lived experiences of communities facing proposed shale gas and wind energy projects across rural working landscapes in the UK and Canada, respectively. We find that engagement is often perceived by community members as insincere, insufficient, ineffective and instrumentally-driven. We suggest that a more community-centered approach to engagement is necessary and will require a move beyond existing engagement and acceptance practice and frameworks. This can include creating more inclusive decision-making processes where powers are balanced and designing community engagement to incorporate multiple rationales beyond achieving social acceptance of energy projects.

Keywords Community engagement · Social acceptance · Energy infrastructure projects · Working landscapes · Instrumental rationale · Procedural justice

1 The importance of engagement in proposed energy projects

The need to move away from carbon-based energy systems is clear and urgent; however, the energy transitions this implies can have strong implications for social and environmental equity and justice (Levenda et al. 2021, p. 1). This is particularly relevant for communities in agricultural working

landscapes (see Abrams and Bliss 2013, p. 846–847), where hosting new renewable energy infrastructures requires the engagement of a variety of actors and institutions (Levenda et al. 2021, p. 2). While the general public tend to support renewable energy efforts, often communities resist more locally proposed energy infrastructure projects (Batel 2018; Devine-Wright 2005, 2011; Wolsink 2007). Opposition tends to be rooted in part to top-down approaches and inadequate governance which leave little or no room for public participation (Devine-Wright 2011, p. 57; Shaw et al. 2015, p. 44; Wolsink 2007, p. 1204). Furthermore, communities often express frustration with the unfettered legal rights of developers and the planning process, as well as skepticism about promised community benefits (Devine-Wright 2005; Sjöberg and Drottz-Sjöberg 2001; Terrapon-Pfaff et al. 2014; Wolsink 2007; Devine-Wright 2011).

Calls for enhancing and encouraging public participation and stakeholder engagement in energy decision-making continue to grow, despite the privatization of the energy sector and changes in spatial planning regulations which reduce opportunities for meaningful public participation (Groves

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et al 2013, p. 341; Rydin et al. 2018). While there is not always a clear and direct relationship between a lack of meaningful engagement and opposition to a project (Devine-Wright 2011), whom, how, and how early communities are engaged in the context of energy projects are often key determinants for how a community will respond to a project (Shaw et al. 2015, p. 45–46). The ability for a proposed energy project to attain planning approval is increasingly contingent upon local support for the project, suggesting that avoiding engagement can create conflict, project delays and even prevent projects from moving forward (Heagle et al. 2011, p. 1989–1990; Mulvihill et al. 2013, p. 15, Simard 2018, p. 1). Conversely, investing in public participation or community engagement (CE) in some cases has shown to move projects forward, and at a quicker pace (see Waters and Pendered 2015, p. 2; Shaw et al. 2015, p. 48). Thus, the desire to achieve social acceptance has been a primary focus of both academics and developers engaged in energy infrastructure contexts. Yet pursuing CE solely because of its instrumental value—where it is a means to project approval ends—has the potential to stray from best practices of engagement, risking co-optation of the term and watering down of the engagement process itself.

In line with the goals of the special issue to critically assess and improve stakeholder engagement, here we aim to take a more critical approach to evaluating instrumentally-driven CE. We start by defining CE and examining the underlying assumptions when CE is oriented toward social acceptance and project approval in recent literature and practice. Then, we turn a critical eye to CE efforts across multiple energy infrastructure projects. While the cases unfold across two different national contexts in the UK and Canada, they are similar in that they are proposed in rural places which have been known as ‘agricultural working landscapes,’ spaces which some researchers are reconceptualizing as “‘sacrifice zones’ of the green energy economy” (Batel and Küpers 2022). We compare experiences and perceptions of CE across different cases, discussing differences when community members perceive CE to be pursued instrumentally, and when they do not. Our research is guided by three critical questions:

1. What do instrumentally-driven community engagement strategies look like, and how might they conflict with established best practices?
2. In rural energy infrastructure projects, how do communities interpret developer-led engagement strategies as instrumentally-driven?
3. How can we move beyond developer-led, instrumentally-driven engagement to create more substantive processes and positive outcomes in energy infrastructure projects?

While we explore these questions through examples from our work across Canada and the UK and acknowledge that a key dimension of meaningful CE is a place-based, context-sensitive approach (Devine-Wright 2011, p. 66), we believe our study also has broader international application for rural communities across working landscapes in the Global North and the Global South (Sen and Ganguly 2017; Rand and Hoen 2017)—including those within Africa (Batidzirai et al. 2021; Ouedraogo 2019; Poncian 2019), Australia (Howard 2015; Spoehr and Tognato 2012), Europe (Bues 2018; Komendantova et al. 2018; Knudsen et al. 2015) and the Americas, (Madriz-Vargas et al. 2018; Rand and Hoen 2017; Petrova 2013)—where approaches to how to do energy development and community engagement may have some parallels (see Pancheco et al. 2022; Cowell et al., 2018; Taylor et al. 2021). Further, the relevance of community perceptions of renewable energy infrastructure projects will only grow in importance, as over 130 countries are aiming to achieve net zero by 2050 (Carver 2021). Thus, the success or failure of localized energy projects will have national, regional and global implications in a climate-changed world.

2 Best practices & underlying rationale for community engagement

For the last several decades, the importance of broader public, community and stakeholder participation in decision-making has been emphasized in environmental governance (Renn 2006). Yet much ambiguity remains both in scholarship and in practice about who is involved and how deliberation should be structured (see Arnstein 1969; CTSA Consortium 2011; Renn 2006). Which terms are used and relevant (i.e., public, stakeholder, community, participation, deliberation, engagement) may depend on a variety of factors, such as project location, scale and ownership model. Here we focus directly on the concept of ‘CE,’ for two reasons, first, because this is the language commonly used in energy infrastructure projects (see Aitken et al. 2016 p. 557), and second, because ‘community’ (despite inherent ambiguity, see Agrawal and Gibson 1999 p. 630) can be used to focus on spatially concentrated, local scales, which are often important when thinking about direct and immediate impacts of energy infrastructure projects.

In the context of planning and development, CE can be defined as “a two-way information process involving understanding different views, listening and responding to suggestions, developing trust and dialogue to support effective working relationships to the mutual benefit of all involved” (Planning Aid 2010, p. 2). Best practices for CE around energy projects include a decision-making process which is: transparent, inclusive, fair, constructive, unconditional and done along a reasonable timeline (UK Dept. of Energy

& Climate Change 2014). The ability to influence decision-making—that is, procedural justice—is also important for engagement around energy projects (Sovacool and Dworkin 2015, p. 437). Conversely, engagement which lacks transparency, excludes some sets of stakeholders, is unfair or procedurally unjust, is not done early enough or for long enough, focuses solely on one-way information provision or is conditional would not align with engagement best practices.

Engagement often takes different forms, varies in its authenticity, and can range from non-participation to community control (see Arnstein 1969, p. 217). Common dimension of evaluating engagement include flows of information exchange (i.e., communication, consultation, participation), levels of participation and impact on decision-making (Arnstein 1969; Rowe and Frewe 2005; Yu et al. 2022). How engagement is pursued depends in part on what actors are responsible for leading the engagement process, and what their own rationales for and goals of engagement may be (Reed et al. 2018, p. S8, Wesselink et al. 2011). Essentially, this means that different actors involved in decision-making processes will have different reasons for pursuing CE, and thus will pursue CE in different ways (Head 2007, p. 447; Howard 2015, p. 144–145). Understanding these differences—as well as how they are perceived—is important for understanding how projects and engagement play out on the ground (Goedkoop and Devine-Wright 2016, p. 136). Yet little research to date has focused on perceptions of rationales and how these shape interpretations of community engagement strategies. Here, we focus on perceptions of one particular type of rationale—instrumental—where community engagement is pursued as a means to an end. Further, we highlight how a recent emphasis on engagement aimed at “social acceptance,” can contradict existing best practices of community engagement.

2.1 Instrumental rationale in social science energy research

Despite the best practices notion that CE should be pursued as a process that is not conditional upon the outcome of a project proposal or implementation, instrumental approaches to engagement are always goal-driven and focused on outcomes. While goals may include improving a particular project, reflecting public interests, or legitimizing the outcome of a decision-making process, an instrumental goal of CE that has become popular in academic scholarship is the social acceptance of energy infrastructure projects. This has been particularly true for renewable energy technologies (RET) which have the capacity to reduce carbon emissions (Aitken 2010; Batel et al. 2013). This focus was established initially to address social resistance and reduce

market barriers in wind energy (Fournis and Fortin 2017, p. 3), but has diversified over the last three decades (see Batel 2018, p. 2).

Batel (2018, p. 2) highlights three distinct waves of social acceptance research, the first of which tended to focus on NIMBYism and the notion that researchers needed to address the social impacts of RETs to work toward reducing or overcoming opposition to it. The second phase moves beyond NIMBY to explore other aspects of community opposition and social acceptance of energy projects, including countering NIMBYism through research which identifies nuances of place-protective action as opposed to acts of NIMBYism (Devine-Wright 2009) described above. Still, much attention in the literature remained on social acceptance. For example, at the time, Petrova (2013, p. 535) suggested that research should shift from focusing on overcoming opposition to “how to make siting successful,” perhaps a pre-emptive approach to opposition. In the third wave, scholars have begun to undertake critical approaches to the social acceptance literature. This new wave acknowledges that responses to RET are socially embedded and co-constructed, and that this needs to be considered both in research and in practice. Further, it aims to address “RET-related discrimination, injustices and inequalities (including those fostered by RET-related research itself)” (Batel 2018, p. 2). For example, questions emerge around how certain places come to be seen as acceptable for proposed energy development, while others may not (Batel et al. 2018; Devine-Wright 2011), and the degree to which power influences this decision-making (Cotton 2017, p. 188). In the context of this research, we suggest that counteracting the rhetoric of NIMBYism with literature on ‘social acceptance,’ has inadvertently contributed to an environment where ‘CE’ is primarily driven by goal-oriented engagement that serves research, industry and government interests.

Some research has begun to reflexively highlight this issue. For example, Aitken (2010 p. 1834, 1840) draws out the assumptions which underlie social acceptance literature and suggests that researchers should not be contributing to advancing the social acceptance of energy technologies. As such, some scholars have moved beyond a focus on ‘acceptance’ and have instead focused on general and varied responses to energy infrastructure (i.e., see Cotton and Charnley-Parry 2018). Aitken (2010, p. 1838) critiques research that aims to reduce opposition and increase the likelihood of planning approval of energy projects by questioning: (1) what is considered the ‘problem’ and who decides this, (2) what conclusions are drawn, and (3) how this approach may gloss over the legitimate and valid community concerns about a proposed energy project. Instead, Aitken suggests that understanding opposition in energy contexts should be focused on the need

to understand planning processes and social contexts of renewable energy as opposed to a technique to manipulate or avoid the outcome of “potential future opposition.”

2.2 Instrumental rationale on the ground

Industry approaches to engagement on the ground mirror the above emphasis on social acceptance, where engagement is viewed as a way to ensure that a project can successfully and quickly move forward. As noted, resistance to wind energy has been used to stress the need for increased public and CE. From a practical perspective, community opposition to proposed energy infrastructure projects is considered a disruption which creates a “bottleneck” within planning (Aitken et al. 2016, p. 557). The adoption of language around a company’s “social license to operate” suggest projects may be contingent on social or community acceptance or approval (Meesters and Behagel 2017, p. 274). This approach to engagement can leave communities hyper-aware of unequal stakeholder influence over decision-making (Devine-Wright 2011) as well as a developer’s instrumental focus on achieving planning consent, the latter of which can influence community approaches to collaborating with a developer (Cass et al. 2010; Goedkoop and Devine-Wright 2016, p. 137). Further, communities often express distrust in governments’ intentions and their commitment to protecting local social and ecological values in energy planning processes (Shaw et al. 2015, p. 48).

Still, the social acceptance of energy infrastructure seems to increasingly be a precursor to developments moving forward and being granted planning permission (see Waters and Pendered 2015, p. 8 and Simard 2018, respectfully). Yet, when engagement is pursued as a way to reduce local opposition, capacity for trust-building is impacted. When this happens, community-operator relations can actually worsen and opposition can actually increase (Aitken et al. 2016, p. 558). Further, a continued and persistent lack of trust across energy projects suggests that efforts at engagement are doing little to build trust in the first place (Aitken et al. 2016 p. 558; Shaw et al. 2015, p. 42–43, 48). As Wynne (2006, p. 219) notes, instrumentalizing relationships and processes which are supposed to be rooted in trust and trust-building is contradictory. If an actors’ engagement objectives are to simply manage and control public response, they are unlikely to be effective at addressing local concerns, values and priorities. As such, public trust and faith in an engagement process are unlikely to exist (Aitken et al. 2016, p. 558; Wynne 2006, p. 219–220). Shaw et al. (2015, p. 48) demonstrate the lack of trust in community response and resistance to both traditional and newer, low-carbon energy projects, highlighting procedural and distributive issues in decision-making. Their findings mirror existing research focused on the social acceptance of low-carbon energy.

Essentially, how decisions are made is directly influenced by who is in charge of the decision-making and who is included. CE practices reflect the interpretations, ideas and outcomes desired by actors who structure the engagement process (Barnett et al. 2012, p. 36; Rydin et al. 2018, p. 576–577). Different actors from different sectors will have different capacities and access to resources within CE processes. These are tied to power imbalances that shape the process, giving some actors and sectors more power within the process than others (Buchy and Hoverman 2000, p. 16; Head 2007, p. 450; Manning 2021, p. 9). This also means that different rationales for CE might similarly be emphasized or de-emphasized within the engagement process, along similar lines of power inequities. Head (2007, p. 447) highlights how motivations for CE look very different depending on who is leading decision-making around engagement—whether that be governments, private industry, or local communities. While not universal, he notes that government intentions are often to achieve ‘better-informed’ decision-making, retain the ability to steer the process, and strengthen trust in government (Head 2007, p. 447). Business or developer motives for CE include maintaining their dominant influence over a decision-making process, circumventing regulatory standards, and signaling a commitment to corporate social responsibility. Finally, community-based intentions for taking part in engagement processes tend to revolve around gaining greater voice in and influence over the process while also enhancing equity in decision-making (Head 2007, p. 448).

When shaped primarily by the instrumental rationales of powerful actors in energy decision-making contexts, CE can neglect other, less powerful stakeholders (i.e., community members) and their desires for the engagement process. For example, when vested interests such as industry dominate CE efforts, the forms engagement takes may be oriented toward procedural compliance and is unlikely to align with best practices laid out in CE frameworks (Howard 2015, p. 145). In processes which are dominated by industry and/or government interests, engagement efforts can negatively impact host communities’ perceptions of the engagement process. For example, Williams et al. (2022, p. 12) note that in the case of shale gas in the UK, their findings suggest that “participatory processes geared instrumentally toward the achievement of energy policy are likely to produce outcomes such as public frustration, cynicism, and exacerbated opposition, rather than trust and acceptance.” Further, instrumental engagement can be interpreted as public placation (Spoehr and Tognato 2012, p. 2) while planning processes become seen as merely a mechanism of social control (Rydin et al. 2018, p. 577). In summary, in the context of energy projects there is a need to begin to further understand the interactions between: (1) actor interests and rationales, (2)



Fig. 1 UK map

how engagement processes are structured and by whom, (3) engagement best practices and (3) community perceptions of engagement effectiveness.

3 Research in the UK and Canadian context

To explore the relationship between actor interests and perceptions of instrumentally-driven engagement, we draw on lived experiences of communities facing proposed shale gas and wind energy projects in traditionally rural working landscapes. Comparing and contrasting existing data across Canadian and UK case studies helps to demonstrate the similarities which emerge in relation to (1) who is structuring engagement efforts, (2) how communities perceive engagement & engagement rationale, and (3) the degree to which engagement is effective and aligned with inclusive, best practices of engagement such as transparency,

two-way communication and community influence in decision-making.

The first case study focuses on two shale gas proposals in different regions of the UK,¹ while the second involves seven wind development case study sites across Ontario and Nova Scotia, Canada.² In both projects, the larger research endeavors relied on mixed-methods research, though this paper is rooted in findings from qualitative methods, particularly semi-structured interviews across the nine case study sites. We provide a brief summary of research methods on each below. For more detailed descriptions of the background and methodological approaches of these research endeavors, see Devine-Wright et al. 2021; Ryder and Devine-Wright 2021; Walker 2017; Walker and Baxter 2017a; Walker and Baxter 2017b).

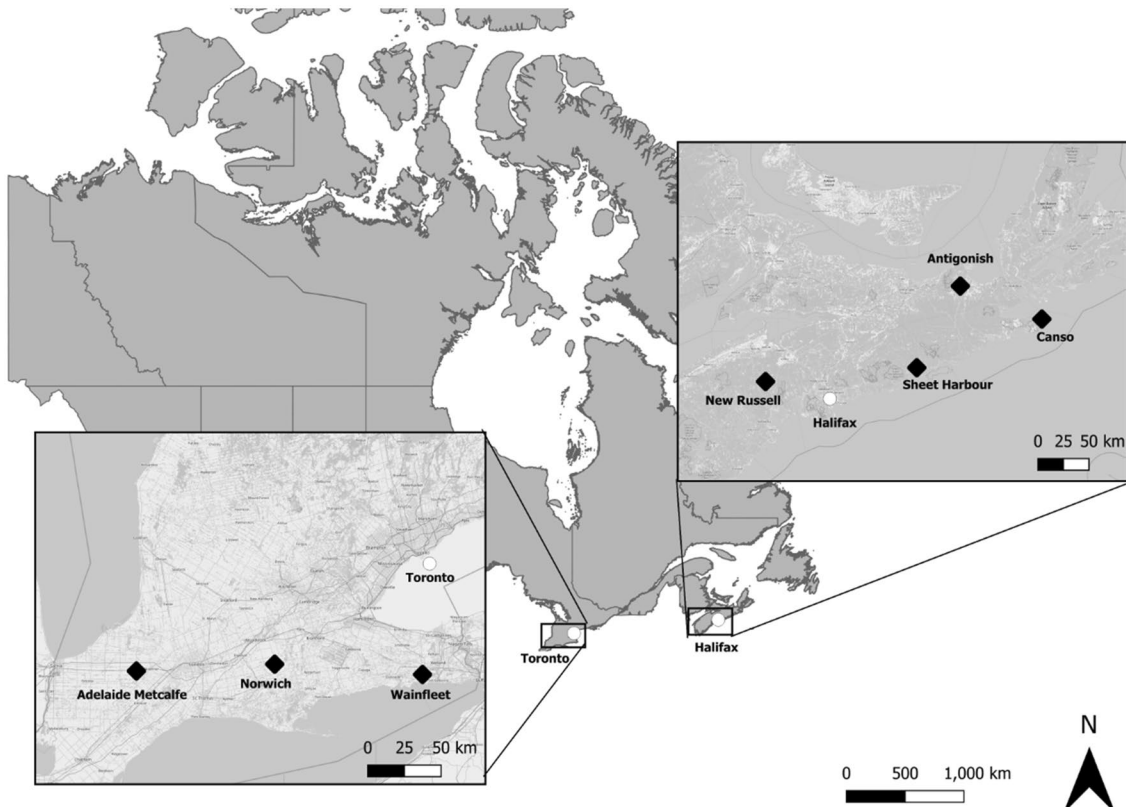
The shale gas case studies in the UK are Great Altcar and Woodsetts, two communities which are historically agricultural working landscapes. Great Altcar is a village of 250 people, about 13 miles north of Liverpool (see Fig. 1). Nearly all of the land and property in the village are owned by the Leverhulme Estate, and there is a lack of public spaces and amenities. Just across the A565 trunk road is the town of Formby, where an additional 20,000 people live. The area is surrounded by lands designated as SSRI, RAMSAR (wetlands of international importance), National

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² This research was conducted by Chad Walker as part of his PhD thesis at Western University.

Table 1 Description of proposed UK shale gas sites

Community	Project name	Median income	Proposed project scale	Population
Great altcar & Formby	Dinnington Road, Woodsetts (Developer: INEOS Shale)	£29,500 (Sefton)	Exploratory vertical core well (shale)	20,250 (combined)
Woodsetts	Altcar Moss (Developer: Aurora Energy Resources)	£28,400	Two exploratory shale gas wells	2,000

**Fig. 2** Canada map

Trust and Greenbelt areas. The village of Woodsetts is 17 miles east of Sheffield in South Yorkshire (see Fig. 1). The village has a population of around 2,000 and consists of one major intersection that can take residents and visitors to the church, the village hall, the school and sole pub. Along the village is Greenbelt land that can be traversed via footpaths and bridleways, and further afield are protected areas such as the National Trust site, Clumber Park. In both cases, projects were approached as top-down endeavors, and the shale gas industry was backed by central government at the time. While the planning consent process requires developers to engage in consultation, developers could design engagement efforts as they saw fit. To date, neither project has went forward and given the English moratorium on fracking, they are

unlikely to go ahead. More information on the communities and proposed projects can be found in Table 1.

Field work in these case study communities was conducted by Ryder and Devine-Wright and consisted of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, walking interviews and document analysis which took place between June 2019 and March 2020. A total of 45 semi-structured interviews were conducted with residents, local campaigners, and local elected officials. These interviews were transcribed, uploaded and analyzed in NVivo (Drisko 2013). Coding and analysis included developing memos and conducting initial and thematic coding phases (Rubin and Rubin 2012).

In Canada, Walker conducted 54 semi-structured interviews across seven rural communities in Ontario

Table 2 Description of developed Canadian wind energy sites

Community	Project name	Median income (CAD)	Number of turbines (total capacity)	Population	Homes within 2 km of a turbine
Adelaide-metcalfe	Adelaide Wind Power Project	\$28 644	18 (40 MW)	3000	192
Wainfleet	Wainfleet Wind Energy Project	\$29 211	5 (9 MW)	6400 (Township)	287
Norwich	Gunn's Hill Wind Farm	\$26 923	10 (18 MW)	10,721 (Township)	227
Canso	Sable Wind Farm	\$21 421	6 (14 MW)	800	187
County of Antigonish	Fairmont Wind Farm	\$26 157	2 (4.6 MW)	4500 (North of Antigonish)	51
Sheet Harbour	Watt Section	Data not available	1 (1.5 MW)	800	51
New Russell	South Canoe	\$26 526	34 (103 MW)	10,600 (municipality of chester)	25

Table 3 Project ownership and community perceptions of engagement rationale

Community	Project name	Type of project ownership	Perception of CE (i.e., instrumental or substantive)
Great Altcar & Formby	Dinnington Road, Woodsetts	Developer-led	Instrumental
Woodsetts	Altcar Moss	Developer-led	Instrumental
Adelaide-Metcalfe	Adelaide Wind Power Project	Developer-led	Instrumental
Wainfleet	Wainfleet Wind Energy Project	Developer-led	Instrumental
Norwich	Gunn's Hill Wind Farm	49% public ownership	Mixed
Canso	Sable Wind Farm	Municipally owned (51%)	Mixed
County of Antigonish	Fairmont Wind Farm	Majority developer-led; Minority (35%) community-owned (CEDIF)	Mixed
Sheet Harbour	Watt Section	COMFIT; majority (51%) community-owned	Substantive
New Russell	South Canoe	Developer-led	Instrumental

While public perceptions of community engagement across case studies naturally varied among the sample of people we spoke with, here we present our understanding of the more prevalent perceptions across the communities, either as being driven by instrumental, substantive or mixed goals

(Adelaide-Metcalfe, Wainfleet, and Norwich) and Nova Scotia (Canso, Antigonish, Sheet Harbour, and New Russell) where wind energy projects had already been built (see Fig. 2, see also Walker, 2012, 2017). More information regarding each community, including median income, population and project details, can be found in Table 2 below.

The Canada-based interviews were similarly coded and analyzed through NVivo software and were supplemented by participant observation. The chosen wind energy case studies across the two provinces are of interest because at the time of data collection Ontario had a reputation for high levels of local opposition to wind energy under a top-down, proponent-led Feed-In-Tariff, while Nova Scotia had recently introduced its Community Feed-In-Tariff program which had the *potential* for higher levels of community

involvement, ownership and public support (for more details, see Walker, 2018).

4 Engagement strategies & how they are perceived

Here, we explore residents' perceptions of operator motivations and strategies for engagement across the case study communities. Across the case study sites, those that were exclusively developer-led were generally perceived by community members as being instrumentally-driven (see Table 3). Conversely, the projects which were not strictly operated by private entities had more mixed perceptions where community members were split or interpreted engagement efforts as substantive. Below, we discuss common themes in more detail, including how communities

perceive CE as being done merely to fulfill a planning requirement and problems with an overemphasis on economic incentives within industry-driven engagement efforts. In order to improve future engagement, we also highlight examples of when CE efforts focus on issues of local ownership, equity, and justice. In doing so, we demonstrate important lessons for how CE can be designed more inclusively and with equitable weight given to different stakeholders' desires and expectations for energy decision-making processes and their outcomes.

4.1 Instrumentally-driven engagement as a 'tick-box'

In the context of shale gas in the UK, the industry's approach to community engagement (as laid out in UK Onshore Oil and Gas organization [UKOOG] documents) focus on addressing local concerns, sustainability, and *balancing safe energy production and community needs*. This approach assumes production will move forward and is at odds with best practices of CE such as ensuring two-way communication and engagement being unconditional. The idea of a predetermined outcome points to emphasis on instrumental-driven CE at the industry level. Residents in the two UK shale gas case study communities clearly pick up on this as a motivation for CE:

"I think for me... [operator research and engagement] is going through the motions and it's a box ticking exercise. So I don't really believe them when they say that they care immensely, that's just my thoughts."—Shirley³ (Resident, Altcar).

Community residents express skepticism around engagement efforts that they see as instrumentally focused on the end goal of meeting a particular requirement in the planning process. Essentially, local residents often view planning requirements as creating the bounds within which the 'bare minimum' of engagement are set—a bar that they often believe is insufficient. For example, in the UK shale gas case studies, (where engagement efforts consisted largely of a limited number of public meetings) resulted in no changes to the developer's plans in either community. As such, it is unsurprising that nearby residents suggested that the practice (which primarily focused on communication as one-way information sharing from operator to community) amounted merely to a box-ticking exercise where the developer only worked with them to the degree that they had to in order to fulfill planning requirements:

"They haven't worked with us at all, apart from these meetings, but...they have to have these meetings before they put the planning application in, I believe, so they're just ticking boxes aren't they really?"—Ashley (Resident, Altcar).

"I don't think they have [done CE]. I think they tried at the beginning, and then they decided that the community was never going to be on their side so they would just comply with the law...just do what they've got to do legally and just get on with it."—Sebastian (Local Councillor, Woodsetts).

Thus in the case of Woodsetts efforts at more thorough engagement were perceived to be abandoned because the community was not immediately on board. Yet this is not an issue specific to shale gas or the UK (see also Knudsen et al. 2015, p. 300). The idea that project advancement is an instrumental driver for CE was also emphasized in some wind farm cases where locals participated in open houses, consultation sessions, and other events where they were told that their input was needed (exercises of consultation, or one-way information sharing from community to operator, see Rowe and Frewer 2005). Community members recall similar feelings to those facing shale gas in the UK. For example, "Zach" quickly summarizes his experience during a project-mandated open house. After approximately 30 min, he and others realized the event was a tick-box exercise and the local project was going to be built no matter what:

"Well it started off slow...people feeling out the other side and all that and then all of the sudden it exploded when people realized, "well they're going to push this goddamn thing through anyways."—Zach⁴ (Resident, Ontario).

Community members in both the UK and Canada interpreted these limited engagement efforts as disingenuous and instrumentally-driven by the goal of moving the projects forward. They also saw the role of the local governing authority as one that facilitated the operators' pursuits of the goal, which negatively impacted some residents' trust in government actors:

"Our trust was eroded...If you opposed any part of the consultation, some of the questions didn't allow you to write in that way...We realised that these so-called public consultations were stilted and were designed to get the answer that they [government] wanted. That made me very, very aware that [central] government had an inbuilt bias towards what they wanted."—Martin, (Resident, Woodsetts).

³ For the quotes seen from the shale gas (UK) dataset, all names are pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of each participant.

⁴ For the quotes seen from the wind energy (Canada) dataset, all names are pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of each participant.

“The process was handled in such a way and, to my knowledge, none of the communities recommendations being implemented, that many people came away unhappy with the process and further distrusting of local government and the developer.”—Mitch (Resident, Nova Scotia).

This lack of trust was driven in part by residents’ perceptions that no matter what engagement opportunities might occur, the decision was already made and the outcome of the process had already been pre-determined to align with the end goals of the developer. That is, engagement was seen as an act of going through the motions, and was done as a means to an end:

“You’re thinking that people got together to sit down and those somehow fell apart or didn’t work quite right or it’s a system we could tweak. That’s not the way it is. They decided to put this in. They put it in motion in 2011 and they were putting it in regardless. It didn’t matter what was said or done. Meetings were only held because they had to be.”—Brent (Resident, Nova Scotia).

“In my mind, they (the developer) thought ‘Whatever they say we’ll listen to them, fair enough, but we’re still going to go ahead with it.’ They’re going to win in the end, people with that much money always win in the end.” – Sam (Resident, Woodsetts).

Here, residents highlight how what they perceived to be instrumentally-driven engagement resulted in inauthentic, low-levels of engagement, essentially what amounts to “tokenism” (Arnstein 1969). In addition, the last interviewee signals how developers have economic resources they can draw on in moving toward their project goals. Below, we explore this more by analyzing resident perceptions of compensation and incentives as a key component of developer engagement strategies.

4.2 Perceptions of economic incentives: engagement or bribe?

In the context of community engagement in both shale gas and wind energy, much emphasis has been placed on community compensation and benefit schemes. For example, in reporting annually on engagement, UKOOG highlight only the economic benefits and incentives reported by operators. Yet UK interviewees suggest they have no desire to be affiliated with the shale gas developers or their money:

“One of the men [from the developer] came out and said ‘We’ll give your village a percentage of what we make,’ and we all said we don’t want it. We don’t want any of that dirty money.” – Emma, (Resident, Woodsetts).

“It sounds like bribery, doesn’t it, yeah. Let us dig in your back garden. And where will you [developer] be when it floods and takes my vegetables?” – Ellie (Resident, Altcar).

Further, UK interviewees note that economic benefits don’t actually address any of their project-related concerns. This issue is similarly picked up on by one resident speaking about economic incentives as a way of addressing potential impacts of wind development in Canada:

“If my husband was suffering from the migraines from that noise it would be like his boss coming up to him and saying, ‘Well we’ll give you another 100 bucks a week to continue to suffer.’ You know? ‘But won’t that soften it?’ No...It becomes blood money. It feels toxic.”—Lauren (Resident, Ontario).

“It’s bribe money to keep people happy, to shut them up so they can leave them alone basically and smile when they’re trucks are driving down the road... It’s a farce as far as I’m concerned.”—Phillip (Resident, Nova Scotia).

These concerns about economic incentives, compensation, and potential ‘bribes’ in proposed energy projects highlight the perceived mutual benefit and relationship between developers and the governing entities managing planning and engagement processes. Municipalities and local governments may stand to benefit financially from an energy project moving forward, incentivizing them to move the development proposals successfully through the engagement and planning process:

“You don’t want it and that’s how I always have felt about it because it didn’t...you’re accepting it for other people’s pain and that’s the same way with the municipalities accepting all this money.”—Lauren (Resident, Ontario).

Further, some interviewees also point to skepticism about how ‘community’ benefits allocated to local governments might be managed and distributed. As one developer notes:

“If you’re giving it to the municipal politicians to decide what to do with, is that really benefiting everybody?...If you give it to the municipality and they decide to build a nice hockey rink and you don’t play hockey then you’re not really benefiting from it. You know what I mean? Where at least if the money is in my pocket it’s a direct benefit to me.”—Graeme (Developer, Ontario).

Across several communities there was a lack of clarity around who might receive benefits and how they might be disbursed, and this included questioning who would benefit in the community if incentives went directly to local

governments instead of individual households. In addition, some residents also pointed to how more central forms of government supported projects which would bring economic benefits to actors at a national level:

“I think...it could go ahead if the money’s there for the councils and the [central] government...the [central] government also will be getting cash from it eventually.” – Sam (Resident, Woodsetts).

In engagement processes focused on economic benefits, developers are able to use economic incentives as an effective bargaining chip for government support, while governments are able to retain a managerial role in moving proposed energy projects to fruition, fulfilling instrumental goals for both actors. Yet it is clear that for community residents facing the impacts of the proposed developments, financial incentives and compensation are unlikely to actually reach them and are not viewed as a form of community engagement. Further, economic incentives are not perceived to lead to outcomes where community concerns or problems are actually being acknowledged or solved. Instead, economic incentives replace opportunities for project input and dialogue, a strategy which developers label ‘engagement’ but actually ends up constituting ‘non-participation’ (see Arnstein 1969).

4.3 ‘Ethics of care’ and effective engagement

While the above demonstrates a few of the issues which arise when engagement efforts are perceived as instrumentally-driven by developers, other participants highlight how engagement practices look when on-the-ground practices align more closely with the ideals of CE best practices and center potentially impacted communities. As seen across a few Canadian wind energy cases, involving the community and starting engagement to co-develop a future project vision at the project’s earliest stages is one way a developer could go about this:

“We’ve identified the areas that we felt had the greatest potential and then went out as part of our land use planning process and had the consultations with residents far in advance of development.”—“Joseph” (Local Councillor, Nova Scotia).

CE that aligns with ‘best practices’ may also start with developers or operators truly recognizing and valuing the local community and their knowledge sets (and rights and knowledge holders, see Gagnon et al., this issue):

“Once you think you have a good site then you go out in the community and spend some time in the community. You know, kick around, knock on a few doors, hang out at the convenience store and just talk about

the idea of a wind farm in the community and kind of get a feel for it. So that helps, you know, being present in the community in the early stages, you can get a sense of whether you think or whether you feel even that a wind farm would work.”—“Brian” (Developer, Nova Scotia).

Part of this can include actively engaging the local workforce, which can both improve the project and enhance community relationships as Brian notes:

“Hiring local contractors is like the best thing you can do. They know the community, they’ve worked in the community... if it’s a civil contractor they know the soils, they know where the rock is...you know the neighbours recognize their trucks. They’re the ones... they’re a local business but they’re the ones using local businesses as well. They’re great community champions.”—“Brian” (Developer, Nova Scotia).

This is different than situations where developers and industries make promises about hypothetical jobs an industry might bring to a local area, another point of skepticism for locals in the UK shale cases who suggest that there is not a local workforce with the appropriate skillset to be hired. Instead, aiming to employ existing local workforces in specific and appropriate support roles is an example of how a developer can legitimately recognize the value of the input of locals because they bring with them knowledge sets that they know they themselves simply do not possess (i.e., see Ryder and Devine-Wright 2021).

A move away from instrumentally-driven engagement practices also allows for more local resident agency in determining the future of a local area—another important best practice. This gives residents the opportunity to choose whether and how they see a new development as a part of their community’s future, and these conversations are ones that can be mediated through relationship-building aimed at understanding, not changing, public opinion on the topic.

“As a municipal council where you know everyone in the grocery stores and everyone in your community, I think it’s really important to get out and actually talk with people. Have meetings and get the public on side...if they choose to be. You know? Don’t force them. That’s the secret.”—Fred (Local Councillor, Nova Scotia).

“Maybe developers need to say to themselves ‘Let’s approach the local council first and just say: “Are you interested in having a project in your municipality? What’s the feeling, what’s the temperature here?”’ And if the municipality says ‘You know what, we’ve already declared ourselves non-willing’ that’s the way it should work.”—Joanne (Local Councillor, Nova Scotia).

Another pathway is to provide the opportunity for communities to have ownership stake in a proposed project:

“I would think that there would be a lot better relationships in the township or in the municipality if the community had some involvement in the ownership of that project.”—Alex (Local Resident, Ontario).

“I’ve heard that there were some meetings where there were some heated discussions but since September of 2013 when we got involved as a community co-op I have not had a single experience in that direction.”—Angelo (Resident, Ontario).

There are also other advantages when a project is ‘localized’—attention can be paid to details which are of importance to individual community members and the community as a whole. Caroline demonstrates how this changes the approach to how an energy project might move forward when it is not driven solely based on project development timelines and goals:

“A husband and wife that live right here, they’re an elderly couple and their clothesline pole was a little close so the project...you know the guys that were working there dug a deeper hole and put up a nice sturdy pole for them and talked with them and said “Okay is this good? Is it okay if we move it this way just slightly?” And you know, from what they had they upgraded. I mean I don’t think a clothesline pole would be too important to a lot of big companies but because it’s a community project, because the community is involved you can have those kind of discussions.”—Caroline (Resident, Nova Scotia).

Here, Caroline stresses the benefits that come out of the very structure of a community energy project—one that is locally owned, for example. Yet local ownership is not the only way to achieve this balance. As one Altcar resident pointed out in the case of the shale gas project there, understanding that the community is not well-connected to the internet should have influenced how the operator went about engaging in the first place:

They should [have sent] out more newsletters and such like, or more information packs...Obviously, they don’t need to send them into Formby because they’re all internet connected. Kat (Resident, Altcar).

In part, it comes down to a developer adopting an ethic of care—not only about the environment, but about the community as well. Brian once again stands out as a developer that demonstrates how and why this is important in terms of community relations and project decision-making.

“I feel like we do a pretty good job developing wind farms because we’re a smaller company, we’re private,

we’re not publicly traded, we have a younger team who’s quite passionate about renewables, we all get into this because it’s so important to us, you know? And I think that tends to allow us to be a little but more slower and respectful of communities.”—Brian (Developer, Nova Scotia).

From an ethics of care motivation, there is also less emphasis on the speed of moving a proposed project forward, and more emphasis on ensuring protection of people and the environment. Thus, while a project outcome is not completely abandoned, engagement from an ethics of care standpoint allows for a refocusing on transparent and thorough engagement where the *process* becomes equally important (if not more so) than the potential outcome.

5 Shifting engagement mindsets: from outcomes to process and relationship-building

In this article, we aim to address important questions about the relationship between instrumental rationale and CE. We find that CE processes which are perceived as instrumentally-driven—directed by goals of developers and supported by governmental authorities—tend to conflict with best practices of engagement. Instead opportunities for two-way communication, dialogue and engagement are reduced through practices of non-participation (economic incentives, perceived as bribes) and tokenism (one-way communication strategies, seen as ‘tick-box’ exercises). Community members in both the UK and Canada interpreted these engagement efforts as disingenuous, perceiving engagement efforts in all projects led by private developers as instrumentally-driven. But, they did not only take issue with developer’s goals as CE efforts across several proposed energy projects were perceived by local community members as being designed to favor outcomes aligned with developer and government interests.

In many of these cases, government entities retained their role as the steering entity of the process (Head 2007, p. 447), where they created an avenue for developers to inform the public and achieve planning consent. The facilitation of the developer’s pursuit of engagement as a means to an end through government control of the process further impacted some residents’ trust in government and governance processes, as indicated by previous research (Aitken et al. 2016, p. 558; Wynne 2006, p. 213). Finally, interviewees did not feel empowered to be able to prevent or say no to a project, nor did they feel that knowing the project would go ahead that they were able to change any characteristics of the project they might have input on. Given this, engagement approaches which residents saw as instrumentally-driven did

not align with what residents want from engagement (see also Batidzirai et al. 2021). As with previous research on different stakeholder groups rationales for engagement (Head 2007, p. 443), residents expressed a desire for information, for meaningful participation and influence, and for their concerns to be adequately addressed (see also Ryder and Devine-Wright 2021). These desires are primarily concerned with process, and align with existing best practices for community engagement where processes are fair, inclusive, transparent, and procedurally just, allowing for influence.

Conversely, in our case studies where practices appear to move beyond instrumental rationale, developer efforts tended to align more closely with best practices of community engagement. For example, interviewees discussed how developers tended to engage communities early, emphasize two-way information sharing through community partnership and ownership, build trust through developing relationships with local community members and engaging local workforces, engage without conditions (i.e., not forcing community support) and engage without rushing just to get through the planning process.

In particular, the opportunity for communities to have ownership stake in a proposed project, was seen as leading to a more equitable balance of actor's desires. This can create an engagement and decision-making process which elevates community perspectives to be more fairly considered and can again create better relationships between community and the developer. In addition, there are opportunities for developers to legitimately recognize the value of the input of locals and their sets of place-based knowledge (see Ryder and Devine-Wright 2021). Meaningful and effective engagement can be achieved through changes in how developers approach their relationships to local host communities. This requires developers to step away from a narrow focus on social acceptance and project approval, where concern is not only about *outcome*, but about *process*. That is, the rationale must shift from a focus on engagement as a means to an end and recognize the inherent value of fairness in the process of engagement in itself. As Aitken et al. (2016, p. 570) suggest a key aspect in doing so is ensuring that developers are deeply and genuinely committed to CE, which can lead to innovative efforts that go beyond the bare minimum to improve energy infrastructure decision-making processes. Of course, this is a necessary but insufficient component of effective and successful CE.

If instrumentally-driven approaches from developers fail, they jeopardize society's collective ability to reduce carbon emissions and minimize impacts of climate change. When developers move forward with a proposal simply because they have the legal right to do so, they force communities into situations where 'no' can still end up meaning 'yes.' Instead, a move away from this approach can allow for more

local resident agency in determining the future of a local area. It gives residents the opportunity to envision their role in combatting the climate crisis, and contemplate how they can see a new development as a part of their community's future, if at all (does the technology fit the place, see Devine-Wright 2009, p. 434; 2011, p. 66). These conversations are ones that can be mediated through relationship-building aimed at understanding, not changing, public opinion on the topic. Opening up the engagement process to one that incorporates an ethics of care can lead to more inclusive processes and more fair and effective outcomes in energy decision-making.

In interpreting the findings from this paper, it is important to acknowledge that there are clear limitations to our work. Given the nature of qualitative data and the specific contexts of each of these projects, we cannot draw sweeping conclusions about engagement in proposed energy infrastructure projects as a whole. Certainly, we cannot control for other variables that can impact community perceptions of and objections to some projects over others (for example, opposition to shale gas can be rooted in the reliance on fossil fuels). Further, we do not aim to suggest that instrumental rationales for engagement are always the same for different stakeholders or similar stakeholders across different sites. Nor are we saying that engagement efforts can never include considerations of outcomes or instrumental drivers; in fact stakeholders may regularly hold multiple reasons for participating in engagement processes.

Instead, like previous research, we suggest that approaches to CE often reflect the desires of those stakeholders who possess the most power, resources and influence over the decision-making processes and their outcomes (Holmes and Scoones 2000; Manning 2021, p. 9; Kerr et al. 2017, p. 209; Ryder and Malin 2021). This includes economic resources, which developers often rely heavily on to offer compensation and incentives as a key component of instrumentally-driven "engagement" strategies (see Cass et al. 2010).

Thus, when engagement processes are designed by and for a limited number or type of stakeholders and their motivations for engagement are singular or very narrowly focused on a particular end goal, this can lead to problematic community engagement efforts which are rejected by local community members. Coupled with collective insights from the authors' various other projects on engagement in energy projects (i.e., tidal, geothermal, hydroelectric, smart local energy systems) and our own personal experiences of scholarly and industry attitudes toward engagement in professional settings, the above findings signal how an over-emphasis on instrumental rationale (in both scholarship and practice) can lead to problematic engagement practices that ironically can end up setting energy projects up for social opposition and potentially failure. Further, inequalities in

decision-making for communities are potentially exacerbated by market forces which tend to favor major projects and large corporations over community renewable projects (Strachan et al. 2015). Similar forces and resident experiences are likely not only across, but outside of the UK and Canada, especially so in jurisdictions that allow for or even prioritize decision-making power outside of local host communities and in the hands of governments and/or industry (see also Batel and Küpers 2022, for large-scale hydropower in Portugal). We suggest that future research should more systematically analyze the relationships between actor rationale, actor influence over structures of community engagement, perceptions and effectiveness of community engagement, and how these factors interact with different ownership schemes, project scale, company size, policy context and energy sector.

6 Moving toward community-centered decision-making in proposed energy projects

Community, public and stakeholder engagement have become increasingly common in opposed energy infrastructure projects. Despite this, often times efforts at engagement are viewed as insufficient by the communities who are being engaged. This has been particularly true in terms of CE around shale gas exploration (i.e., see Malin et al. 2018; Ryder and Devine-Wright 2021, p. 12) as well as communities facing low-carbon, renewable energy schemes such as wind development (Aitken 2016, p. 558). Here, we work to unpack this, suggesting that an over-emphasis on engagement pursued according to developers' instrumental reasoning may lead to engagement processes which stray from widely accepted best practices and are negatively perceived by communities. Recent scholarly and practical emphasis on engagement as a way to achieve public support, social acceptance, or a 'social license to operate' has further made this approach the norm, despite these potential problems.

Recently at a talk reflecting on CE, an audience member from an energy lobby group suggested that in the case of decision-making about siting projects in their industry, it is always 'geology first.' When CE is done by actors that have this mindset, it is unlikely that engagement is being pursued in a way that aligns with the primary tenets of best practices for CE—including CE that is designed in order to increase elements of equity and justice via greater decision-making ability of local populations. As a result, inauthentic and instrumentally-driven engagement processes that focus on social acceptance as a contingency for project approval may actually lead to more opposition of proposed renewable energy projects which are vital for reducing carbon emissions.

Moving forward, we need new ways of thinking about CE as we work to develop 'just' energy transitions. This includes approaches which challenge systemic inequalities, open up public participation to the least privileged actors (see Castellano and Mook, this issue), and allow for broader community agency. This means moving toward more community and public-centric process which incorporates multiple actors' rationales and uses scientific and local knowledge in a complementary fashion. We suggest it also requires a focus not just on engagement, but on relationship-building (see Gagnon et al., this issue) and creating spaces through which local residents gain not just access to the decision-making process but shared control over it. While in some cases that may mean shared-ownership models or locally based developers leading energy projects, there is no one exclusive model that will create the opportunity for shared, more equitable control over decision-making. Moving forward, these efforts will need to be place-based and contextually rooted, and can and should take different forms which might include: collaborative or participatory planning (Christidis and Law 2012, p. 91; McGookin et al. 2021), the implementation of social impact assessments (Short and Szolucha 2019, p. 265) or environmental justice protections (Paparo 2021, p. 223), as well as shared-ownership models. Ultimately, improving how we conceive, design, implement and assess engagement (a key desired outcome of this SI) requires a cultural-political shift in how developers, governments and researchers approach energy infrastructure decisions, a challenging but necessary step toward the practice of energy democratization and just transitions.

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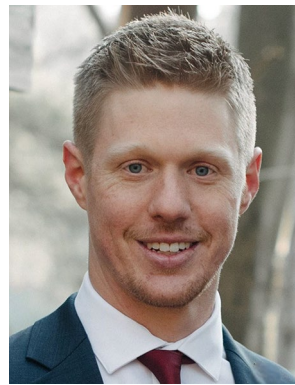
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