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COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN ENERGY POLICY IN AUSTRALIA

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Technology in Society
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Key Points

- A large proportion of the Australian public has a low level of energy literacy and appears increasingly to be confused and concerned about energy and climate change policies
- Resources, including time and money, are required to ensure adequate opportunity for a wider cross section of the community to engage with policy issues
- Engagement processes provide the opportunity for policymakers to hear from a broader cross section of the community to generate energy policy outcomes that transcend individual political stances
- Independent information drawing from beyond the vested interests of individual groups and organisations is critical for these processes and to build trust and legitimacy in the outcomes

The community's stake in energy supply

In Australia, as in most modern economies, access to secure and affordable energy is no longer just an expectation of society; instead it has come to be regarded as a fundamental economic right.[1] Most Australians expect that, when they 'flip the switch', the light or appliance will work every time, quite often without any thought of how the energy has been generated, where it has come from or what it might have cost. However, with the recent rapid rise in prices of both electricity and fuel, we are witnessing a change in how the public engages with the issue of energy supply.

Along with the deregulation of the energy retail market, changes in government incentives (e.g. solar PV, feed-in tariffs) and changes in other market mechanisms (e.g. the Renewable Energy Target (RET) and Minimum Energy Performance Standards (MEPS)), not to mention regulations relating to climate change and greenhouse gas mitigation, energy supply has become a prominent issue, about which more Australians are now talking, protesting and wanting to become better informed about. With a new Energy White Paper (EWP) consultation process under way, it is timely to reflect on what this process implies for the broader public. Do they have a legitimate stake in what is going on and what will happen in the future and what opportunities are there for them to have their voices heard?

In calling for submissions on the EWP, the Australian Government highlighted its commitment to working closely with industry and state and territory governments in the development of an integrated, coherent national energy policy.[2] How this is to be achieved amongst all levels of government however was not detailed and the need for cross-jurisdictional consistency and reliability raises an additional dimension of complexity for community engagement. In this context, the process of 'cooperative federalism', as practiced by the Coalition of Australian Governments, which operates exclusively of broader society, may need to be further studied.

[1] An economic right is not of course to be equated with a first-order civil and political right. However, the right to an adequate standard of living has long been recognised in international legal instruments such as the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (Section 25) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Section 10). This paper approaches the public expectation of a secure supply of affordable energy from a social scientific and not a legalistic viewpoint.

[2] Department of Industry, Energy White Paper, Terms of Reference, 5 December 2013

In its submission to the EWP consultation process,[3] the Energy Policy Institute of Australia (EPIA) asserted:

> *A nationally agreed energy vision is the central, indispensable requirement for an integrated, coherent energy policy, in order to secure acceptance of the key principles of energy policy, reduce the excessive level of politicisation of energy issues, and build community trust. Its starting point should be the commencement of a genuine process of stakeholder participation. It cannot be completed simply by calling for submissions and publishing an EWP and it will need to be methodically pursued over the long term.*

In Australia, policymakers have been slow to engage communities in discussions about energy and climate change.[4] Some believe the general public are disinterested and, because the topic is complex, they are unable to make rational decisions about it.[5] However, many researchers believe that policymakers[6] should engage with communities on issues that affect their lives.[7,8] This paper is based on a similar conviction, that effective community engagement requires best practice principles grounded in sound theory and research. It is a dialogue process amongst stakeholders that provides communities with the opportunity to influence decision makers. The contemporary challenge is how can policymakers engage effectively with communities where issues are complex, politically sensitive and/or perceived high risk?

What does community engagement mean?

Early literature in the area of *community engagement* emerges from the analysis of attempts by American governments to democratise social programs in the 1970s through *public participation.*[9] Over time, policymakers, researchers, and consultants have utilised the terms, *community engagement* and *public participation,* interchangeably to represent those processes that involve key stakeholders[10] and the general public in issues of significant interest; the overriding aim being to involve community members in decisions or in policymaking that is likely to affect them now or in the future.[11]

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[3] Energy Policy Institute of Australia (2014). Second Submission to the Energy White Paper Process, 4 February 2014. Retrieved 24 April 2014 http://ewp.industry.gov.au/sites/ewp.industry.gov.au/files/EPIA%20EWP%20Submission%20Feb%202014%20.pdf

[4] Australian Business Roundtable on Climate Change. (2006). *The business case for early action*. www.businessroundtable.com.au

[5] Harding, R. (2006). *What social change is necessary in a move to a sustainable energy future? Explorum 1.* Brisbane: Cooperative Research Centre for Coal in Sustainable Development.

[6] Policymakers refers to all levels of government, organisations, research institutions and others who inform and influence policy decisions

[7] Renn, O., Webler, T., & Wiedeman, P. (1995). *Fairness and competence in citizen participation: Evaluating models for environmental discourse.* Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

[8] Dryzek, J. S., Downes, D., Hunold, C., Schlosberg, D., & Hernes, H. K. (2003). *Green states and social movements*. New York: Oxford University Press Inc.

[9] Contandriopoulos, D. (2004). A sociological perspective on public participation in health care. *Social Science & Medicine, 58*(2), 321-330.

[10] I use the stakeholder definition developed by Freeman to encompass the full range of individuals and organisations who are affected, influenced or impacted on or those with potential to affect or influence

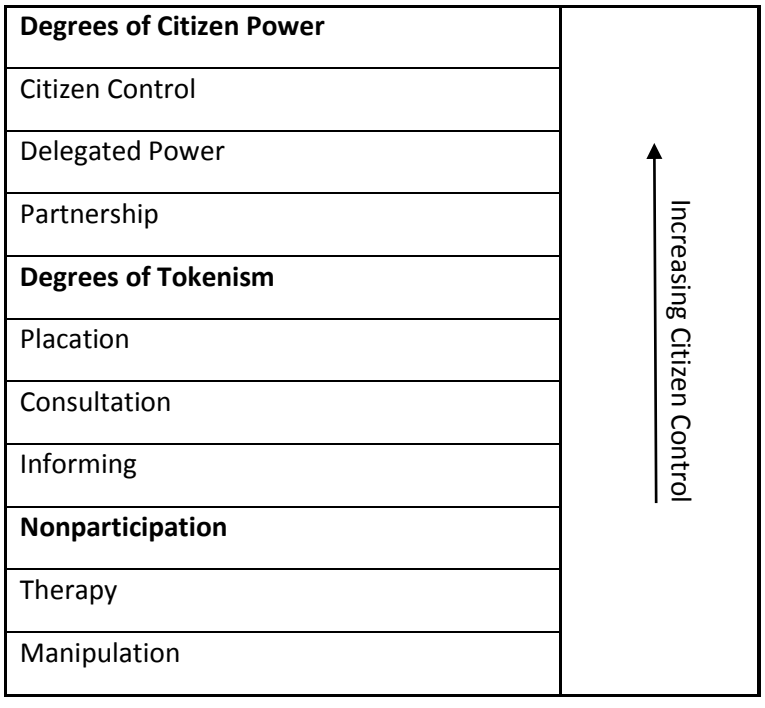
[11] Keeney, R. (1998). *Value-focussed thinking. A path to creative decision making*: Harvard University Press.

Tamarack: An Institute for Community Engagement, Canada[12] has adopted wide ranging definitions of community engagement such as *citizens from different sectors of a community joining together, taking leadership, to address issues that affect them all*. Within its definition, Tamarack focuses on process(es) that bring people together and facilitate the broad engagement of organisations and people. These processes enable collective change (changing attitudes, building social capital), create movement in communities, ensure all stakeholder groups are represented, and ensure it is the communities which determine local priorities. In this paper, community engagement is defined as *involving stakeholders in a dialogue around issues of importance where their participation allows them an opportunity to influence the decisionmaking process in some way.*

Community engagement/public participation frameworks

There are a number of frameworks around public participation and community engagement that have been developed over time. One early well-known framework that is still relevant today is Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation.[13] The eight rungs in the ladder are grouped into three subsections ranging from "non-participation", "degrees of tokenism" and "degrees of citizen power". The non-participation end focuses on manipulation of the public to gain support for policymakers through education and public relations. At the opposite end, ultimate citizen's power is when those not in power, "the have-nots", are granted complete control of the process.

Figure 1: Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation[14]



[12] Tamarack Institute. (2003). *Tamarack: An institute for community engagement*. Retrieved 19 April, 2014 http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g3s11.html

[13] Arnstein, S. R. (1969). A ladder of citizen participation. *American Planning Association Journal, 35*(4), 216-224

[14] Footnote 13 Supra.

Alternatively, the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) outline a Public Participation Spectrum where the level of public involvement increases as you move across the spectrum.[15] The spectrum begins with a commitment to *inform* the public through fact sheets, websites and open houses as the lowest level of engagement through to *empowerment* at the opposite end where the public hold the final decision making power. Thomas[16] suggests the most appropriate program of public participation will be influenced by what the organisation or government is hoping to achieve and ultimately this choice will be affected by a range of factors including level of public interest, political will, time frame, resources and the degree of likely controversy expected.

Best practice principles of community engagement

Much of the literature on community engagement is based on evaluating the success of individual cases with very little theoretical underpinning. Over time, reviewing of a range of public participation case studies focusing on climate change, energy and/or high risk technologies reveals a number of potential best practise principles to be considered for an effective participation programme.[17] In this section these principles are summarised and the rationale for each explained.

For example, Goodin & Niemeyer[18] found that engaging people with an interest in the topic is critical to its success as they will maintain commitment and disseminate the knowledge gained. Researchers also discussed the need for early engagement because, once formed, opinions can be slow to change and early engagement guards against the possibility of misinformation and negative attitudes being formed early in the debate.

Several of the case studies also used advisory committees. Such committees, comprised of representatives from key stakeholder groups, with diverse and often opposing views, ensure the agenda of an engagement program remains well balanced and presents all necessary information.[19] Advisory committees can also become a point of contact for concerned community members to raise issues with and provide feedback into the process.[20]

Solomon[21] discusses the need to allocate adequate resources for the consultation process. This becomes part of a risk management strategy as critics can be quick to say not enough resources have been devoted to the engagement process. In this case resources are not just money but also time and people to complete the work. Adequate resources also include catering for minority groups and ensuring flexible scheduling to enable maximum groups of people to be involved. This is particularly relevant for energy because often minorities who are most impacted are least likely to be able to participate unless specific attention is given to them. In her case study review, Solomon also highlights the importance of a process which balances out power differentials or directly

[15] IAP2. (2004). *IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum*. Retrieved 19 April, 2014 from https://www.iap2.org.au/documents/item/84

[16] Thomas, I. (1998). Chapter 4. In *Environmental impact assessment in Australia*. Sydney: The Federation Press.

[17] Wilsdon, & Willis. (2004). *See through science: Why public engagement needs to move upstream*.

[18] Goodin, R. E., & Niemeyer, S. J. (2003). When does deliberation begin? Internal reflection versus public discussion in deliberative democracy. *Political Studies, 51*(4), 627-649.

[19] Pisarski, A. & Ashworth P. (2013). The Citizen's Round Table Process: Canvassing Public Opinion on Energy Technologies to Mitigate Climate Change. *Climatic Change*

[20] Ashworth, P., Bradbury, J., Feenstra, Y., Greenberg, S., Hund, G., Mikunda, T. & Wade, S. (2012). What's in Store: Lessons learnt from CCS. International Journal of Greenhouse Gas Control. Issue 9. 402-408

[21] Solomon, F. (2000). *A Case Study of the Wallaby Consultation Process* (Case Study): CSIRO Minerals.

acknowledges them within the process. Using a facilitator within the process can help to achieve this balance.

Most research also highlights the importance of relationships with open, honest and transparent communication.[22] This extends to a basic need for trust being essential for information flows.[23] There are many examples cited of individuals having low levels of trust in industry (e.g. Brent Spar, Shell; Monsanto; coal seam gas) which must be considered when planning any engagement strategy.

The public tends to be sceptical of the commercial gains proponents may make from projects and often perceives that proponents have scant regard for the local community[24] or that governments may have a vested interest in certain outcomes. What is clear is that meaningful engagement, with clearly defined expectations and outcomes, helps to build trust. This alone reinforces why policymakers should consider building in a community engagement mechanism for developing a nationally agreed energy vision as put forward by the EPIA in its EWP submission.[25]

Low energy literacy and the need for time and resources

The CSIRO's Energy Flagship has been researching public attitudes to energy technologies for the last nine years. Both through conducting national surveys, as well as trialling a number of engagement processes (see for example: focus groups[26] and similar adapted processes;[27] large group processes with up to 130 participants over one day[28]; and citizens panels of up to 25 individuals that deliberated on energy futures over three days)[29]. Although each process is not without its criticism[30,31] and not everyone is interested in being engaged on the topic of energy, it is apparent that many Australians are confused and concerned about the climate change/energy mitigation nexus, and have 'low energy literacy'. That is, they possess little understanding of the energy supply chain, how energy is generated, what the pros and cons of each technology are, and what the possible alternatives might be for achieving a secure, affordable and low carbon energy future.

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[22] Beck, U., Giddens, A., & Lash, S. (1994). *Reflexive modernization : politics, tradition and aesthetics in the modern social order.* Cambridge: Polity Press

[23] Fischhoff, B., 1995. 'Risk Perception and Communication Unplugged: Twenty Years of Process' *Journal of Risk Analysis* 137–45.

[24] Terwel, B.W., Harinck, F., Ellemers, N., Daamen, D.D.L., 2009. Competence-Based and Integrity-Based Trust as Predictors of Acceptance of Carbon Dioxide Capture and Storage (CCS). Risk Analysis 29, 1129-1140.

[25] Footnote 3 supra.

[26] Footnote 18 supra.

[27] Dowd, A-M., Ashworth, P., Carr-Cornish, S., & Stenner, K. (2012). Energymark: Empowering individual Australians to reduce their energy consumption. *Energy Policy*.

[28] Ashworth, P., Paxton, G., & Carr-Cornish, S. (2010). Reflections on a process for developing public trust in energy technologies: Follow-up results of the Australian large group process. In: 2010 Greenhouse Gas Control Technologies (GHGT). International Conference of Greenhouse Gas Control Technologies 10; 19 - 23 September; RAI Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Energy Procedia: Elsevier

[29] Ashworth, P., Littleboy, A., Graham, P., & Niemeyer, S. (2010).Turning the heat on: Public engagement in Australia's energy future in Renewable Energy and the Public: From NIMBY to Participation (Ed. Patrick Devine-Wright) Earthscan, UK.

[30] Malone, E., Bradbury, J., and Dooley, J. (2010) "Moving from Misinformation Derived from Public Attitude Surveys on Carbon Dioxide Capture and Storage toward Realistic Stakeholder Involvement" International Journal of Greenhouse Gas Control

[31] Nisbet, M.C., Myers, T., 2007. The polls—trends: twenty years of public opinion about global warming.

Public Opinion Quarterly, 71:3, 444-470.

CSIRO research results also show, along with other institutions,[32,33,34] that, through these processes, individuals become more knowledgeable and form their own opinions about potential pathways forward.

From the engagement processes, it has become clear that many Australians are interested in learning more about energy. Each brings different opinions on what the likely solutions might be, based on personal values and beliefs, socio-economic status, and the influence of other social norms – such as the opinions of their friends and families[35] and other influential stakeholders. Through such processes, when the public are given time to hear independent information from trusted experts on potential pathways for an energy future, combined with deliberation amongst their peers, they are able to arrive at decisions that often endorse the overall direction policymakers are hoping to achieve. In fact, research has shown that providing the time and space for meaningful engagement not only enhances the overall strategy of the policy, it also helps to create 'buy-in' and provides greater ownership of policy outcomes.

This is in stark contrast to the current state of play in Australia where those with vested interests, strongly formed opinions and loud voices tend to engage on energy matters - often overriding those who are less well-informed and confusing communities in the process. This is particularly apparent when groups and individuals use social media to promote a particular point of view. Such avenues are not usually representative of wider society but they do tend to capture public attention at various times in the debate. Finding better ways for the public to participate across all levels of society, that includes the best practice principles outlined in this paper, should help to lift the overall energy literacy of the Australian public and ultimately contribute to enhanced energy policy outcomes. The processes referred to in this paper, along with others that target various cross sections of the community, could form the basis for such an approach.

Conclusion – the value of community trust

With many Australians paying increasing attention to their energy bills and expressing concern about energy affordability, coupled with their continuing concerns over climate change, the time appears right for a greater degree of community engagement, providing communities with the time and space for meaningful participation.

Fostering better-informed and more-engaged communities builds community trust. In turn, greater community trust could appreciably enhance the development of a nationally agreed energy vision that transcends politics. A nationally agreed energy vision as propounded by the EPIA would do much towards providing the high degree of long-term policy certainty that highly capital-intensive investments in the energy sector require.

[32] Einsiedel, E., Boyd, A., Medlock, J. & Ashworth, P. (2013). Assessing socio-technical mindsets: Public deliberations on carbon capture and storage in the context of energy sources and climate change. *Energy Policy*, 53. 149-158

[33] http://newdemocracy.com.au/our-work/item/117-citizens-jury-on-energy-generation

[34] Parkhill, K.A., Demski, C., Butler, C., Spence, A. and Pidgeon, N. (2013) Transforming the UK Energy System: Public Values, Attitudes and Acceptability –Synthesis Report (UKERC: London).

[35] Hobman, E. & Ashworth, P. (2013) Public support for energy sources and related technologies: The effect of simple information provision. *Energy Policy*

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Ms Ashworth established CSIRO's Science into Society Group, which specialises in interdisciplinary research at the interface between science and society. The Group applies social science expertise to understand human responses to nationally-identified challenges. Ms Ashworth has managed multi-million dollar research contracts for CSIRO, particularly on stakeholder understanding and acceptance of new energy technologies. As part of her work she co-authored 'The CSIRO Home Energy Saving Handbook – How to save energy, save money and reduce your carbon footprint.'

Ms Ashworth's key research interests are how to deliver information to best effect and facilitating dialogue around complex and contested issues. She has gained an international reputation as a leading researcher in understanding public perception to climate change and low emission energy technologies.

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