

Community-owned Wind Energy: How local groups are navigating economic possibility to create renewable energy projects in line with motivations, ethics and local assets

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Energy is a key issue to be addressed if we are to transition towards a safe climate future. To date, electricity markets have been characterised by highly centralised generation and distribution systems dominated by governments and large corporations operating under capitalist market principles. In Australia, this arrangement has proven to be largely incapable of responding adequately to the need to shift away from fossil fuels. The availability of renewable energy technology revolutionizes electricity generation by using sources that are clean, renewable, readily available and scalable, thereby opening up opportunities for small-scale actors to become electricity producers.

This paper presents findings from PhD research that uses qualitative methods to understand the outcomes and impacts from community-owned wind energy projects in four small regional communities. It explores the diversity of economic arrangements that case studies use to deliver these successful community enterprises by applying the diverse economies framework pioneered by J.K Gibson-Graham (2006, 2008). The cases exhibit a diversity of practices in their labor, enterprise, finance, market and property arrangements and demonstrate how economic arrangements have been tailored to create viable projects within the bounds of ethical considerations, local assets and context constraints.

In presenting this analysis I hope to confront the hegemony of capitalist thinking that is currently pervasive in the context of electricity markets and energy infrastructure investment and which acts to limit what are considered viable ways to participate in the renewable energy transition. Gibson-Graham encourage an 'opening up' of understandings of economy to more diverse forms of participation, thereby enabling more actors to have more conceptual space and more practical tools to enact economic projects in line with their available assets, motivations and ethics. In the context of energy transitions, a diverse economic analysis helps us to identify multiple potential avenues for community actors to participate through the creation of social enterprises. It also contributes to a growing concept of economy that is dynamic, place-appropriate, strengths-based, creative and generative.

Conference Themes: Work, Exchange, Money, and our relationship with the natural world

Bio:

Jarra came to a PhD after several years working in the community renewable energy sector, with a professional background spanning community development, environmental campaigning and renewable energy. Through her PhD she is researching the outcomes and impacts from community-owned wind energy projects as experienced by local people. She also looks at the role of different legal structures, economic arrangements and community engagement practices in facilitating different types of outcomes. In 2011 she co-founded the Community Power Agency, a not-for-profit worker's cooperative that supports local groups to establish renewable energy projects and performs networking and advocacy at a sector level.