

Review of “Talking Renewables to the Regions” report produced by Essential Media

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Introduction

As Australia works towards decarbonisation and transition to renewable energy, there is significant concern in regional communities about the impacts of this shift. Misinformation, lack of understanding, and fear of economic or social disruptions have fueled resistance to the clean energy transition.



Source: <https://drmcet.ac.in/latest-blog/renewable-energy-a-bloom-to-green-world/>

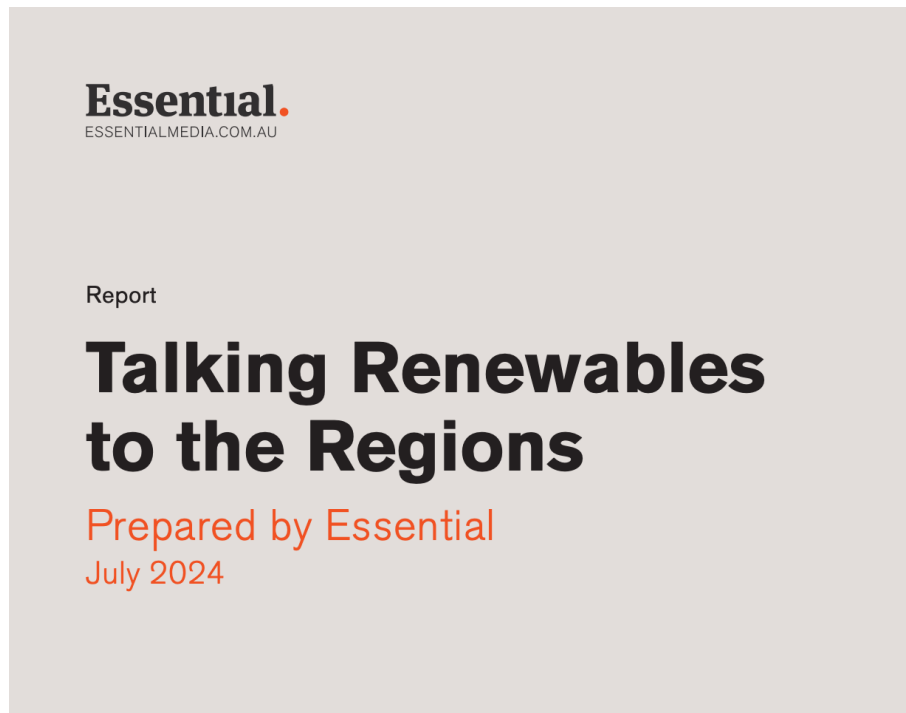
While the transition to renewable energy is critical to addressing climate change and ensuring long-term energy security, and is widely supported by environmentalists, scientists, and many governments, this transition to cleaner energy sources has not been universally embraced, especially in regions heavily dependent on fossil fuels or industries that may face disruption.

Particularly, Australia's energy landscape has long been dominated by fossil fuels, especially coal. As of the latest data, coal is still the largest contributor to electricity generation in the country, supplying about 60-70% of Australia's electricity¹. This is despite efforts to transition to cleaner, renewable sources like solar, wind, and hydro power, which have been growing in recent years, but still “*only account for a relatively small proportion of Australia's primary energy consumption and electricity generation*”¹. In addition to that, different regions in Australia have their own specific concerns that make the shift to clean energy even more complicated. Concerns raised by different communities when it comes to the transition to renewable energy are grounded in specific, often deeply felt, issues related to their livelihoods, environment, and way of life.

About the Project

The Essential² was engaged to conduct research “*across regional communities to inform a narrative that can shift regional communities and national media from fear*” to understand the perceptions, challenges, and opportunities in these communities, and to develop a narrative that could shift attitudes from fear to opportunity. The overarching

goal was to understand the key barriers and communication gaps that are preventing widespread acceptance of the renewable energy shift in rural areas. As a result of this endeavour the report³ “Talking Renewables to the Regions” was published in July 2024.



The research was aimed to answer four critical questions: First, how much do regional Australians understand the need for new infrastructure, including transmission, as part of the renewable energy transition? Second, how can we communicate the full scale of Australia’s energy shift, which involves not just large-scale infrastructure like wind, solar, and batteries, but also household electrification? Third, how much is misinformation shaping regional Australians' views on clean energy? Lastly, the research explored what language and storytelling techniques are resonating with or alienating regional Australians in the context of the renewable transition.

The report looks at the challenges, opportunities, and strategies for encouraging the use of renewable energy in regional areas. It stresses the importance of moving to more sustainable energy sources to tackle climate change, cut down on carbon emissions, and open up economic opportunities in rural and regional communities.

Research methodology

The research methodology involved several stages to gather a clear and detailed understanding of regional attitudes toward the energy transition. First, stakeholder interviews were conducted with respected community leaders to gain high-level insights into key concerns and opportunities in these areas. Next, eight online focus groups with 48 participants provided qualitative data, exploring personal beliefs and emotions surrounding the transition. To delve deeper, a three-day online discussion group with 60 participants allowed extended conversations about more complex issues. Finally, a quantitative survey of 2,000 respondents from New South Wales, Victoria, and Queensland was carried out to measure opinions and identify broader trends in attitudes. Together, these methods combined personal stories, in-depth discussions, and large-scale data to ensure a well-rounded and reliable understanding of regional perspectives.

The report is divided into three main sections: Key Insights; Communications Recommendations; and Language and Messaging Recommendations. It’s meant to be read alongside a more detailed research report, which compiles the findings from four rounds of fieldwork.

Key Insights from the Report

The report reveals a complex relationship between regional communities and the energy transition, characterized by a sense of disconnection and mistrust. Many people in these areas feel that the shift to renewable energy is something being done to them rather than with them. Community consultations are often perceived as token efforts, leaving residents feeling excluded from meaningful decision-making processes. This sense of imposition amplifies the voices of critics, making opposition more prominent. While there is strong underlying support for renewable energy, with 56% of people in favor, many remain confused by the broader energy plan³. Projects like wind farms are viewed as isolated developments rather than part of an integrated strategy, and technical jargon, such as references to megawatt hours, only deepens the sense of alienation.

Adding to the challenge is the low-trust environment in which this transition is unfolding. Although people generally agree on the need to move away from fossil fuels, there is widespread skepticism toward the companies and governments driving large-scale renewable projects. Information from these sources is often dismissed as self-serving, undermining efforts to build public confidence. Promises of cheaper energy and job creation also fail to resonate with regional communities, as these claims are frequently contradicted by their lived experiences. Many renewable energy jobs in these areas are short-term, and rising energy bills create doubt about the economic benefits touted by advocates of the transition.

National-level messaging about renewable energy targets further misses the mark in regional communities⁴. People in these areas are less concerned with abstract goals and more focused on how the transition will directly impact their local communities. They want concrete answers about how developments will protect their livelihoods and address concerns about land use or the environment. Coastal communities, in particular, express deep care for nature and worry about the impact of renewable projects on marine ecosystems. Providing clear and specific information about how renewable energy projects can coexist with nature helps to alleviate these concerns.

Even small details can significantly shape public opinion. For instance, the notion that turbines may end up in landfills or that renewables could displace agricultural land has an outsized influence on people's views, often creating resistance to the transition⁵. Furthermore, the flow of information in these communities comes from diverse and trusted local sources such as friends, family, and community organizations, rather than from traditional media or government. This reliance on local word-of-mouth highlights the importance of grassroots communication and personal connections in building trust and support.

Finally, the report underscores the need for a compelling reason to change. Without a clear sense of urgency, the transition lacks the meaning and motivation required to galvanize public support. Highlighting that 40% of Australia's electricity is already renewable and explaining the risks of falling behind in the global shift to clean energy can provide this context⁶. Overall, the report suggests that addressing these challenges requires localized, transparent, and inclusive messaging, rooted in genuine engagement and a clear demonstration of benefits for both people and the environment.

Communication Recommendations

Communication recommendations, contained in the report emphasize, the need to shift from a top-down, one-sided approach to a more inclusive, collaborative strategy that engages communities as active participants in the energy transition. Rather than imposing changes or "selling" the transition, the focus should be on fostering a shared effort by speaking with communities, not at them, and making them feel like valued partners in the process.

Building trust requires simplifying complex concepts, such as the national energy plan, into clear and relatable terms while highlighting the necessity and benefits of large renewable projects through real-life examples. Instead of relying on abstract figures or technical jargon, the recommendations stress the importance of showing, not just telling, by sharing personal stories of workers, farmers, and communities who have benefited from renewable projects. To address misinformation effectively, creative and light-hearted campaigns can help debunk myths in an approachable way, using humor to educate and engage audiences. Trusted local figures, such as farmers, community leaders, and scientists, play a critical role in amplifying accurate information through word-of-mouth and social media, as their established credibility fosters stronger connections. Additionally, nature lovers and environmental advocates can be engaged by demonstrating how renewable energy helps preserve the land and marine life they care deeply about, using simple, non-technical language.

Proactively involving communities by initiating conversations early, setting clear expectations, and allowing them to shape the direction of projects ensures they feel included and share in the benefits, creating a sense of ownership and reducing resistance. By taking a collaborative and transparent approach, these recommendations aim to build understanding, trust, and support for the energy transition⁷.

Language and Messaging Recommendations

The language and messaging recommendations emphasize the need to tailor communication strategies specifically to regional communities rather than relying on generalized national narratives. Regional audiences often feel disconnected from the transition to renewable energy, as national interest arguments overlook their specific concerns and come across as insincere. Messaging must address this trust gap by building trust and belief simultaneously. This involves validating community concerns, demanding higher standards from developers, and presenting the transition as a shared effort that places community interests at the forefront. Narratives that highlight real-world benefits, such as jobs and environmental protection, resonate more strongly than abstract promises or technical jargon. Using relatable, community-centered language can make messaging feel more genuine and trustworthy.

Successful messaging also focuses on showcasing progress already made, emphasizing Australia's unique advantages, and acknowledging the challenges of the transition while presenting solutions. Communities should be given clear information about how projects will impact them and an active role in shaping their future. Instead of relying on grand claims or numbers about job creation, messaging should specify tangible, local benefits and the kinds of roles created. Avoiding overly urgent or technical language is key, as it can alienate audiences. Instead, framing the transition as already underway and emphasizing long-term community-driven outcomes can foster collaboration and trust in the process. By combining authenticity with practical examples, messaging can better connect with regional communities and build support for the energy transition.

Why it is important?

Effective language and messaging are critical in ensuring the success of the renewable energy transition, particularly in regional communities directly affected by infrastructure developments. Clear and tailored communication fosters trust, counters misinformation, and bridges the disconnect between national-level narratives and local concerns⁸. When people feel listened to and see their worries acknowledged, they are more likely to support and engage with renewable energy projects. This is particularly important in regions where mistrust of government and energy companies is high, and where people often perceive the transition as something imposed on them rather than something they are part of.

Strong messaging also helps to clarify the benefits of renewable energy in a relatable and tangible way. By addressing community-specific issues like jobs, economic opportunities, and environmental impacts⁹, it ensures that the transition feels relevant and beneficial to people's lives. Moreover, involving communities in shaping the narrative not only builds ownership and collaboration but also minimizes resistance and opposition. In essence, well-crafted messaging is not just about sharing information - it is about creating a shared vision, fostering long-term support, and ensuring the transition to renewables is equitable and inclusive.

Conclusion

The transition to renewable energy presents a unique opportunity to tackle the urgent challenges of climate change while creating tangible benefits for regional communities. However, for this transition to be successful and widely supported, it must be built on a foundation of trust, transparency, and meaningful collaboration with the very communities it affects. Each community has its own distinct concerns, shaped by their experiences, way of life, and local challenges. These concerns must be acknowledged and addressed in ways that feel genuine and respectful.

Clear and straightforward communication is crucial to help people understand the benefits of renewable energy. By providing practical, real-world examples, we can show how renewables create jobs, strengthen local economies, and protect the environment for future generations. But information alone isn't enough. Communities need to feel included in the decision-making process. They should have a voice in shaping renewable energy projects to ensure that they align with their needs, values, and long-term goals. This collaborative approach not only builds trust but also fosters a sense of shared ownership and pride in the changes being made.

It's equally important to address concerns about fairness and equity. Communities need to see that the benefits of these projects are distributed fairly and that local interests are prioritized over the profits of large corporations. By engaging with communities early, responding to their specific worries, and ensuring they feel empowered to influence outcomes, the renewable energy transition can become more than just a technical shift. It can become a shared journey toward a cleaner, fairer, and more sustainable future for all.

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