



JustRE Alliance

Global South Alliance for a Just
Transition to Renewable Energy

Community Ownership in Renewable Energy Models: A Global Taxonomy

Mapping Community Authority in Large-Scale
Renewable Energy Projects

In partnership with



**Responsible
Energy
Initiative**

Represented by





Executive Summary

The global energy transition will require the deployment of large-scale renewable energy projects across vast tracts of land, much of it in the Global South. This brings renewable energy developers into direct relationship with rural communities whose ties to that land are geographic, economic, cultural and, in many cases, spiritual. Where those communities are also poor, historically marginalised, and operating within weak regulatory frameworks, the risks of dispossession and exclusion are acute.

Community ownership offers a response to these risks. In Global South contexts, it is not primarily a consumer-facing model centred on energy access, as has historically been the case in the Global North. Instead, it is a rights-based framework through which communities are positioned as long-term partners in projects on their land, with real authority over decisions and a genuine share of the benefits that follow, that also creates benefits for developers and investors through risk mitigation and long-term community buy-in.

Purpose of This Paper

This paper, the first of three outputs from the Responsible Energy Initiative's engagement with the Just Renewable Energy Alliance for the Global South, provides a diagnostic taxonomy for understanding and comparing community ownership models in large-scale solar and onshore wind projects.

It does not prescribe a single best-practice model, nor does it replicate existing methodologies. Its purpose is to offer a common analytical language through which communities, developers, investors and civil society can assess the nature and depth of community authority at each stage of a renewable energy project.

The Core Argument: Authority as Ownership

Existing definitions of community ownership have tended to focus on equity, that is, the proportion of financial shares held by a community in a given project. This paper argues that equity ownership is an insufficient proxy for genuine community ownership. In practice, equity shares do not necessarily equate to meaningful decision-making power, and robust community involvement in decisions can exist independently of equity arrangements.

The taxonomy therefore redefines ownership as decision-making authority: the degree to which a community has formalised power to shape, influence, co-determine or lead decisions at each phase of a project lifecycle. This authority is described throughout the paper using the shorthand term "Authority".



The Taxonomy: Two Dimensions

The taxonomy maps two principal dimensions: the **project lifecycle stage** and the **level of community authority**.

The project lifecycle is broken into five stages: Development, Appraisal and Approval, Construction, Operation, and Decommissioning. Each stage presents distinct opportunities for communities to exert Authority, and each involves decisions of different character and consequence.

Against these stages, the taxonomy defines four levels of authority:

Level	Authority type	Descriptor	Decision-making thresholds
A	Inform	Communities receive information.	No influence or role in decisions
B	Consult	Communities participate in design	Input can influence outcomes; decisions remain with developers and financiers
C	Co-decision	Decisions are jointly made within defined scopes	Decision cannot proceed without documented joint agreement
D	Lead	Communities lead project development, construction and operation.	Community is the decision-maker, with a developer/private partner participating.

To support practical application, we have developed the “Authority Dial”, a way to visually recognise the degree of authority a community holds at what stage. The intersection of these two dimensions produces a matrix through which any project can be assessed.

Four Taxonomic Classifications

Analysis of community ownership models across projects produces four primary classifications, defined by both the level of authority and its distribution across the project lifecycle.

- **Distributed High authority.** Communities exercise Co-decide (C) or Lead (D) authority across all or most lifecycle stages. Currently rare in the Global South, examples exist in Canada and Australia and are beginning to emerge elsewhere. These models require substantial technical, financial and governance capacity on the part of the community.
- **Concentrated High authority.** High-level authority is exercised at specific lifecycle stages, typically upstream, rather than across the full lifecycle. This may reflect strong early engagement practice, or community preference not to participate throughout.
- **Distributed Low authority.** Communities are engaged at multiple stages, but in a consultative capacity only, without binding decision-making power. This pattern is common in compliance-driven contexts where consultation is mandated but decision-making authority is not.
- **Peripheral authority.** Communities receive information and, in some cases, financial remuneration, but exert little to no influence over design or governance decisions at any stage. Financial inclusion without decision-making authority.



Stage-Specific Patterns

Within the classification framework, the taxonomy identifies four temporal patterns that describe how authority is distributed across the project timeline:

- **Front-Loaded:** Authority concentrated in early stages, particularly around siting, land access and approval, with limited formal involvement during operation.
- **Back-Loaded:** Limited early authority, with increasing community governance during operational phases, potentially leading to full handover over time.
- **Symbolic:** Authority appears formally present but is confined to low-stakes or late-stage decisions without binding power. Financial returns without governance.
- **Integrated:** High-level authority distributed across multiple lifecycle stages, from co-design through to operational co-governance.

Structural Embeddedness

The taxonomy introduces a third analytical dimension, structural embeddedness, which considers the degree to which community authority is legally or contractually protected against changes in developer ownership, personnel, or policy environment. This dimension distinguishes between authority that exists in practice and authority that can be revoked.

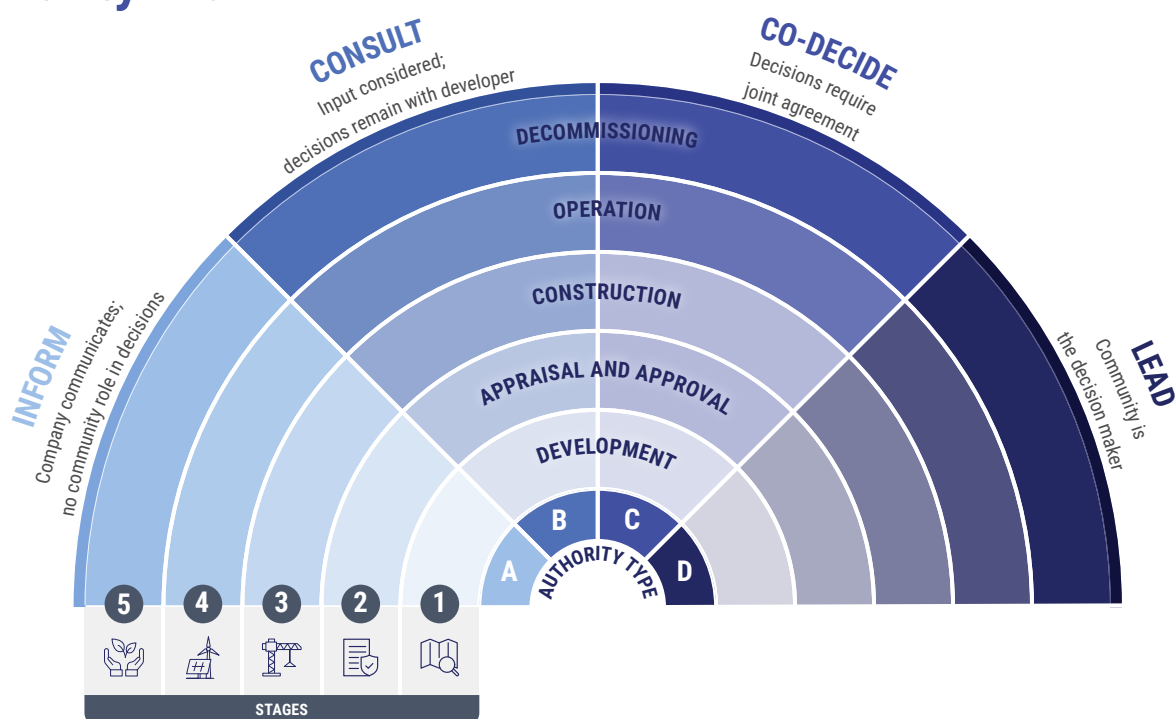
Conclusion

This taxonomy is offered as a starting point, not a settled framework. Its value lies in providing a common analytical vocabulary through which divergent models of community ownership can be understood, compared and assessed. As projects develop across diverse Global South contexts, the framework will require iteration.

The paper will be followed by two further outputs: a business case for community ownership directed at developers and investors, and a series of case studies from projects in which community ownership, or meaningful elements of it, has been successfully implemented.

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Authority Dial



	A	B	C	D
1 Development	Public notice high-level maps showing indicative site boundaries. Explanation of technology options.	Community meetings: Identify land use patterns, seasonal activities, sacred sites. Feedback on siting constraints and access routes	Joint siting workshops: Community and developer agree preferred site options. Cannot proceed without documented joint agreement	Community determines: Whether land can be offered for development at all
2 Appraisal and approval	Disclosure of ESIA summaries, land acquisition frameworks, and project timelines in accessible formats.	Formal consultations: ESIA hearings, compensation rate discussions, consultation on livelihood restoration measures.	Co-design of benefits: Equity shares, funds and local electrification schemes designed together with agreed governance rules.	Community leads: Determines and agrees collectively on permits, land leases and financing conditions
3 Construction	Construction updates, traffic and safety risks.	Feedback channels on construction impacts (noise, dust, access, disruption), consultations on camp locations or working hours	Joint oversight bodies: Review compliance with ESMPs and agree corrective actions. Shared decision on use of local development funds.	Community holds: Project design plans and stop work authority
4 Operation	Performance reporting: Operational summaries and environmental and social monitoring results disclosed periodically.	Advisory forums: On ongoing impacts and changes to operations.	Shared governance: Of community trusts of benefit funds. Joint decision-making on social investment priorities.	Community governs: The operating asset directly, or holds decisive voting rights on key operational matters
5 Decommissioning	Decommissioning notice: Advance notice of timelines. Disclosure of restoration and waste management plans.	Transition consultation: On preferred land restoration options.	Joint repowering: Co-decisions on repowering models, asset transfer or long-term stewardship arrangements.	Community determines: Future land use and assumes ownership or stewardship of infrastructure

Contents

Executive Summary	2
Authority Dial	5
1 Introduction	7
1.1. Why is this critical now?	8
1.2. What is community ownership	8
1.3. Purpose of paper	10
2 Definitions	11
2.1. Community	12
2.2. Global South	12
2.3. Large/Utility scale solar and onshore wind	13
3 Introducing the Taxonomy	14
3.1. Introduction	15
Taxonomy purpose: Making sense of divergent approaches to community ownership	16
Potential benefits of this taxonomy framework	16
3.2. Principles	17
3.3. Building the taxonomy	17
Project lifecycle stage:	18
Levels of authority	18
Authority Dial	20
Mapping level of authority and distribution across lifecycle stage	23
Stage specific models	25
3.4. Critical reflections	29
Conclusion	31
References	32
Acknowledgements	33

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Introduction

1.1. Why is this critical now?

A growing global population, exponentially increasing energy demand and an economy predicated on growth all bring into question one challenge: land use. Food production, restoring nature, mineral and metal extraction, energy production are imperatives for the global economy yet are in competition for finite space. Large scale renewable projects, such as solar fields and on-shore wind farms, must occupy huge tracts of land, a reality that sets them on course for relationships with the communities who occupy them already, who depend on the land for their livelihoods, or have cultural and historic ties that are deep, spiritual and relational.

The exact area of land required for renewable energy projects globally or regionally can be difficult to determine due to changing efficiencies in technology and fluctuating scenarios, but undoubtedly it will be vast. The priority of governments around the world to scale renewable energy in line with net-zero targets and energy security questions, and the potential of many countries in the Global South to have significantly productive renewables (60% of the world's best solar potential is in Africa (Global Solar Council, 2025), all point to the growing land use question inherent in the transition. This is particularly salient in contexts where land rights protection regulatory frameworks are incomplete, and where customary landowners' rights are insufficiently recognised.

The 2024 Indigenous Peoples and the Just Transition Declaration recognises the need to shift to renewable energy to address the climate crisis (IPRI, 2024). However, "the current declaration of the energy transition fails to meet the criteria of justice, social equity and environmental sustainability, particularly from the perspectives of Indigenous Peoples' rights and well-being" (IPRI, 2024). Should this failure continue, the threat is one "at a scale not witnessed previously" and the urgency of the decarbonisation agenda risks compromising "social and environmental safeguards" and "exacerbating historical patterns of dispossession, displacement and exclusion" (Sharma, 2026). The reconciliation of the rights of communities with the expansion of renewable energy is urgently needed to mitigate these risks. However, moving away from engagement seen as one-off or compliance-led, and conducted in a top-down manner, to a mindset and approach that considers communities as long-term partners, will lead to benefits for business, policymakers and energy projects.

1.2. What is community ownership

This paper focuses on community ownership as a framework and as a model for planned large-scale renewable projects in rural areas across much of the global south. **In such cases, the integration and incorporation of communities is the most compelling and important opportunity to achieve a just energy transition, reduce risk, and increase project viability.**



In the context of renewable energy, community ownership is not itself innovative. For example, IRENA's 2020 Innovation Brief reviewed instances of community ownership models globally, defined as "a particular model in which communities invest or are supported to invest in small scale renewable energy systems, referred to as Distributed Energy Resources (DER)". Such approaches, via cooperative or "prosumer models", are predicated on energy access to the communities that invest and are typically located in the Global North.

Despite this historic aperture of the concept, its adoption could be critical in the context of the renewable energy transition in the Global South. Community ownership, and the broader work on Benefit Sharing models, in these contexts takes a justice lens to the design and implementation of projects at scale across large tracts of land, rather than a consumer (lower cost, lower carbon footprint) and access (remote location) based lens. Such approaches are increasingly understood as critical to advancing a human-rights-based approach to the energy transition (for example, UNHCHR, 2025). While existing literature on community ownership in large scale projects is emergent at best, there are conceptually useful aspects of the typical definitions found in community ownership in DER. These include (emphasis by author):

- "Community-ownership structures... refer to the **collective ownership and management of energy related assets**... characterised by local stakeholders owning most of the project and voting rights. Most of the project's **socio-economic benefits are therefore distributed at the local community level**" (IRENA, 2020)
- "**Locally owned and locally sited**, where community owners have control over the wind farm's management" (Global Energy Monitor, 2022)

Together, these refer to the agency and authority communities have over RE development projects directly due to their geographical proximity to the sites themselves, and historical, cultural, spiritual relationship with the territories, and tie this to receiving benefits because of that relationship. In the examples studied at the time of publication where shared ownership has been utilized in the context of large-scale energy projects, this link is also clear: "community involvement in a commercial developer's project... this **can imply sharing in project assets and the dividend stream, as well as the potential role in governance and decision-making**" (IFC, 2019).

Table 1: Elements of Community Ownership: Global North vs Global South

	Global North	Global South
Governance	Voting control lies with community	Voting control predominantly lies with developer
Purpose	Powering the community	Contributing to national energy generation
Ownership structure	Community represented through cooperative structure	Community represented through trust or representative body
Model	Lower household bills, prosumer income from grid	Land-leasing, dividend or revenue sharing models

*In rare cases, such as in Canada, Indigenous Peoples own a significant proportion of large-scale renewable energy projects.

Rights based community ownership in large-scale renewable energy projects, when developed through meaningful engagement with rightsholders, offers these opportunities:



- **A means for those directly impacted by projects to have a role in decision-making and benefit-sharing, advancing the rights of communities to benefit from resource development and set their own vision of development**
- **A means through which developers and investors can, through upfront investment, mitigate risk of social conflict and backlash to the project, limit unintended consequences of development and potential legal implications, and delay to project timelines.**

As this paper will discuss, it can go much deeper than that if adopted as a model to genuinely transform developer-community relations.

1.3. Purpose of paper

Community ownership in large scale renewable energy projects is not new. Over the past twenty years, Indigenous Peoples in Canada and Australia have demonstrated their right to assert control over their land through such projects (BHRC/IPRI, 2024). However, across the Global South, such cases are rare. In South Africa, the Renewable Energy Independent Power Producer Procurement Programme (REIPPP) mandates equity shares for communities in proximity to such projects and has seen an expansion of the model. Examples are beginning to emerge in other places globally, from the Philippines to Argentina, Kenya to Colombia.

To date, there has been a lack of a systematic approach to clarify and align the various models of community ownership across Global South contexts. The purpose of this paper is to provide an initial attempt at doing so, first by attempting to provide definitional clarity to some of the key terms used in this paper, then by providing a diagnostic taxonomy that breaks down ownership as a conceptual term and applies it to the reality of renewable energy projects, along with a discussion of key principles and gaps in the framework.

This paper is the first of three tools developed through the Responsible Energy Initiative engaging with the Just Renewable Energy Alliance for the Global South, as part of a broader effort to advance community ownership in large scale renewable energy. The second tool, a short industry-facing brief, will provide a case for action for business to adopt such models. The third will spotlight case studies of where community ownership models, or elements of community ownership, have found success.

This paper takes the commercially driven, privately led renewable energy project as its unit of analysis and explores how communities can be meaningfully included within it. It therefore does not consider in detail a critical moment of self-determination; that a community may not choose to optimise its position within a developer-led project, it may choose to reject the project entirely or to propose an alternative land use. Additionally, the paper also does not make a normative argument for best practice and explicitly advocates for the adoption of any specific model. Nor does it detail methodologies or any single specific roadmap for developers to use in conducting strong social engagement. It builds on the frameworks of engagement, such as those of the UN and multinational banks, and other leading practices in community engagement; it does not seek to replicate them.

Our intention is to build the body of knowledge of community ownership, informed by Indigenous Peoples' experience and wisdom and applied to the energy transition overall, to encourage communities, developers and others to work with its potential as a viable option, and to integrate climate, social and natural needs.



2

Definitions

This following section aims to explore what we mean by key terms in this field. We acknowledge we cannot capture all perspectives, nor can we hope to entirely capture context-dependent discrepancies in interpretation. The following serves to support understanding of the use of these terms in this paper, with the goal of improving the fluency of all actors in engaging with these models.

2.1. Community

What do we mean when we describe a community? While this may seem philosophical in nature, it has implications for projects that explicitly name communities as their key stakeholder.

Our goal is to discuss community ownership from the perspective of Global South contexts, and this paper is fundamentally informed by the experiences, advocacy and work of Indigenous Peoples and organisations. However, it is not explicitly for or restricted to Indigenous Peoples.

In the majority of instances, large scale renewable projects are, or will be, located on rural land, and those living or connected to that land are poor, underserved, disenfranchised, and underprepared for the complexity of energy project. For the purposes of this paper, our definition of community is:

A geographically concentrated group with historic and present-day ties to living in and using a specific territory, typically rural, and typically marginalised, dispossessed and excluded from decision-making and economic prosperity.

Relevant to the energy transition, these communities are geographically proximate to planned large-scale renewable energy projects.

2.2. Global South

We understand the *Global South* to mean those countries and communities, primarily in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and Pacific Islands, and Latin America with shared histories of colonization and subsequent resistance, coupled with a record of long standing exemplary ecological stewardship despite extensive mineral resource extraction and political and economic instability. Communities in the Global South are also disproportionately affected by climate change in spite of contributing the least to it (GermanWatch, 2021). These regions are characterized by distinct governance systems, rich cultural norms influenced by anticolonial movements, and often volatile development trajectories compared to the Global North.

We recognise that the Global South is not a monolith, but a constellation of diverse contexts shaped by resilience and innovation in the face of deeply entrenched legacies of extraction, subjugation and inequity.

To take a Global South perspective, we commit to grounding our work in the lived realities of people and systems in these regions. We will define clearly what we mean by “Global South” in all outputs and draw on our collective understanding of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion to make biases explicit.



We will take time to question Western-oriented assumptions and honour Indigenous knowledge and leadership. We will sample data responsibly, speak directly with practitioners and communities on the ground, and design dialogues that are inclusive of both business and community mindsets. Through this, we aim to represent Global South perspectives with integrity, humility, and care.

2.3. Large/Utility scale solar and onshore wind

When we focus on large scale renewable energy projects, we narrow the scope of this work intentionally. This is for two reasons: the first is that community ownership in DER has a substantial and growing body of literature, and the second is that, as discussed, the energy transition will require the deployment of vast energy projects in many contexts within the Global South.

We define large or utility scale for solar and onshore wind as:

- >5MW – Solar Fields
- >10MW – On-shore wind^[1]

Notable exceptions to this list in the context of the renewable energy transition are offshore wind and hydropower. Off-shore wind remains nascent in community ownership and brings multiple new questions to address. While this framework has not been developed from offshore wind experience, we hope it can contribute to that field as it emerges. For hydroelectric dams, examples of community ownership exist, notably in Nepal and Canada. Given extensive research on these topics already, we have focused the scope on solar and wind as exhibiting sufficient commonality to be analytically useful.



[1] Per The National Renewable Energy Laboratory and Global Wind Power tracker respectively



3

Introducing the Taxonomy

3.1. Introduction

Within the scope provided above, and as introduced in the opening sections, community ownership can have multiple meanings. To set up the taxonomy, we combine innovative work on equity ownership with existing literature on community engagement to create our working definition.

While community ownership as it relates to the ownership of equity has significant potential, in Global South examples equity ownership does not correlate to decision-making evenly. In equity ownership models, communities receive a percentage of shares of the project. The origin of the capital required to participate in this way varies by case and context. In cases such as REIPPP projects in South Africa, community ownership is mandated by the state and provided by the developers, determined through community consultation and financing requirements. In other cases, such as Antu-1, in Argentina, the Millaqueo formed a joint venture with the developer and Meliquina, a 3rd party mediator. In other cases, development bank financing has provided the financial input on the community's behalf. **In the Global South, there are few to no cases of self-funded community equity ownership.**

Equity ownership can act as “**...not only a financial mechanism but a tool for sharing decision-making power and wealth**”^[2], with the purpose of moving communities from being opponents or recipients of marginal benefits to becoming active business partners, or “socias activas” (Meliquina, 2025). Other recent analysis defining community ownership similarly finds as “whereby an indigenous group or entity, on whose land or territory the project is located, holds shares (equity) in the developer company”, which can “empower indigenous communities by **increasing influence in decisions and enabling fairer and more equitable distribution of project benefits**” (Sharma, 2026).

Equity as a financial mechanism is typically legally recognised post-financing of the project, while ownership as a decision-making or authority wielding reality begins prior to financing and runs the full cycle. This is clear in the recommendations of Indigenous Peoples, development banks and the UN on rights such as Free, Prior and Informed Consent through which broader ownership is exercised.^[3] In the FAO's definition “consent should be sought **before any project, plan or action takes place** (prior), it should be first be independently decided upon (free) and **based on accurate, timely and sufficient information** provided in a culturally appropriate way (informed) for it to be considered a valid result or outcome of a collective decision-making process” (FAO, 2016), and for development banks, **it should be continuous throughout project cycle, and sustained to closure** (ADB 2025), while recognising the long-term impacts of a project on land and community.

How a community can exercise “ownership” through a project is neither fully understood nor formally mapped, regardless of equity considerations. The projects reviewed in this paper provide an array of models for equity AND in community involvement in decision-making. A Greenwood-led project,

[2] Emphasis by the authors

[3] For further detail on the appropriate application of FPIC, refer to BHRC/IPRI, 2024.

“TERRA”, has had strong and consistent community engagement, yet the community’s equity ownership increases over time until they receive full ownership of the project. In another example, equity ownership was provided, but little community involvement as a critical stakeholder beyond consultation in early stages. The two cases both fall under community ownership by various definitions yet are analytically divergent. Framed another way, significant community shares do not equate to high degrees of decision-making and nor does a lack of shares equate to low levels of engagement.

Taxonomy purpose: Making sense of divergent approaches to community ownership

Our proposed taxonomy aims to provide an analytical link by mapping decision-making authority across a given projects’ dominant lifecycle phases. In doing so, we identify community ownership as meaning “decision-making power and authority” aligning with Meliquina and Sharma examples but extending this definition to become the defining factor for ownership across a project. For the purposes of this paper, this authority and agency held by communities will be typically described in shorthand as “Authority”.

Authority is variable and conditional. In some cases, limited authority is recognised only through informing stakeholders of decisions being taken, but full authority means full responsibility and leadership in decision-making. Each stage across the project lifecycle provides an opportunity to assess the level of authority exercised by the community due to the variety of decisions made by stakeholders either with communities or without them.

Potential benefits of this taxonomy framework

Our hope is that by taking this approach, this taxonomy can provide a range of benefits to communities, developers and others, for example:



- » **Clarifies what authority that can be achieved** at each stage of the project, distinguishing between information, influence, and decision-making power.
- » Helps communities identify **gaps between promises and formal authority**, reducing ambiguity and misaligned expectations.
- » Helps articulate demands in terms of **clear governance arrangements**, which are more legible to developers and financiers.



- » Surfaces potential **“Authority gaps”** that could translate into conflict, delay, or reputational exposure
- » Helps **design engagement strategies that evolve across lifecycle stages** rather than remaining static.
- » Provides a **neutral vocabulary to understand, assess and discuss the wide spectrum of participation and ownership**



- » Offers a **consistent framework to assess whether projects are consultative, influential, or genuinely participatory** at different stages.
- » Supports **capacity-building programs that align community skills** with specific authority levels (e.g. governance, monitoring, negotiation).
- » Enables **cross-project and cross-region comparison** of participation models.

3.2. Principles

Through the development of this taxonomy, we have held the following principles to be true to ground our work. These go deeper and beyond what our taxonomy can provide as a diagnostic tool.

1. **Communities are not a coherent, monolithic decision-making unit.** This is the fundamental and critical aspect of any discussion of community engagement and especially as it relates to contexts in which decision-making can be exploited, due to the substantial power, financial and non-financial opportunities offered, and the reality of existing inequities. Within almost any grouping lie power dynamics, excluded voices and inequalities. In line with all recommended practice, we adopt as a principle that safe, gender-responsive and inclusive engagement, catering for the needs of most vulnerable community members, requires tailoring to different stakeholder needs, and thorough and appropriate process to incorporate and respect all voices.
2. **Appropriateness over maximisation:** The nature of the taxonomy may encourage one reading in which best practice leads to maximal authority from the very first instance of the project to the very last. Instead, we adopt as a key principle that community ownership approaches should not only be co-designed with communities, but be appropriate to the needs, expectations, desires and resources of the community.
3. **Intergenerational justice:** Intergenerational justice in community ownership is not achieved through long-term benefits alone, but through durable rights, institutions, and decision-making authority that persist beyond individual leaders, project lifecycles, and political administrations.
4. **Rights as non-negotiable:** Core values of justice and the human rights of all rightsholders are non-negotiable in project design and implementation, which requires meaningful consultation and deliberation with rightsholders. Regardless of utilising equity ownership as a potential modality, companies have a requirement as per the UN Guiding Principles to meaningfully engage with communities impacted by the project and integrate stakeholders' feedback etc (UNGP, 2011).

3.3. Building the taxonomy

The taxonomy has two components:

- Project lifecycle stage
- Level of community decision-making

Project lifecycle stage:

The purpose of breaking down by stage ([Table 2](#)) is to demonstrate when ownership and influence over key decisions may be exercised. In later sections, we demonstrate how this can lead to temporal categorisations of community authority. For example, high degrees of authority in upstream stages as “front-loaded authority” ([see section 4.3 for more details](#)).

Table 2: Project Lifecycle Stages

Stage	Description
 Development	Early-stage project identification and feasibility, focused on site screening, risk identification, and understanding the social, environmental, and institutional context. Emphasis is on early stakeholder identification, initial information disclosure, and shaping project options before key decisions are locked in.
 Appraisal & Approval	Formal assessment of project impacts, human rights due diligence, risks, and mitigation measures, culminating in permitting, institutional and financial approval decisions. This stage establishes binding commitments through direct agreements with communities, including on equity ownership, impact assessments, consultation processes, management plans, and approval conditions.
 Construction	Delivery of the approved project, typically covering construction and early operational activities. Engagement focuses on managing impacts, implementing agreed measures, maintaining grievance mechanisms, and ensuring compliance with approved plans.
 Operation	Long-term operation and maintenance of the asset following commissioning and achievement of commercial operation. This stage centres on ongoing performance, monitoring, stakeholder engagement, and delivery of agreed social and economic benefits.
 Decommissioning	Planned decommissioning, repowering, or handover of the project at end of life. Engagement addresses site restoration, socio-economic transition, future land use, and resolution of outstanding obligations.

Levels of authority

To demonstrate how and to what extent communities can exert authority over a project, [Table 3](#) provides five levels of authority, descriptors and “decision-making thresholds”. The levels begin with “Inform”, the basic level of compliance in nearly every geography, and develops to “Lead”, in which communities are the primary responsible partner for decisions and actions at that stage or across a project.

While these levels have been adapted and built from existing frameworks on social engagement, our focus differs in that the primary emphasis is on the evaluation of formalised, project-embedded decision authority over time, not participation quality.^[4]

[4] We defer to materials such as FPIC’s Manual for Project Practitioners, Arnstein’s Citizen Engagement Ladder, and recommended practice from Development Banks such as Asia Development Bank’s Environmental and Social Framework.

Table 3: Levels of Authority

Level	authority type	Descriptor	Decision-making thresholds
A	Inform	Communities receive information.	No influence or role in decisions
B	Consult	Communities participate in design	Input can influence outcomes; decisions remain with developers and financiers
C	Co-decision	Decisions are jointly made within defined scopes	Decision cannot proceed without documented joint agreement
D	Lead	Communities lead project development, construction and operation.	Community is the decision-maker, with a developer/private partner participating.

Bringing these two elements together, lifecycle stage and authority type, creates a matrix in which authority at each stage can be indicated. [Table 3](#) provides a high-level overview of the matrix, while [Table 4](#) provides additional detail of what each authority level may look like in practice at each stage. In addition, we also introduce the Authority Dial to support visualising and applying these elements.

We recognise that this is not and cannot currently be exhaustive. It is not possible, nor necessarily useful, to attempt to be comprehensive; rather, we acknowledge that each project, energy type and community brings with it a different context with different people, approaches and regulations. We intend that this taxonomy can be taken and explored in different contexts.



READER QUESTION

If you are a developer, project manager, or investor in renewable energy projects, **where do the projects in your portfolio sit within this matrix?** What is your ideal place and how does it compare with your current status?

Table 4: High level overview of lifecycle x ownership matrix

Lifecycle stage	A - Inform	B - Consult	C - Co-decide	D - Lead
Development	Early disclosure	Site/layout influence	Joint siting decisions	Community-led site selection
Appraisal & Approval	Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) disclosure	Formal consultation	Joint benefit frameworks	Community-led assessment and binding agreements
Construction	Construction updates	Local monitoring/feedback channels	Joint oversight bodies	Stop-work authority
Operation	Performance reporting	Advisory forums and grievance mechanisms	Shared governance	Community-controlled asset
Decommissioning	Decommissioning notice	Transition consultation	Joint repowering and/or transition decisions	Stewardship / land control

Authority Dial

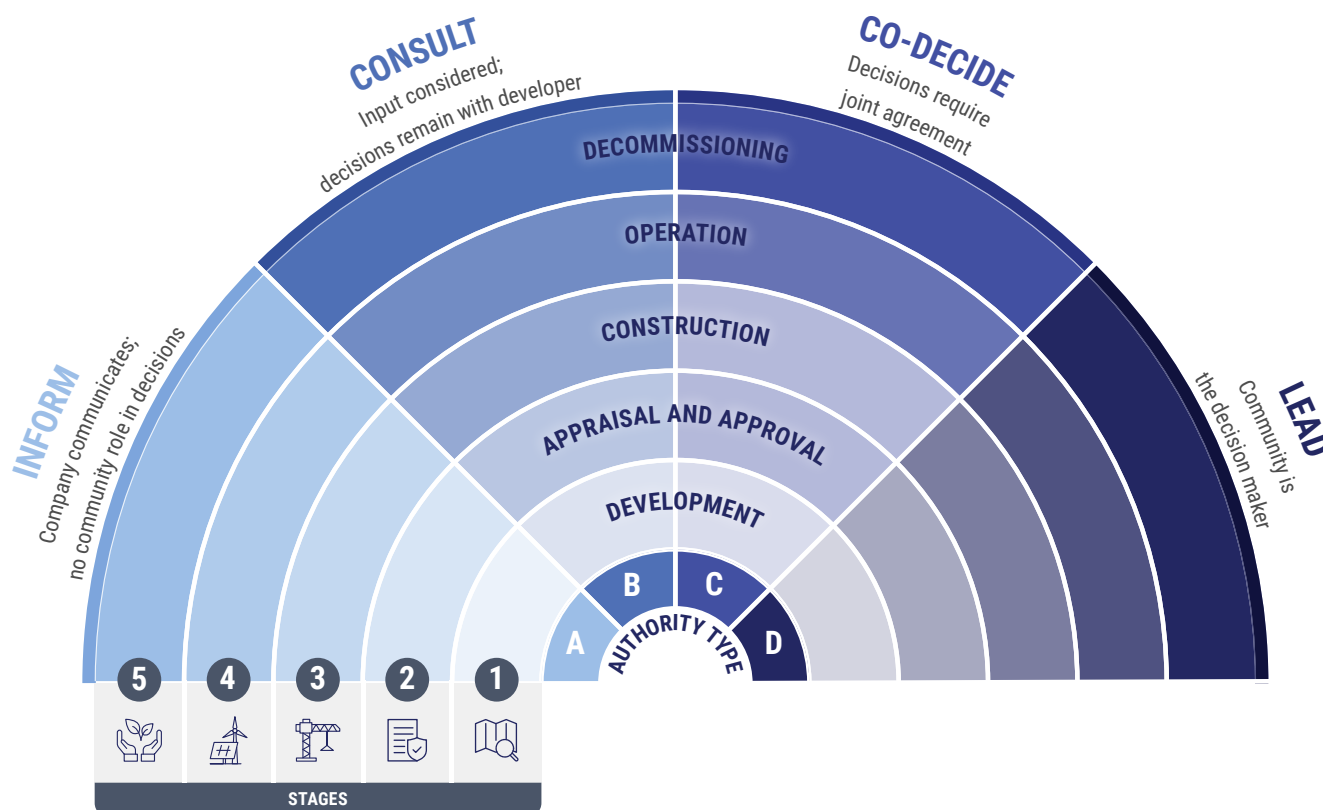


Table 5: Lifecycle-ownership matrix, in detail



STAGE 1: DEVELOPMENT

Typical activities: site screening, land identification, early grid studies, pre-feasibility	
Authority	What this looks like in practice
A - Inform	Public notice of project concept; high-level maps showing indicative site boundaries; explanation of technology options (e.g. wind vs solar).
B - Consult	Community meetings to identify land use patterns, seasonal activities, sacred sites; feedback on siting constraints and access routes.
C - Co-decide	Joint siting workshops where community representatives and developers agree on preferred site options from a short list.
D - Lead	Community or customary land authority determines whether land can be offered for development at all (e.g. Indigenous land councils).

**STAGE 2: APPRAISAL AND APPROVAL**

Typical activities: ESIA, permitting, land acquisition, PPA structuring, lender approval	
<i>Authority</i>	<i>What this looks like in practice</i>
A - Inform	Disclosure of ESIA summaries, land acquisition frameworks, and project timelines in accessible formats.
B - Consult	Formal ESIA consultations; hearings on compensation rates; consultation on resettlement or livelihood restoration measures.
C - Co-decide	Co-design of community benefit-sharing mechanisms (e.g. equity shares, funds, local electrification schemes) with agreed governance rules.
D - Lead	The community as lead determines and agrees collectively on permits, land leases, and financing.

**STAGE 3: CONSTRUCTION**

Typical activities: construction, EPC works, workforce mobilisation, grid connection	
<i>Authority</i>	<i>What this looks like in practice</i>
A - Inform	Regular construction updates, traffic and safety risks, schedules for major works
B - Consult	Feedback channels on construction impacts (noise, dust, access, disruption), consultations on camp locations or working hours
C - Co-decide	Joint oversight committees review compliance with Environmental and Social Management Plans (ESMPs) and agree corrective actions; shared decision on use of local development funds during construction
D - Lead	Community representatives hold project design plans and stop-work authority for defined breaches

**STAGE 4: OPERATION**

Typical activities: Power generation, O&M, revenue flows, long-term asset management	
<i>Authority</i>	<i>What this looks like in practice</i>
A - Inform	Disclosure of operational performance summaries; reporting on environmental and social monitoring results
B - Consult	Advisory forums on ongoing impacts (shadow flicker, water use, access); consultation on changes to operations, allocation of benefit sharing arrangements and opportunities, establishing grievance mechanisms.
C - Co-decide	Shared governance of community trusts or benefit funds; joint decision-making on social investment priorities
D - Lead	Community governs the operating asset (e.g. cooperative ownership) or holds decisive voting rights on key operational matters



STAGE 5: DECOMMISSIONING

Typical activities: Decommissioning, repowering, land restoration, asset transfer	
Authority	What this looks like in practice
A - Inform	Advance notice of decommissioning timelines; disclosure of restoration and waste management plans
B - Consult	Consultation on preferred land restoration options or post-closure land uses (agri, conservation, reuse)
C - Co-decide	Joint decisions on repowering models, asset transfer, or long-term stewardship arrangements
D - Lead	Community determines future land use or assumes ownership/stewardship of remaining infrastructure or site.

With this matrix in place, the following section provides an overview of the subsequent classifications of distinctive models of community ownership.



READER QUESTION

- » Which stages seem most feasible for your existing or future projects?
- » Which will require the most capacity building or support?
- » How will you prioritize allocating capital / resources / time to assist your efforts to progress from A to D?

Classifications

Analysis of community ownership across project lifecycles provides several taxonomic classifications, each with value to offer users of this framework. In this section, we explore how the taxonomy enables

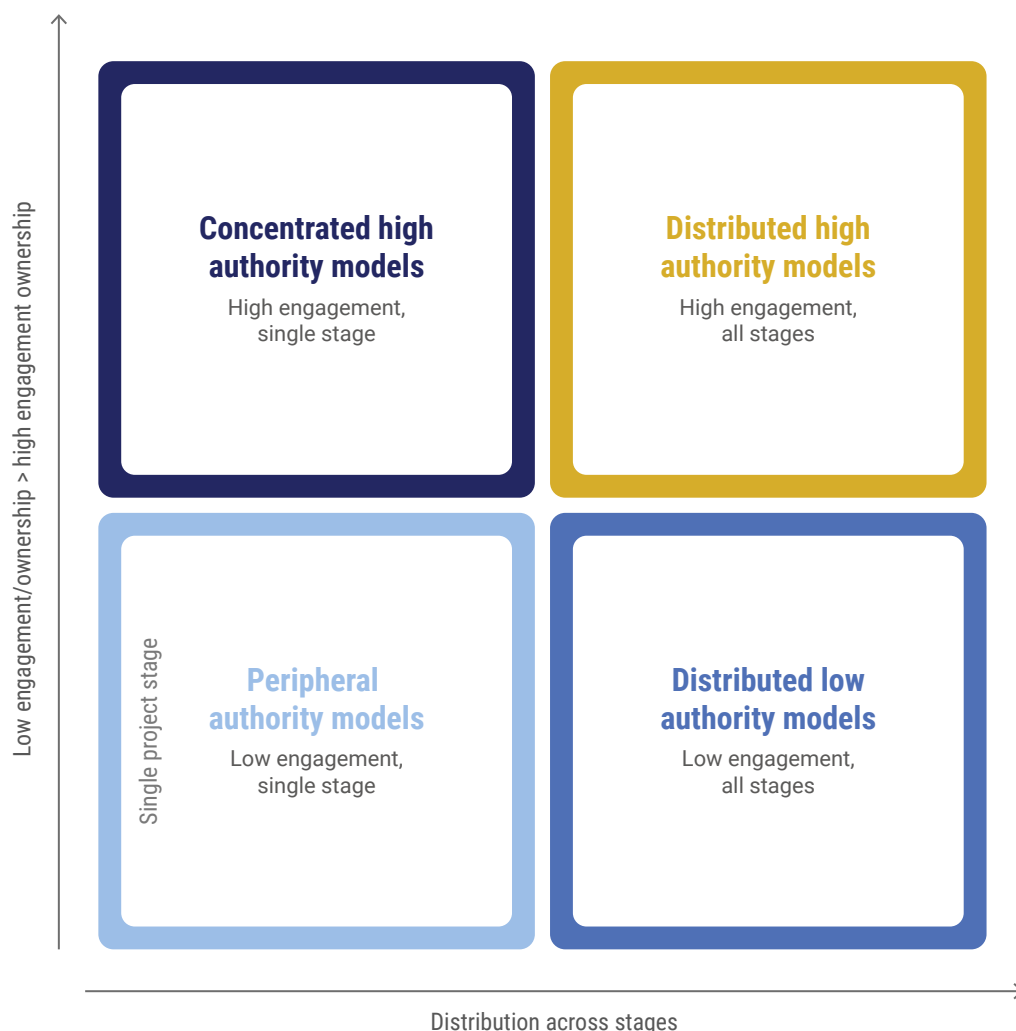
1. a diagnostic categorisation of existing frameworks grounded in degree of authority and distribution of lifecycle stage;
2. a secondary classification of which specific lifecycle stages are the typical focus for engagement, and
3. a generative foundation for further research on authority within renewable energy projects.



Mapping level of authority and distribution across lifecycle stage

The taxonomy provides an approach that supports categorisation of levels of authority versus distribution across lifecycle stages. In *Figure 1*, this is divided into four quadrants, with X and Y axis corresponding to number of project stages and level of authority and ownership, respectively:

Figure 1: Authority distributed across lifecycle stages.



Distributed High Authority

Models in this quadrant demonstrate high levels of community ownership (minimum C) across all project lifecycles. Examples of these models in utility-scale projects can currently be found in Canada and Australia but are emerging as innovative approaches in Global South contexts. In these cases, Indigenous Peoples and their representative organisations exert significant influence and ownership (D) over the majority, if not all, lifecycle stages, including in financing and management of the projects.^[5] Even in cases in which the community is the lead (D), considerations for these models must take into account the appropriate technical, financial and governance experience and expertise of the community.

[5] For example, [East Kimberley Clean Energy Project](#), [Mesgi'g Ugu's'n \(MU\) Wind Farm](#).



Concentrated High Authority

Models in this classification demonstrate a high-degree of authority (C-D) in specific stages of the project, instead of across the totality of the lifecycle. In many examples reviewed, the concentration occurred during earlier stages where best practice in social engagement mandates communities provide input and ideally act to co-design elements of the project (authority levels B-C). Models in this range may be self-selected by communities over an integrated approach, with respect to challenges posed by the technical knowledge required to, for example, be the project lead during construction or operation phases.

Distributed Low Authority

Models in this approach can be seen in states that have some form of mandate or incentive for community ownership, but without strong guidance or regulation on how to implement or provide guardrails for communities. A compliance-led approach can result in the community being consulted throughout the project without any degree of decision-making. For example, early information and consultation (max authority level B) activities and compliance-mandated equity inclusion result in required ongoing engagement but still have consistently limited role for the community.

Peripheral Authority

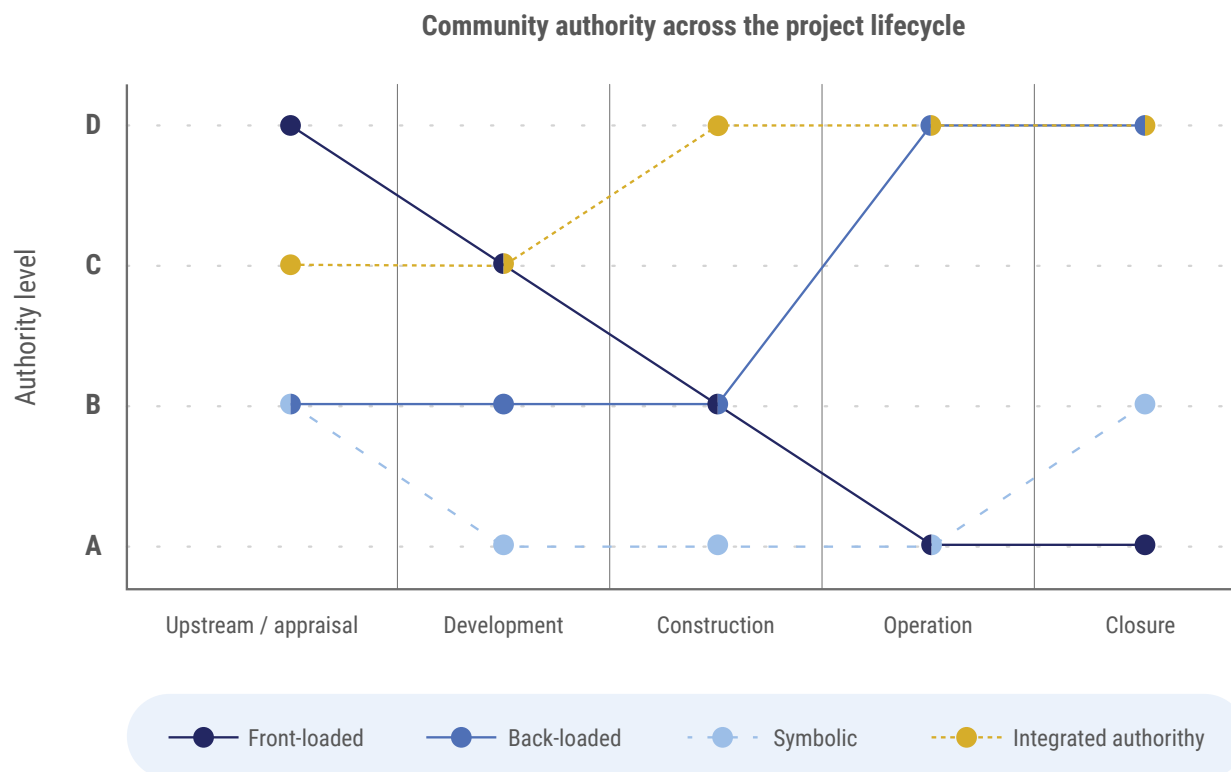
In some cases, developers engage communities to secure access to land leases, or in cases where the land titles do not belong to the communities, to reduce developers' risk of conflict with the communities for potentially violating Indigenous Peoples' FPIC principles and other rights. In these cases, communities may receive a financial remuneration for their land, in addition to information about the development during planning or determination stage but exert little to no decision-making authority or input into design at any lifecycle stage.



Stage specific models

Progressing the diagnostic further, the above classification supports temporally located classifications. As *Figure 2* demonstrates, specifying which stages had high degrees of authority recognises how this can change across a project lifecycle. The specific mapping provided in *Figure 2* is illustrative rather than restrictive.

Figure 2: Stage-specific mapping of Authority



Front-Loaded - Upstream-heavy authority

Community decision-making authority is concentrated in early stages, for example on issues like siting, land access, and approval. This could mean higher degrees of authority through binding consent prior to permitting or financing but limited formal authority during operation. In other words, in these models the community may influence whether, and how, a project proceeds, but little to no influence over long-term revenue flows or operational governance. This approach may be typically seen where principles of early and informed consent are followed diligently by developers through early stages of a project, or where communities are satisfied that initial stages have secured their long-term benefit and do not wish to participate any further.



CASE STUDY

KIPETO WIND FARM (KENYA)

When establishing the wind farm, Kipeto Energy PLC undertook a rigorous consultation process that contributed to the design of the project. The process involved hiring a Maasai lawyer to represent the community, and the extensive use of community liaison officers to meet with members of the impacted groups. The critical project elements the community had high degrees of influence over included the lease payments, the continued use of land by agriculturalists in the group, and the governance structure and investment strategy of the Trust responsible for managing the community funds received through the project. After these stages, the community has grievance mechanisms in place along with the financial payments but has otherwise seen its involvement decline.

Back-Loaded – *Operation-heavy authority*

Authority increases substantially during operational phases. For example, engagement may meet consultatory (B) level of authority from communities in early stages, but developers aim to involve communities as advisors and ultimately owners over time. This arrangement could result in limited participation in key design decisions, but through mechanisms like community benefit funds with shared governance or community board seats, look to “handover” management of the project long-term. Models in this classification contain risks; communities may be inadequately supported to take on the technical and financial aspects of a renewable energy project, or initial dissatisfaction with the model could lead to social unrest. Conversely, it could also recognise that in some cases, communities may require capacity building and support to ensure they can appropriately engage with a project’s key decisions, both on an individual level and as a community. It may ultimately lead to much stronger ties between community and the project.



Nora Romero speaking at public hearing for the Antu solar



TERRA INITIATIVE (COLOMBIA)

While starting as a meaningful stakeholder, this project demonstrates the long-term view of building the community into the owner and lead of a renewable project. The Arhuaco people contributed significantly to several elements of the design of the project, including using the payments from the power purchasing agreement (PPA) signed with the national supplier to fund infrastructural investment into the community. After 25 years, the Arhuaco people receive full ownership of the project's assets, exhibiting a development from B or C level of authority to D, becoming the "lead". The case study exemplifies many key aspects of community ownership, including that equity is not correlated to ownership – the Arhuaco begin with no equity to avoid debt issues, increasing over time, but with significant levels of decision-making power throughout.

Symbolic - *Authority concentrated at closure or marginal stages*

Community decision-making authority appears formally present but is confined to low-impact or late-stage decisions. Throughout the project, community members are limited to advisory roles without binding power (e.g. authority level B), and minimal influence over strategic or financial dimensions. Developers or other parties may have included within land-leasing arrangements the return of land to community members, or the handover of assets and decision-making of how they are used, without providing sufficient recognition of, or support for, the irreversible nature of land use change. Such models may appear positive due to their commitment to returning land or providing assets to the community, in reality these models are likely to generate significant environmental impact and lead to disputes or conflict between parties.



CASE STUDY

TOUWSRIVIER CONCENTRATED SOLAR (SOUTH AFRICA)

The Touwsrivier solar farm is the second largest Concentrated PV (CPV) in the world, operational since 2014. Although the community has an equity percentage of approximately 5%, and control over the investment and distribution of the dividends and land lease payments received, there is little to no evidence of communities in the area exerting influence or being involved in decisions relating to the solar farm. This model exhibits the pitfalls of equating community ownership with equity, as the community's shares do not provide the foundation for contributing to decisions. It equally may be indicative of the challenge of engaging with peoples not otherwise understood as a common Indigenous Peoples, with representatives negotiating on that understanding of commonality. However, this is still not fully explored.



Integrated Authority - Multi-stage C/D Authority

Decision-making authority is distributed across multiple lifecycle stages. In these cases, communities are involved in joint siting decisions, designing mitigation and benefit frameworks, and establishing operational co-governance. Authority can evolve, from co-design (C) at an early stage to leading (D) at later stages. In this case, the technical and social performance expertise of both developer and communities needs to be high to ensure that the complexity of this approach does not undermine its potential for either party.



CASE STUDY

ANTU-1 (ARGENTINA)

The Millaqueo People's, along with Meliquina and Sustentar Energia, formed the Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) Cla Nehuen Antu S.A for the planned 18MW solar project on Mapuche territory, Argentina. The SPV represents the degree of collaboration and engagement conducted throughout the early stages of the project and commits the community as an integral member of the project for its entire duration. While nascent, and the Millaqueo are not the project "leads" as in similar cases in the Global North, the robust framework the SPV is governed by, and the long-term structure of the vehicle is demonstrative of a C and above level of authority throughout the project lifecycle.

Structural embeddedness

The two classification categories developed above, level of authority across project stages, and stage specific models, describe the structure and timing of community decision-making authority within the project. While our intention is to provide a common framework of what authority is available to communities and when it is exercised, this begs a critical question: how might we ensure the durability of the authority over time? This dimension, which we describe as structural embeddedness, refers to the manners in which a community is protected by legal or institutional structures that persist regardless of changes in developer ownership, policy change or project personnel.

Our current evidence base does not sufficiently or consistently provide the data to substantiate a third classification on structural embeddedness. Data on the legal or contractual basis of community authority arrangements is typically unavailable, incomplete or not comparable across jurisdictions. The field needs further systematic, comparable and well-evidenced documentation to assess whether high-authority models are structurally resilient, or contingent upon developer goodwill. Despite this, the analytical potential of combining structural embeddedness with the classifications above is significant, and worth mapping conceptually.

Combined with temporal classification and authority, embeddedness would allow a practitioner to distinguish between models that currently appear analytically similar but carry different implications in practice.

For example, a front-loaded authority model in which upstream and appraisal stage authority is legally embedded, for example through binding consent requirements or contractual veto rights, is structurally different from one in which the same level is exercised through informal arrangements. In the first case, authority is protected, in the second, it is real but can be revoked. Similarly, a back-loaded authority model is only analytically meaningful if the mechanisms by which the handover of authority over time occurs are legally specified. The contrast in this case may be between contractually embedded protected board seats, for example, and the honouring of commitments made during development.

The most significant opportunity of this analysis comes from combining lifecycle integrated authority with embeddedness assessment. A model presenting high levels of authority across a project lifecycle that is also legally embedded in structures surviving changes of developer or government is a genuinely distinct category of community ownership, in which the structural relationship between community and project is transformed, not only managed.

3.4. Critical reflections

We hope that this paper will stimulate further research, application in specific contexts, and challenge. By providing a suggested framework for understanding ownership in renewable energy projects using the classifications of lifecycle distribution and authority, we consciously choose to relegate other considerations and formats for understanding ownership. Any choice results in gaps, either in our analysis, omission or due to available data. The following section provides an initial review of these gaps, and we invite further discussion and critique as a building process to develop the framework and body of knowledge further.

GAP 1

THE FRAMEWORK ASSUMES AUTHORITY IS RECOGNISED

The taxonomy relies on community decision-making authority being observable and categorisable. In this way, it can be mapped onto a scale as described. In practice, authority is often relational and context-dependent in ways that resist formal categorisation.

A community that never exercises veto rights formally, but has the implicit capacity to withdraw consent, can shape every developer decision throughout the project lifecycle. This genuine degree of responsibility could, nevertheless, show up as consultative (max. B) in the matrix. A community that formally holds high level joint decision-making, but whose representatives lack the technical literacy to meaningfully interrogate project financials or environmental assessments holds nominal authority that the matrix would record as D.

Although we have attempted to develop elements of this through substantiation and emphasis on embedded authority, there remains a gap between formalised and substantive authority that is not captured here, the difference between formal governance arrangements and what community power, and power within that community, really entails.

GAP 2**DEVELOPER-CENTRIC LIFECYCLE MODEL**

The five-stage lifecycle is a developer-centric model of how projects proceed. It reflects how financiers and project managers understand project phases, not necessarily how communities experience them.

For many communities, the most consequential moments of a project are not captured by lifecycle stage at all. The period before a developer arrives, when land use patterns are established, when customary governance structures are functioning or not, when communities are or are not aware that their land is being assessed, may determine everything that follows, but it sits outside the taxonomy entirely. Similarly, the social dynamics within a community during a project, who gains, who loses, how intra-community conflict is managed, unfold continuously across all stages rather than at defined decision points. Finally, there are many different relationships to ownership as a concept, including contradictory underlying relationships with the privatisation of land, that cannot be accounted for here.

A framework built on developer lifecycle stages could systematically underweight the periods and dynamics that communities themselves identify as most significant.

GAP 3**COMPARISON ACROSS CONTEXTS MAY PRODUCE FALSE EQUIVALENCE**

Authority levels can mean different things in different regulatory and institutional contexts. C level authority in a jurisdiction with strong environmental and social governance frameworks, active civil society, and effective grievance mechanisms is a very different thing from C-level authority in a context with weak rule of law, no independent media, and limited community access to legal recourse. The matrix records both as “C”. A practitioner comparing projects across those two contexts using the taxonomy would be comparing formally equivalent but substantively incommensurable situations.





Conclusion

This whitepaper aims to serve to build the body of knowledge on this topic, not complete it. As new projects are developed in different contexts, this taxonomy may become outdated or require development.

It may continue to serve as a reference document for stakeholders from across the spectrum to recognise the continuum with which authority can be established and employed, rather than equating community ownership with just one policy tool or financial instrument. As such, the paper has not sought to be overly restrictive or determinative. This is a burgeoning field of work, and no outcomes can be certain.

The ongoing clean energy transition differs from the fossil fuel-based order, particularly given the distributed nature of renewable resources such as solar and wind. However, renewable energy systems are not inherently equitable, and the outcomes of the transition ultimately depend on how projects are governed, financed and embedded within local territories. In this context, community ownership represents one important pathway to strengthen local participation, improve benefit-sharing, and ensure that communities have a meaningful stake in projects and in the benefits generated by the transition, rather than being concentrated among a limited set of actors.

This series will continue with a paper covering the business case for community ownership models and a series of case studies to inspire and inform.

Please get in touch at contact@justre-alliance.org for more information.

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JustRE Alliance

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