



How presumed benevolence could short-circuit the energy transition and what we can do about it

Institute for Infrastructure in Society
www.nextgenengagement.org

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Social Licence Community of Practice
2 September 2025


Next Generation
Engagement 

 Australian
National
University

CRAWFORD SCHOOL
OF PUBLIC POLICY

ANU acknowledgment of country

“

We acknowledge and celebrate the First Australians on whose traditional lands we meet, and pay our respect to the elders past and present.

”

I2S Partners and Supporters



Australian
National
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Our industry partners work with us every step of the way to research solutions to their most pressing challenges

Major partners:



Queensland
Government



Government of South Australia

Department for Infrastructure
and Transport



sunwater

Transurban

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HIGHER EDUCATION FUTURES LAB



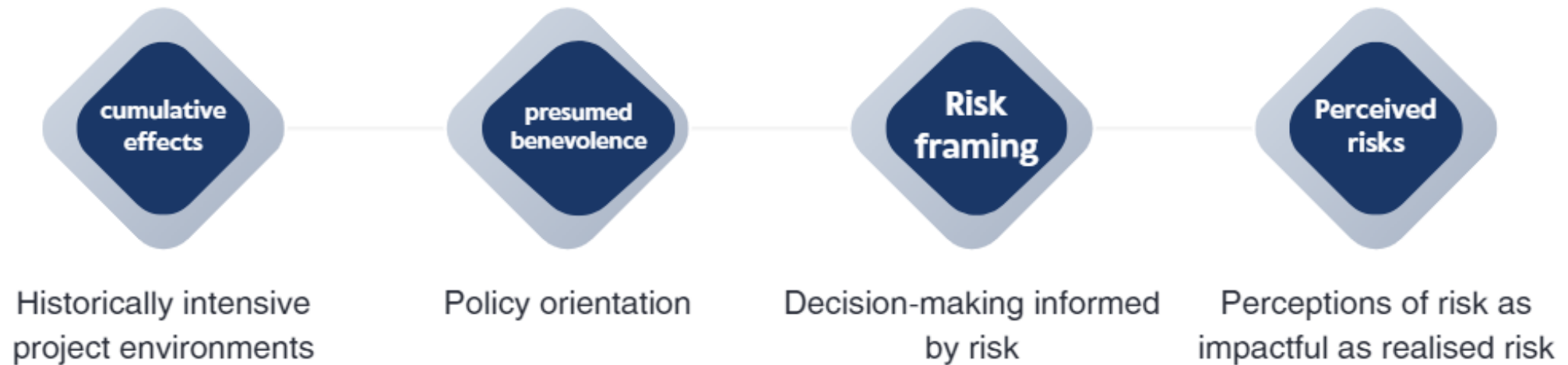
Sydney
WATER

A dramatic photograph of a sailboat navigating through a stormy sea. The sky is filled with dark, heavy clouds, with a bright patch of light breaking through near the horizon. A large, white-capped wave is breaking in the foreground on the left. The sailboat, with its mast and rigging visible, is positioned in the middle ground, moving towards the right. The water is dark and turbulent, with white foam from the waves. The overall mood is one of intense natural power and the challenge of sailing in adverse conditions.

a perfect SLO storm?

Four Intersections

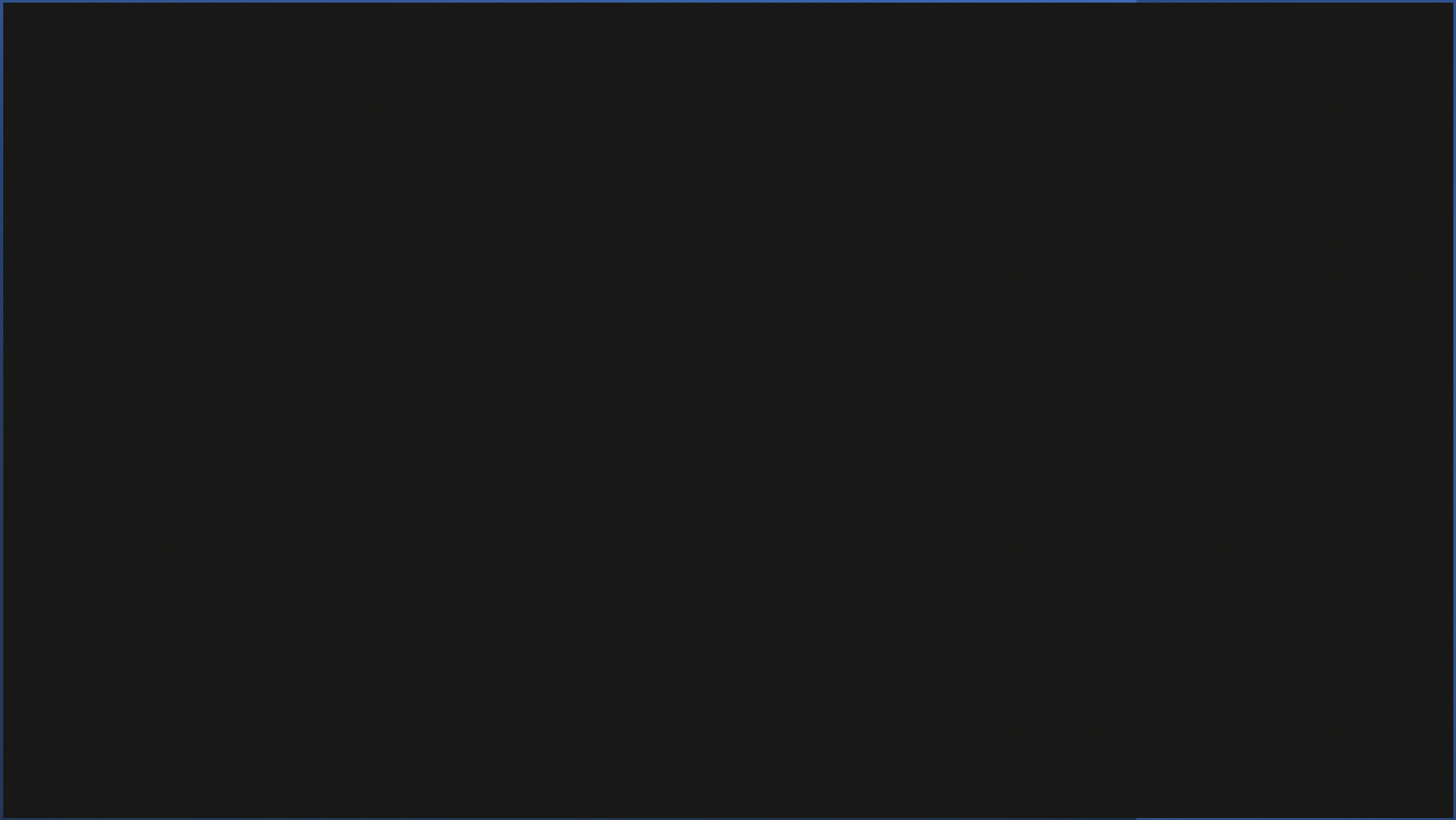
creating a perfect policy storm for renewables





Three opportunities

- Acknowledge and address presumed benevolence
- Build ‘collective efficacy’
- Use the compression effect



What is the 'social transition'?

The social transition refers to community and societal concerns which will affect the speed, quality and success of the energy transition.





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Why does the social transition matter?

WINNERS AND LOSERS



1) ACKNOWLEDGE AND ADDRESS PRESUMED BENEVOLENCE

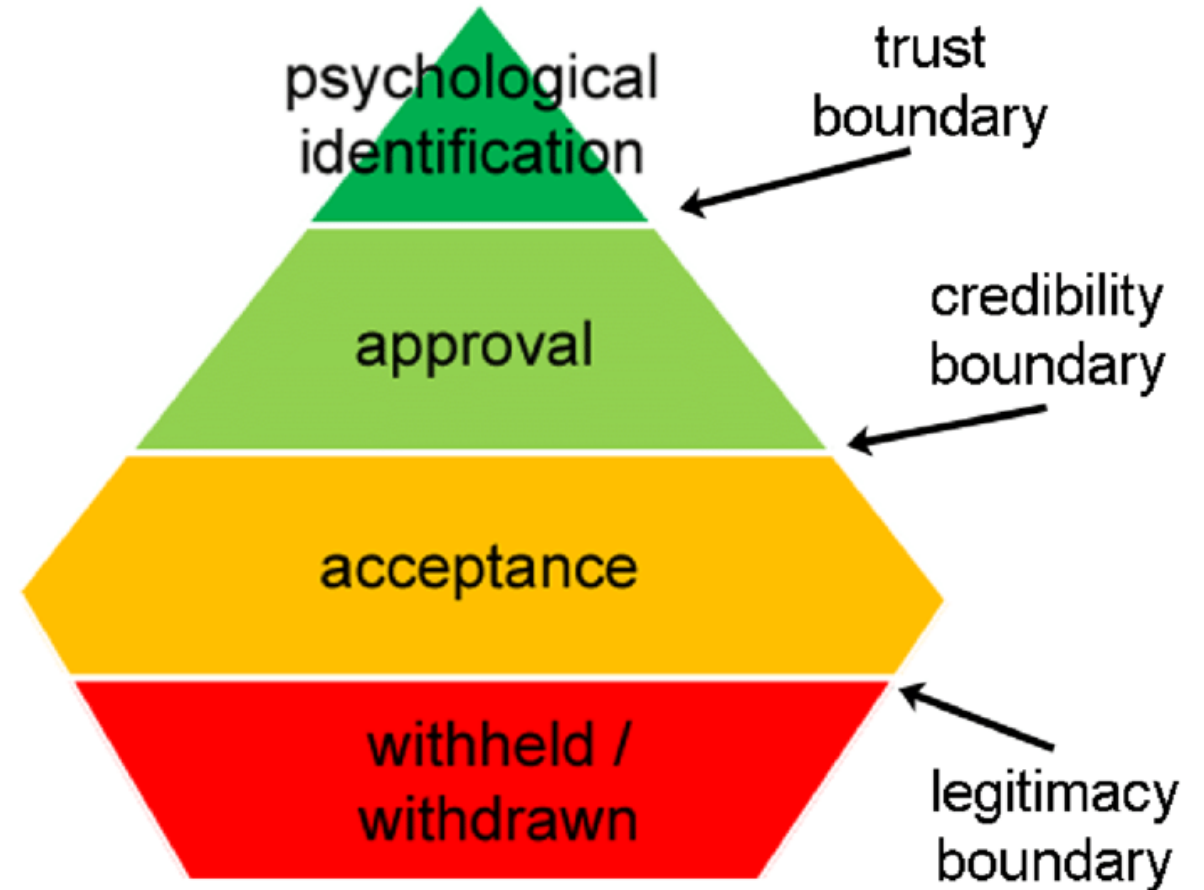


Every major reform has winners and losers

Right now...

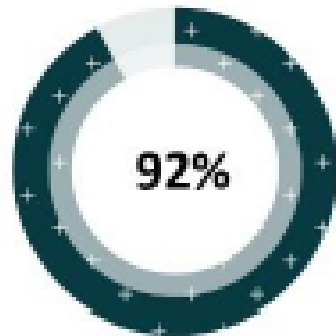
- Almost 20% of Australians would **reject** renewables transmission lines
- A further 20% would only **tolerate**

Source: CSIRO, 2023

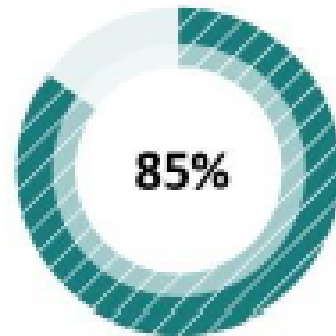


Social Licence to Operate

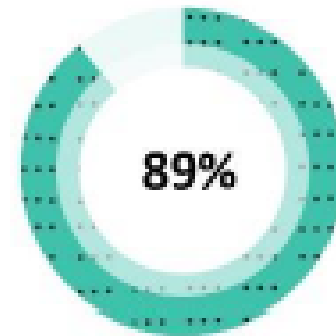
In the HaveYourSay survey, the Review asked landholders and community members about their experience of engagement on renewable energy projects.



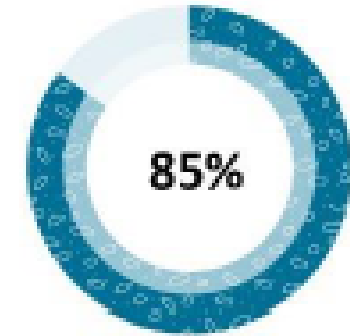
92% of respondents were dissatisfied with the extent to which project developers engaged the local community.



85% of respondents were dissatisfied with the explanations provided by project developers in response to their questions.



89% of respondents stated that the information they received from project developers was not relevant to the concerns that they raised.



85% of respondents stated that their concerns were not addressed in a timely manner.

Source: AEIC, 2024



Key Issues

- Affordability
- Benefits
- Regional and rural communities are less accepting
- Transmission lines are least wanted
- Public understanding of necessary scale is limited


Sources: I2S, 2023; 2022; CSIRO, 2023



The case of NSW Renewable Energy Zones

Hunter-Central Coast REZ

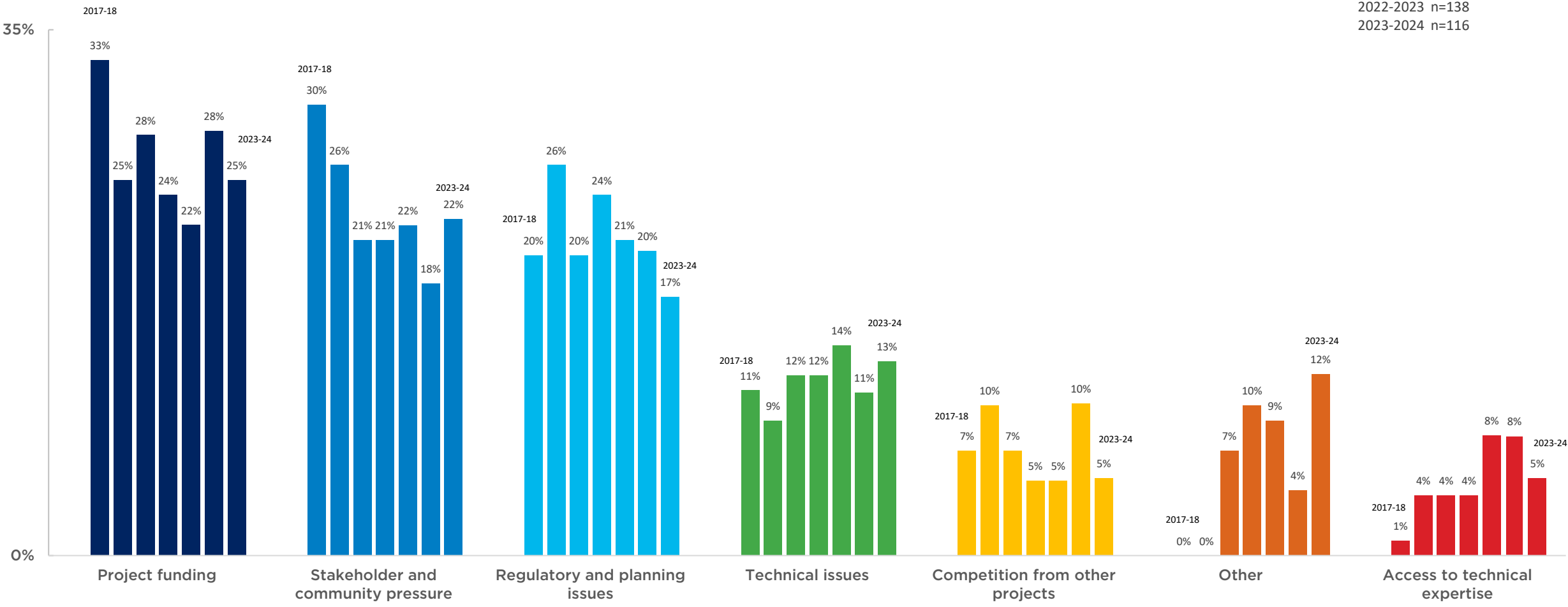
- 24 solar energy projects
- 13 onshore wind projects
- 7 offshore wind projects
- 35 large-scale batteries
- 8 pumped hydro projects
- New 100kms of above-ground transmission lines



**POOR COMMUNITY
ENGAGEMENT,
LACK OF SOCIAL LICENCE
AND
POOR SOCIAL RISK
MANAGEMENT
WILL SHORT CIRCUIT
THE ENERGY TRANSITION.**

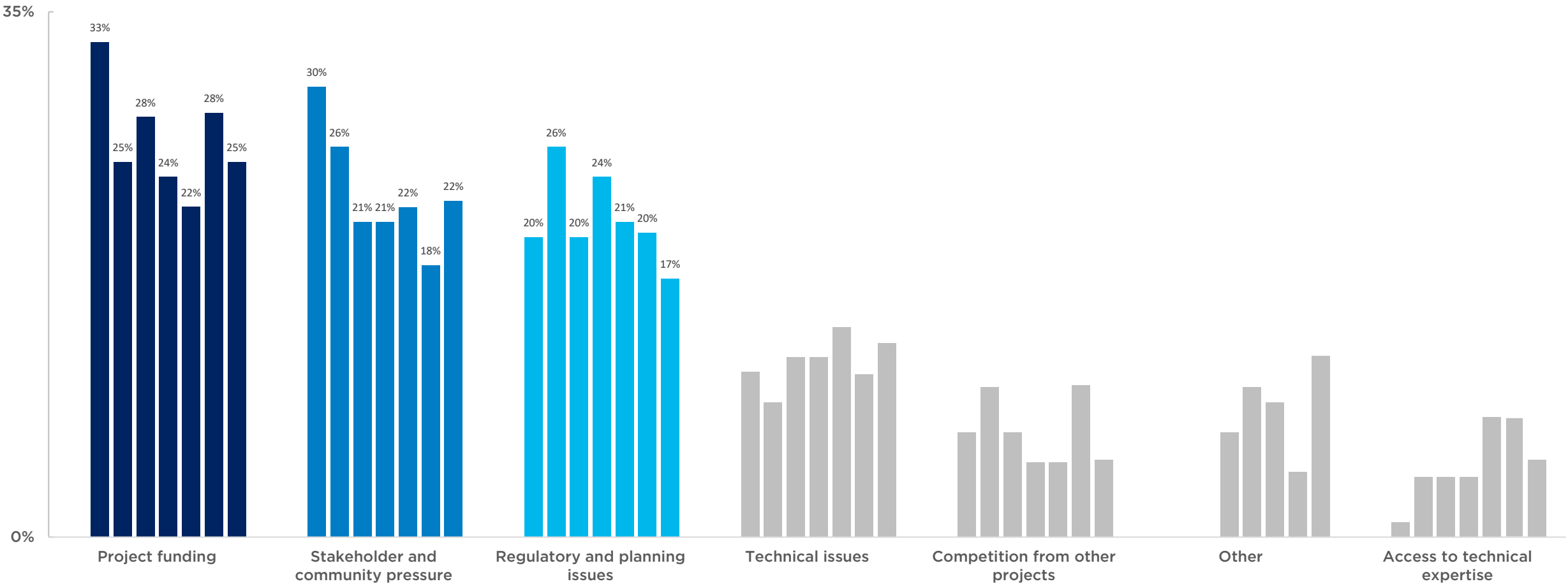
Most influential factors 2017- 2024

2017-2018 n=70
2018-2019 n=154
2019-2020 n=401
2020-2021 n=125
2021-2022 n=185
2022-2023 n=138
2023-2024 n=116

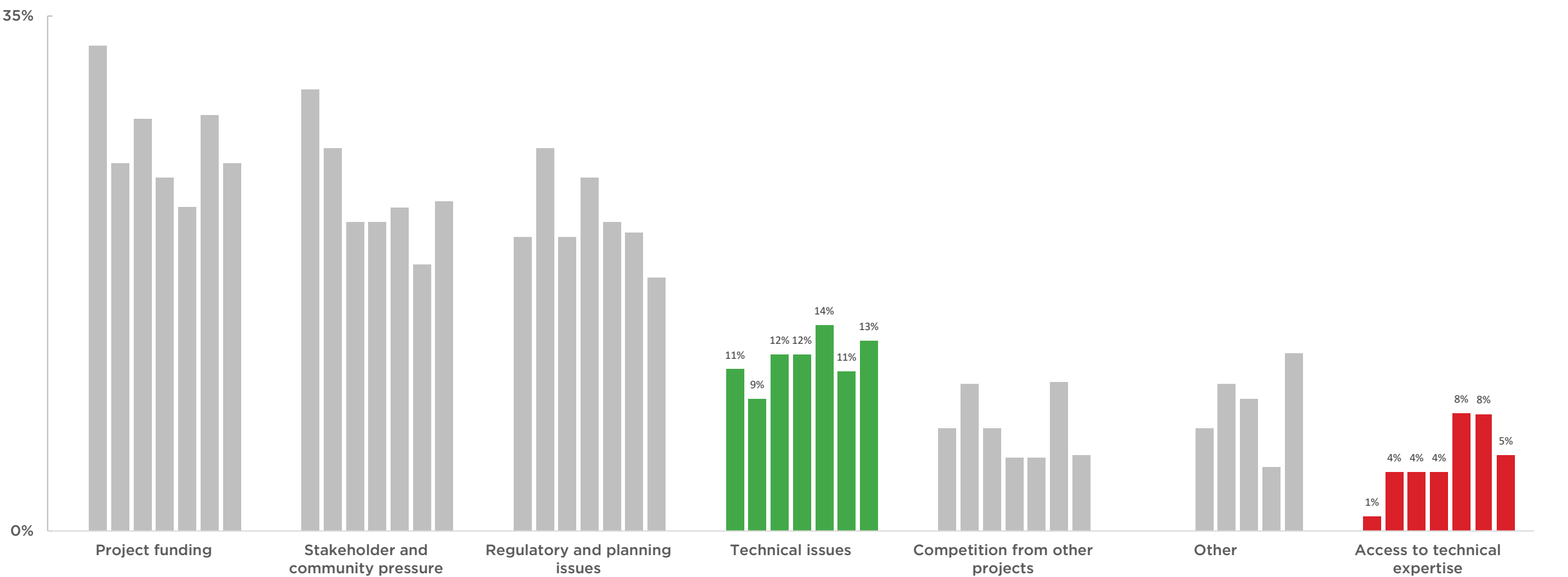


Most influential factors 2017- 2024

Since 2018 and **‘project funding’**, **‘stakeholder and community pressure’** and **‘regulatory and planning issues’** make up the top three most influential factors to project delays or cancellations, according to industry professionals.



Year on year, **‘technical issues’** and **‘access to technical expertise’** are only minimally identified as being major influencers of project delays or cancellations.



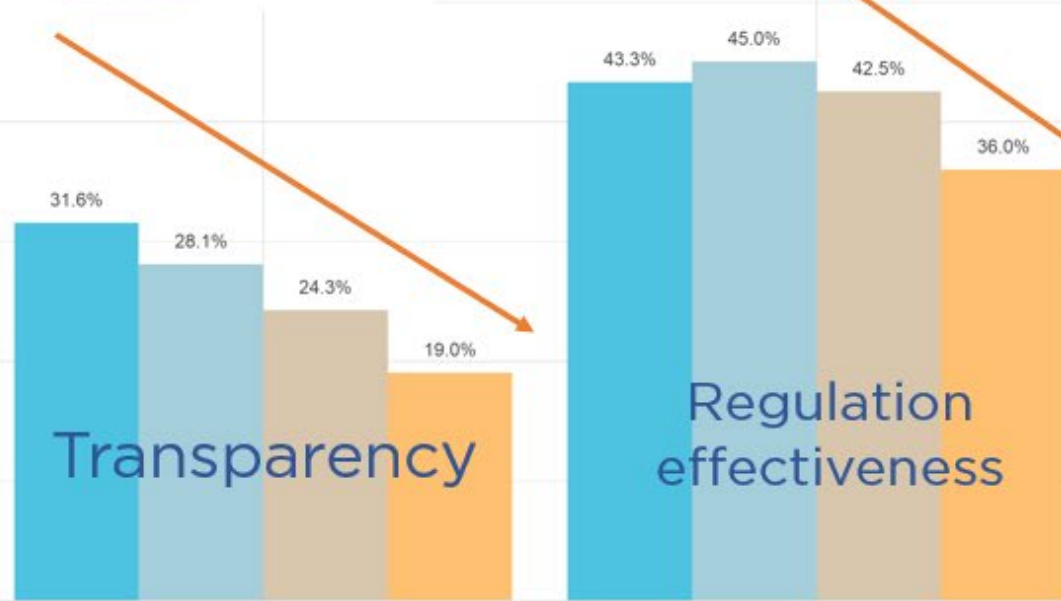
Cumulative impacts: Local Surveys results

How many projects



The most impacted communities feel unheard and overwhelmed

Agreement



Infrastructure developers operate in a transparent way

Regulations ensure infrastructure developers do the right thing

Agreement



My community has generally had positive relationships with infrastructure developers

There is good overall planning for the future of my community

***2) Focus on building
collective efficacy***

Collective efficacy

Group members' perception that their group is capable of reaching its goals, despite barriers or difficulties

See, Albert Bandura, 2000 (original idea);

Fritzsche and Masson, 2021
(Collective Efficacy and Climate Change)



a bit of old school, theoretical
background

The importance of naming what we feel

Solastalgia

~the loss and distress caused by environmental change, the sense of homesickness, looking back on a place you once knew

Albrecht, 2005

Eritalgia

~what it means for communities who are existentially displaced from their homes, even while they remain in place; a naming of what it means to no longer be able to envisage your future-self in the place you call home, even while you remain there

Askland, 2024



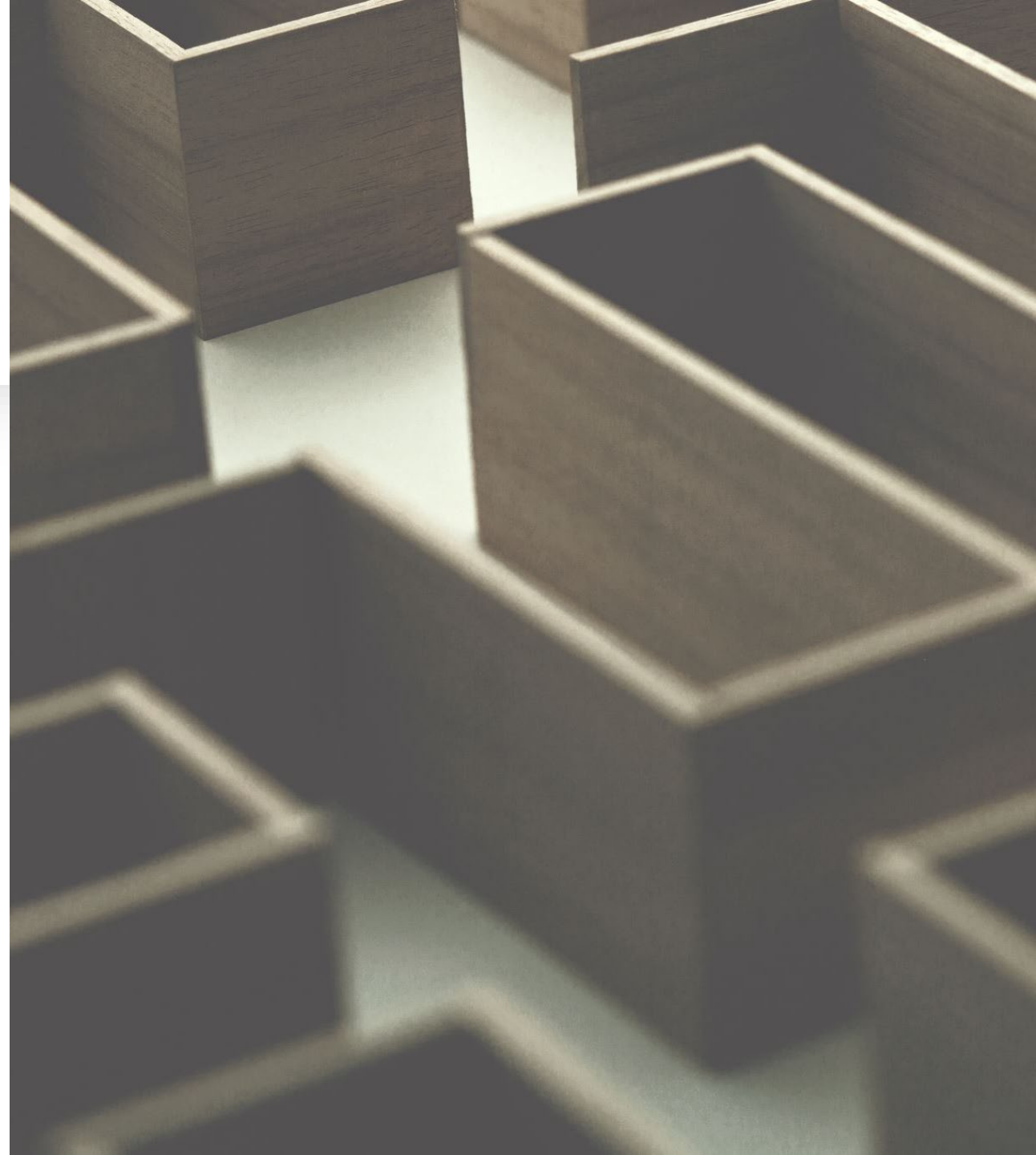
Policy windows
~Kingdon, 1984



THE IMPORTANCE OF FRAMES

Framing

the sense-making
structures we apply to
situations and
experiences in order
to interpret and
create meaning



Presumed benevolence



presumed
benevolence



A form of unconscious bias—usually related to a ‘good for all’ project, policy or initiative that responds to a requirement or crisis—where the related science, technology or need creates a *presumption* that the project/policy/initiative is *benevolent* and will therefore be readily accepted.



Shore wind farm rally in Wollongong

Wollongong
October 14 2023 - 11:19am, first published October 29 2023 - 5:30pm

55 Comments



CH: The Wollongong crowd at the rally against the proposed wind farm. The protest was held on Sunday, October 29, 2023.

Battle lines drawn as farmers fight masts



By Mark Saunokonoko • Senior Journalist | 8:15am Aug 2, 2023



Presumed benevolence in practice

- Wind farms
- Overhead transmission lines
- New technologies
- Job changes or losses
- Changes to character of local community
- Cost/benefit to local community
- Proximity of energy infrastructure to place of electricity use



Protesters hold signs during a rally against renewable energy at Parliament House in Canberra. Image by Mick Tsikas/AAP PHOTOS

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Wollongong wind farm proposal rally | Octo...
Covered by Dailymotion

Battle lines drawn as farmers fight wind masts



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Presumed benevolence in policy

- Streamlining
- Fast-tracking
- No SIA requirements (VC261-VPP Amend)
- No right to appeal
- Four months to approval
- SLO Merit Criteria (AEMO, CIS)
- Economic and risk lenses applied



Protesters hold signs during a rally against renewable energy at Parliament House in Canberra. Image by Mick Tsikas/AAP PHOTOS

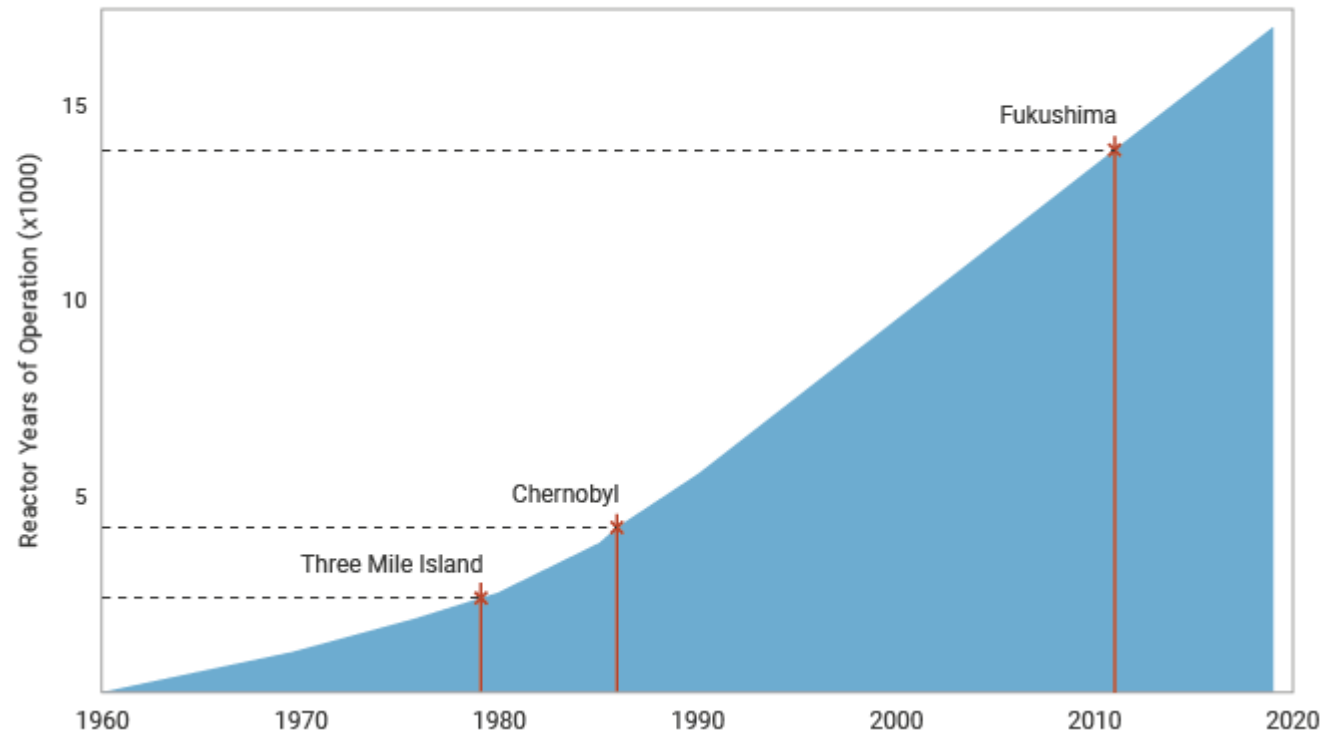


What do you see here?

The importance of perspective



Cumulative Reactor Years of Operation



World Nuclear Association, 2024.

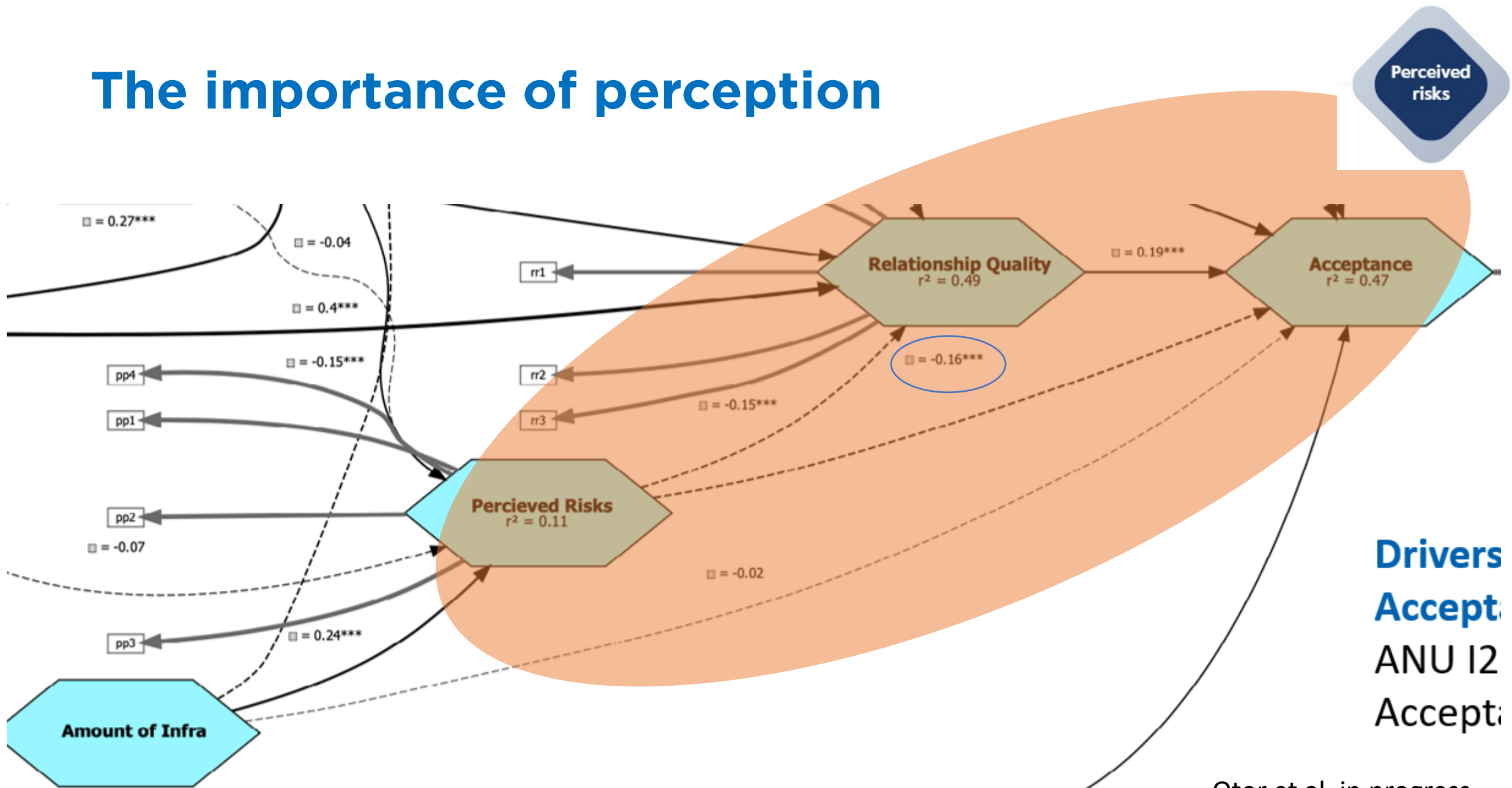
Example: Nuclear Power Plants

- Low probability can have a disproportionate psychological effect.

Psychology: Perception and Risk

The Possibility Effect

The importance of perception



Otor et al, in progress



***3) Concentrate on
the compression
effect***

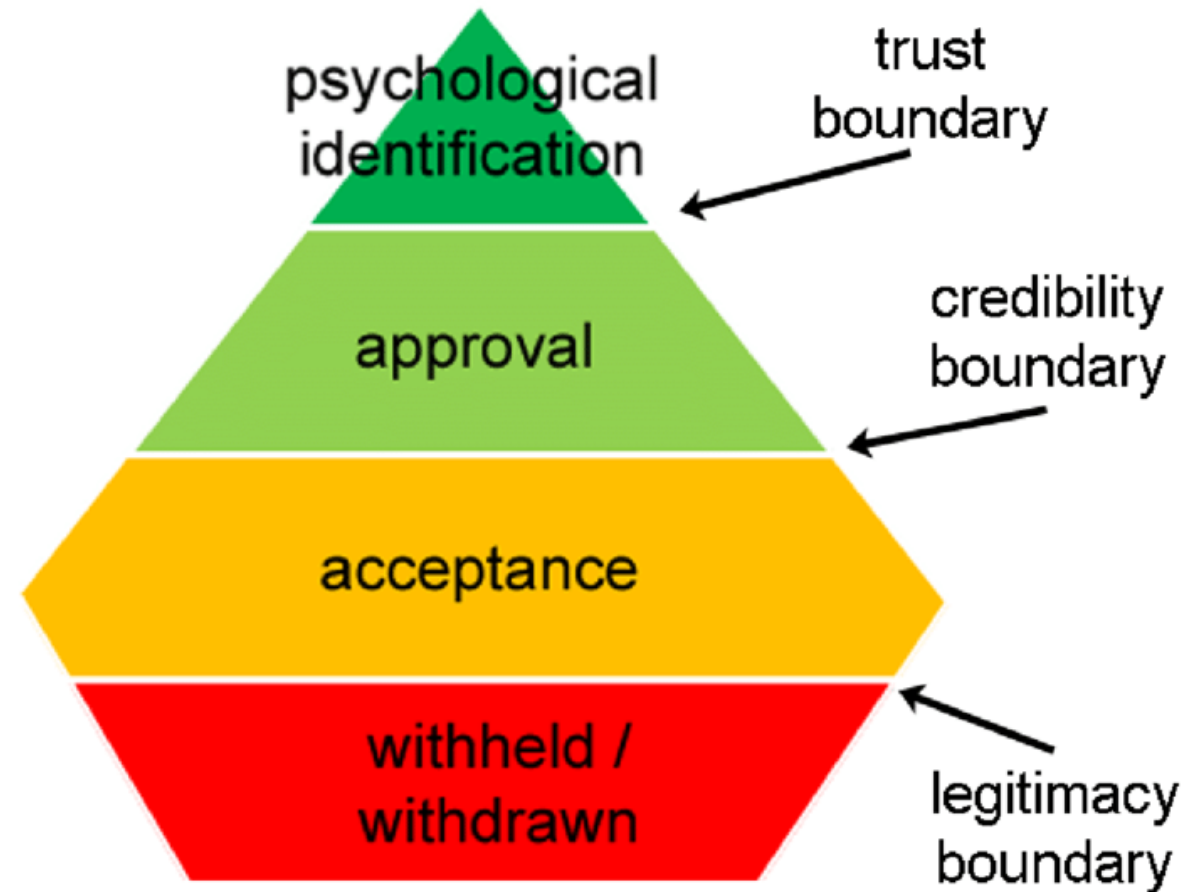


Social licence to operate

- A question of flow...

Social licence

THE LEVEL OF
ACCEPTANCE OF A
PARTICULAR PROJECT
OR POLICY WITHIN A
DEFINED COMMUNITY



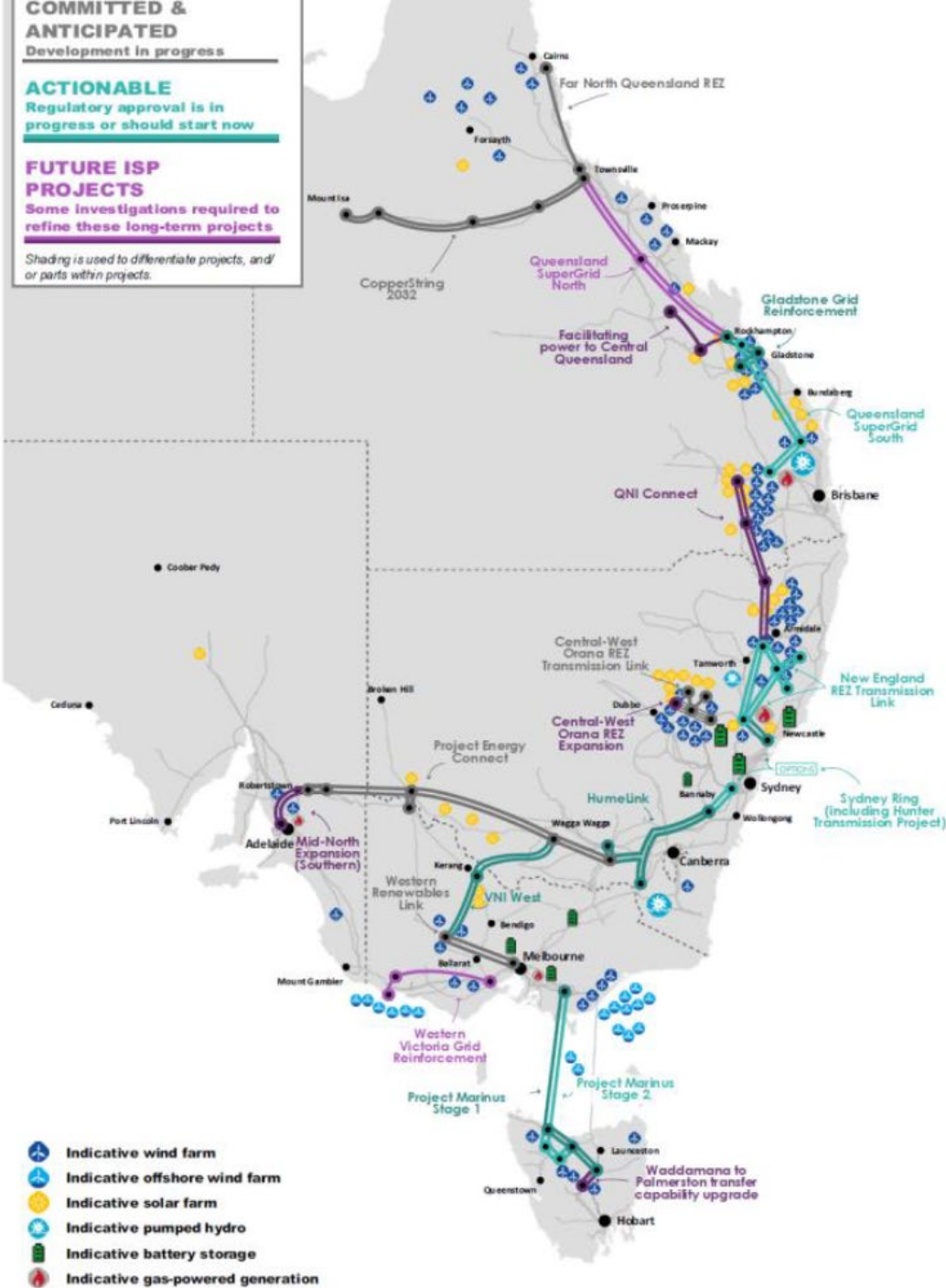
LEVELS OF SOCIAL LICENCE

Project level

Community level

Industry level

(Haines, Bice, Einfield, Sullivan, 2022)
(Einfield, Sullivan, Haines, Bice, 2021)





towards solutions

START



1) ACKNOWLEDGE AND ADDRESS PRESUMED BENEVOLENCE

***2) Focus on building
collective efficacy***



***3) Concentrate on
the compression
effect***

How presumed benevolence will short circuit the energy transition

NextGen Engagement > News > How presumed benevolence

© AUGUST 9, 2024 SARA BICE NEWS, RENEWABLES 0 EDIT EDIT WITH WPBAKERY PAGE BUILDER

Social licence is the word of the day when it comes to the energy transition. It's the headline of the new [National Guidelines for community engagement and benefits for electricity transmission projects](#). It's the subject of [national sentiment tracking](#) for the energy transition by the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water. And it's the lever for many [community groups opposing](#) energy infrastructure [in their local areas](#). And these are just a few examples in a groundswell even the energy engineers are recognizing as 'a [somewhat unexpected roadblock on Australia's path to net zero](#)'.

In this short piece (relatively speaking, I am an academic!), I want to take a pause on SLO, to step back and to introduce a new, helpful and important concept: **presumed benevolence**.

Is our focus on SLO all wrong?

Communities in Australia and around the world are voicing opposition to the renewable energy infrastructure required for the energy transformation. The [recently approved Central-West Orana renewable energy zone \(REZ\)](#) in New South Wales remains contested, despite planning approval. Of 398 public submissions received in the planning process, for instance, 369

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