

# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:

A KEY LEVER FOR PURSUING  
& ENABLING MORE JUST  
OUTCOMES IN THE ENERGY  
TRANSITION IN SOUTH AFRICA

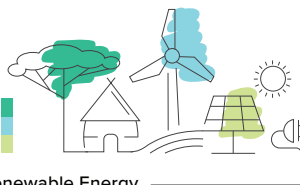
WRITTEN BY  
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**engage**

**INSPIRE**



Initiative for Social Performance in Renewable Energy

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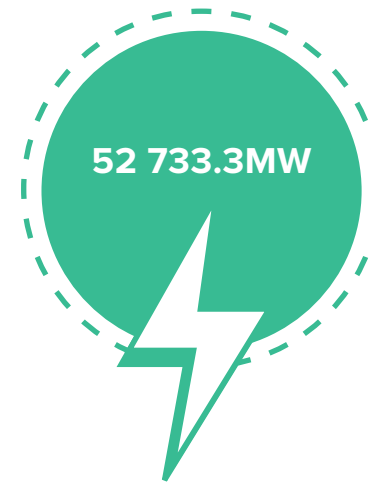


As the highest emitter of carbon emissions in Africa, South Africa has forged ahead with concerted efforts of reduction through the robust procurement of renewable energy since 2011 when the government announced the Renewable Energy Independent Power Producer Procurement Programme (REIPPPP). This programme has been globally lauded as an exemplary programme and to some extent used as a template for the procurement of renewable energy in other African countries. It is undoubtedly a successful programme if we judge it by the electrons it's injected into the South African grid and the contributions to loadshedding that it has made.

The South African Independent Power Producer Office reported that a whopping 52 733.3MW had been procured as of July 2025. It has also undeniably attracted large investment into the country - R292.2 billion to be exact as of March 2025.

These are remarkable figures, and one cannot deny that the programme has achieved what it had intended to and more on the measure of these two metrics. While the programme's primary mandate was to secure power from the private sector from renewable sources and its secondary mandate was to contribute to the broader national development objectives of job creation, social upliftment and broadening of economic ownership. The paper delves more into the latter.

Whilst there is overwhelming consensus in the renewable energy ecosystem of the importance of balancing the primary and secondary mandate, the translation of this into lived realities on the ground remains limited. Community engagement, as a core component of achieving this secondary mandate and operationalising justice elements remains underexplored. This paper hones in on community engagement as a lever to realising the social upliftment aspects of the energy transition in South Africa. Specifically, it details how community engagement, currently not implemented to its fullest potential, can better support social justice outcomes in the renewable energy sector in South Africa through learnings from case studies of how innovative community engagement approaches were implemented in two renewable energy regions of the Western and Northern Cape. The paper highlights the findings uncovered in the pilot and makes recommendations on how best community engagement can be deepened to improve the quality of developmental outcomes in the renewable energy programme.



# 01. INTRODUCTION

The idea of a transition is understood as a fundamental transformation within a societal system. Since a transition signifies a profound and long-term change across various socio-economic and environmental domains, the involvement of stakeholders in addressing this complex challenge is crucial (Topaloglou, 2024). Energy transitions also profoundly impact social, economic, and political systems (Garcia-Casals, Ferroukhi, and Parajuli 2019) with potential to enhance social equity or reinforce power asymmetries (Geall, Shen, and Gongbuzeren 2018; Leiren and Reimer 2018).

Topaloglou's statement has more pronounced implications in a divided and unequal country like South Africa where the divides are deeply entrenched and citizen realities are worlds apart. It places an even bigger responsibility to engage across these structural divisions to ensure that transitions are designed, implemented and maintained in ways that are responsive to lived realities. In a recent article penned by colleagues at the South African Institute of International Affairs (2025) published in the Business Day, they posit that when we centre marginalised perspectives through physical and digital platforms, we can better ensure that policy reflects lived experiences rather than elite assumptions.

While it is important to include marginalised perspectives, it would also be amiss to recognise that with the pervasive division and accompanying trauma in South Africa, engaging across these lines of division can be challenging for all parties involved. However, while this is challenging, it is not sufficient reason to shy away from doing what is necessary to prevent the renewable energy transition from replicating fossil fuel regime inequities. The energy transition presents us with an opportunity to intentionally include dissonant and less powerful voices to re-imagine a future that is inclusive and centres the well-being of all the citizens of South Africa.



# 02.METHODOLOGY

## 2.1 PILOT COMMUNITIES

The ENGAGE initiative was piloted in two project communities in the Northern and Western Cape. These communities are host to two utility scale wind farms that were procured under the 4th bidding round of the South African Government’s Renewable Energy Independent Power Producer Procurement Programme. These two communities are significant as they are situated in two of the three Cape Provinces that have played a leading role in renewables in South Africa. The two communities in question are Laingsburg and Sutherland.

**Laingsburg** is situated in the Western Cape Province, located in the arid Great Karoo region at the confluence of the Buffels and Baviaans Rivers. Known for its geological features, such as fossilised mudstone and ancient rock formations, the town is situated near the N1 highway and is a hub for agri-tourism. A significant historical event was the devastating **flood of 1981**, which destroyed most of the town and claimed many lives. The current population according to the Western Cape Government 2021 census is estimated to be 9273. As a town that sits along a national route it is plagued by social ills and provides a good study case for the multiple social ills that are rampant in underserved and disadvantaged communities.

**Sutherland** is situated in the Northern Cape with about 2,841 inhabitants. The Karoo region is a compelling research site, given its history and environment. It is historically significant as a site of human settlement over millennia and, more recently, the first frontier between European colonisation and indigenous people from the late 17th century. It is of further social interest because of several globally networked developments that are promising major social and economic benefits, locally, nationally and globally, and in the process reshaping relationships to land, environment and place.



To implement the ENGAGE initiative, a toll-free community hotline was set up. This platform was set up in the local languages of the communities – namely English, Afrikaans and IsiXhosa. This was set up to encourage engagement between communities and project owners during the operations and maintenance phase of the project. The primary objective of the platform was to help build project-community relations in these two communities, with the secondary objectives being to act as a support line for the activities that happen on the ground during this project phase.

Prior to the establishment of the platform, a series of community awareness campaigns and door-to-door drives were initiated in the communities to alert them of the availability of the platform and its purpose.

Over 150 community touch points were recorded during the pilot, and these were via our various ENGAGE platforms – toll-free platform, WhatsApp and email. 58% of these interactions were via the ENGAGE toll-free platform, 40% via email and 2% via WhatsApp. These interactions were organised thematically with 5 major themes dominating interactions namely: general enquiries, SMME related queries, complaints, bursary support and information, and clarifications across the entire project value chain.

Source: ENGAGE's own

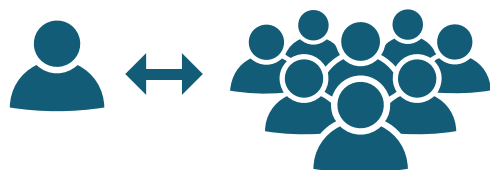


Following the eighteen-month pilot period these are the findings that emerged:

### 3.1 Individual & collective agency

Agency was assumed as inherent in these communities, and the role of awareness creation was initially thought to catalyse and enable inherent agency. In implementing this work, it became clear that this was not the case. Instead, in these communities, we found that individual agency had become dormant and in some, the belief in their own human agency had completely subsided. This was particularly pronounced at the individual agency level where many also didn't feel capable of engaging directly – even in their own languages. In certain return interactions individuals uttered, 'I was going to ask Person x to call on my behalf.' Diluted human agency we found has implications for the strength of the collective.

Collective agency was impacted by individual agency in the sense that the collective was represented by a select few individuals in these communities who, at times were driving key agendas – sometimes well intentioned for the community and on other occasions, not well intentioned. It therefore became clear throughout the pilot that building capacity and therefore agency in communities will be critical to ensure more just energy transition outcomes. Agency in highly unequal societies such as South Africa cannot be assumed and targeted effort to build and strengthen communities is a critical element in the just transition discourse and this can be achieved through capacity building and awareness.



### 3.2 Capacity building & awareness

A core component of the ENGAGE initiative was creating awareness of the platform and capacitating communities on renewable energy to enable and facilitate robust engagement and dialogue between renewable energy host communities and renewable energy project owners via the hotline. Amartya Sen's Capability Approach is a useful guiding tool to understand the importance of platforms such as these to achieve their outcomes. This approach posits that economic growth is a means to development, not an end. Sen redefined development as the enhancement of people's lives and their real opportunities to achieve valued outcomes (Halder, 2025). In line with this view, the effectiveness of public policy is assessed by its ability to expand "human capabilities" (Murphy and Gardoni 2007), which includes active participation in decision-making and tangible opportunities to achieve valued outcomes. The effective use of participatory capabilities can reciprocally shape public policy, creating a bidirectional relationship between capabilities and policy directionality.

It became clear that capacity/capability building and awareness in contexts where literacy levels are low, trust is low and where there is limited agency require a lot more intentional and targeted effort. Capacity and awareness interventions were implemented via multiple channels – both physical and non-physical – in the local indigenous languages to cater across the literacy spectrum. The engagement via the platform increased dramatically during windows of community awareness drives.



### 3.3 Technology, implemented with a contextual awareness, can be an effective tool for enabling inclusivity

Considering the physical and non-physical barriers and limitations of the contexts and environments that the pilot was implemented in, it was imperative that the barriers to engagement were catered for to increase the rate of participation. The platform is implemented at no cost to the community and community members can engage anonymously in the comfort of their own homes and in their preferred home language.

In the South African context, technology implemented without contextual awareness risks entrenching the very inequalities it seeks to address. Given the legacy of apartheid, where access to infrastructure, education, and opportunity was deliberately racialized, deploying digital tools in a "neutral" or "one-size-fits-all" manner can unintentionally reinforce structural disparities. For example, assuming universal digital literacy or access to broadband excludes communities historically denied those resources. And so, to truly enable inclusivity, technology must be affordable, culturally sensitive, and purpose-built to address the developmental needs of historically marginalized communities. This means designing with — not just for — users in mind, and grounding innovation in lived realities rather than abstract ideals.



### 3.4 Needs responsive social investment

The platform was set up as a tool to support community relationship building and trust between project owners and project host communities after seeing the gap that exists in communication between the two parties.

The platform turned out to play a multi-faceted role and one of the key outcomes was the contribution in conceptualising social investment strategies that were responsive to the needs of the communities. For example, an intervention in health that was conceptualised to support the elderly disabled in the community after extensive and continued engagement was deemed inappropriately timed and as a result funds were channelled towards another intervention in education and youth that was better timed and appropriate for the community. This example represents only one of the many scenarios and instances where continuous community engagement results in needs responsive social investment. This is particularly important when considering the importance of balancing compliance requirements with impact. Whilst intentional and continuous community engagement contributes a great deal to needs responsive investment, it also is critical for establishing and maintaining a bi-directional relationship between communities and renewable energy assets.

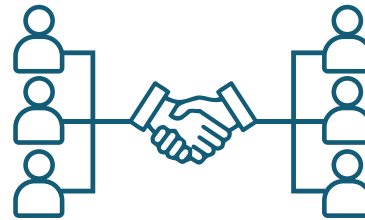


### 3.5 Bi-directional relationship building

In the numerous projects that we have been exposed to in the sector, we notice on many occasions that there is a unilateral, power uneven relationship that exists between renewable energy asset owners and the communities that host their assets. This relationship undermines the host

communities and creates a shaky foundation on which to build trust over the lifetime of the project. Through the implementation of ENGAGE, it was found that the establishment of a platform to support in building a relationship anchored on trust and transparency was useful for community relations.

Through the establishment of the platform and a structured way of relating community needs, grievances, queries and requests, this afforded communities a channel to express themselves outside routine-compliance standard methods of engagement such as community meetings that are point-in-time interactions and often for a limited period. Communities felt heard and their queries, grievances and requests were responded to in a methodical way that supported trust-building. Through frequent and shorter response times, communities were able to share information in the local community and this prevented, to a large extent, the flow of incorrect information in the community. This two-way frequent communication that affords communities an opportunity to be heard and allows project owners to address these in methodical ways builds relationships in ways that strengthens trust and contributes to transformative developmental outcomes.



### 3.6 Multi-stakeholder/sectoral solutions

Through the implementation of the ENGAGE initiative, it also became apparent that many of the challenges - expressed and not expressed - were beyond the ambit of a single project owner or department. The continuous engagement revealed a need for greater collaboration within the sector and across different sectors if greater impact is to be achieved through the Just Energy Transition. The magnitude and rate at which the challenges

were expressed made it clear that interventions and solutions require a structural and intentional approach for better and more sustained outcomes. Whilst the smaller more frequent interventions have a place in rural communities, the structural and ultimately more transformative interventions will require strong collaboration and alignment between the sector and other players in the ecosystem – with the support of government to a large extent.



### 3.7 Check, balance & accountability

An interesting finding was the ENGAGE platform's role in acting as an accountability and check and balance channel. Through the implementation of ENGAGE, community members had the opportunity to share any suspected irregular activity on the ground relating to the successful implementation of the project. This was useful for supporting project owners in keeping an eye on activities that they were unaware of but could have carried major reputational and financial risk for project owners unbeknownst to them. The surfacing of these issues initiated processes that included a plethora of stakeholders that together found the most fair and equitable solutions for all affected parties. One instance included a labour matter through an entity contracted by the project owner that contravened basic labour law practices in South Africa and that could've put the project owner at risk, financially, relationally and reputationally. The availability of the platform empowered the community members involved to raise the issue and trigger a process that resulted in outcomes that were suitable to all parties involved.



This is an important finding in the context of absent enforceable institutional frameworks for social impacts.

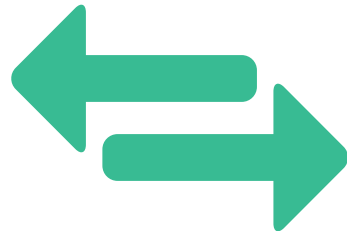
# 04.RECOMMENDATIONS

Through the implementation of the ENGAGE pilot, the following recommendations are being proposed:

## 4.1 Appetite for dissent

To meaningfully implement the Just Energy Transition agenda, there needs to be an appreciation of the current structural issues of poverty and inequality that are visceral in the South African context, and an even deeper awareness of the implications that the trauma of poverty and inequality present to those impacted by it. The default position of industry has been to ‘silence’ and/or limit opportunities for dissent to be expressed by communities who live with the effects and impacts of poverty daily.

This frustration and dissent expressed by communities is valuable information for those in positions of power with a commitment to use their power in ways that support a transformative development agenda. Dissent is also useful in helping to shape ideas that are rooted in the lived realities of those who are impacted by renewable energy projects. The aversion to dissent births frivolous surface level interventions that do not meaningfully address the structural issues that exist in renewable energy host communities. Making room for dissent to surface initiates a process of deeper structural level thinking that will birth the solutions that are needed to move the needle on social performance outcomes. We need the ability to comfortably sit with discomfort to birth structural solutions. The aversion and avoidance of dissent that we have seen to date will result in a recycling of the same ideas and solutions that have not resulted in truly transformative outcomes. Platforms like ENGAGE provide the ability to invite and constructively harness dissent in a way that supports just energy outcomes.



## 4.2 Innovative ways to engage that are culturally & context sensitive

Current ways of engaging are not very sensitive to the uneven power dynamics that exist between industry and communities. These methods are static, point-in-time engagements that are not sensitive to the fluidity of communities and the rapid pace at which things change on a community level. Whilst these static methods e.g. community hall gatherings, are widely recognised and accepted across industries, they are not effective on their own for building trust and relationships in communities. These methods are also prone to a lot of interference from political influences, personal agendas and many other issues. In these settings, it is often those with the ability to manage and communicate across prevailing power dynamics that can voice their opinions and have their way.

It is for this and many other cultural reasons why it is important to start creating culturally sensitive methods of engaging that consider how power dynamics play out, the role of language and place in engaging and building relationships across bridges. Culturally and contextually sensitive ways of engaging consider literacy levels, language preferences, gender roles, agency and cost effectiveness – all essential to consider in a South African context and in renewable energy host communities where there are strong cultural norms and boundaries. It is not sufficient to approach community engagement/public participation as a compliance exercise. Innovative ways of engaging are sensitive to the complex nuances that exist in the South African context and simplifying engagement in a complex environment misses the nuances that are necessary to support just energy outcomes.



## 4.3 Institutionalisation

The institutionalisation of community engagement will be critical to shift attitudes and perceptions around communities and project owner relationships. This area is currently very loosely governed and enforced, and governance of community engagement and community engagement outcomes currently takes on a very minimalist and compliance driven approach that does not legally enforce engagement in a way that encourages frequent and more intentional engagement. If community engagement is understood to be a core component of achieving an inclusive and just energy transition outcome, it is imperative that it is institutionalised and managed across the project value chain and across the project lifecycle against existing and new legislative frameworks and not guiding frameworks and principles that are 'nice-to-haves'.

Although there currently exists some legislated public participation processes in the Environmental and Social Impact Assessment frameworks, these are not sufficient as tools for the inclusion of communities impacted and affected by projects. Social impacts need to be approached with the same vigour and intent that the non-social aspects of projects are managed. Through the pilot phase and interactions with a range of project owners in the industry, it did become apparent that with no institutional recognition of the importance of community engagement, it will continue to be approached as a 'nice-to-have' and no incentive to approach it with the urgency it deserves.



## 4.4 Incentivisation and disincentivising

Further to the institutionalisation of community engagement, it is going to be imperative to start measuring the performance of projects using community engagement as a guiding metric/tool. Currently, showing spend against mandated and contracted commitments suffices as a metric for social performance and no quantitative elements are included in this guideline to address the quality of interventions. On the back of this, community engagement and evidence thereof should be a pre-requisite for formulating and amending proposed interventions and not only community engagement using the standard compliance approach but also community engagement that shows intentional and ongoing engagement with project host communities. Companies should also be incentivised for showing commitment beyond performing standard engagement activities.

Contrary to incentivisation, those who do not show commitment to performing intentional community engagement and social performance activities should be penalised to encourage engagement and social performance that goes beyond compliance. In essence compliance should be the benchmark for 'minimum performance' and performing over and beyond the minimum should attract incentives for project owners.



## 05.CONCLUSION

It is evident from the implementation of ENGAGE that there is an opportunity to take a more intentional approach to community engagement if the just energy transition is to truly achieve more inclusive and justice centred outcomes. With increasing social complexity and growing poverty and inequality rates, social astuteness is becoming a key attribute for the success of renewable energy project implementation. Situated in the heart of periphery communities, renewables present a real opportunity to make the transition meaningful for immediately impacted and affected communities.

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That said however, it cannot be assumed or taken for granted that with the current limited enforceable institutional frameworks around social impact governance that this will happen automatically. Instead, it requires a combination of institutional support from the public sector and willingness and commitment from the private sector to achieve transformative development outcomes.

Deepening the way we engage with project host communities will improve our understanding of communities and their lived realities in ways that support the emergence of solutions that respond to lived realities and shape an energy transition that is inclusive and just. If a just energy transition is to be achieved, inclusivity is a requisite, and inclusivity begins with the inclusion of all (not some) the sentiments of all impacted and affected. Making intentional space for a multitude of voices to contribute will strengthen just energy outcomes and ensure that the inequities perpetuated by the fossil fuel era are not perpetuated by the renewable energy industry.



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