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Good Neighbours, Public Relations and Bribes: The Politics and Perceptions of Community Benefit Provision in Renewable Energy Development in the UK

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Abstract

The provision of community benefits has become a more common component of renewable energy project proposals in the UK. This raises questions as to the purposes these benefits are fulfilling and the ways in which they are perceived by the many different stakeholders involved in the processes of project development and approval. Are they seen as an effective strategic element in negotiations around planning consent; as a right for communities whose resource is being exploited, or who are experiencing the dis-benefits of technology implementation; or as a way of bribing or buying off protestors or key decision-makers? In this paper, we draw on evidence from a series of interviews with key stakeholders involved in renewable energy policy and development and from a set of mixed method, diverse case studies of renewable energy projects around the UK to examine the viewpoints of different stakeholders (including developers, local publics, politicians, activists and consultants). We discovered variation in the extent and type of benefits on offer, reflecting the maturity of different technologies, based on a number of rationales. We also found in the public's views a high degree of ambivalence towards both the benefits on offer (when they were known or acknowledged) and the reasons for providing them. The normative case for providing community benefits appears to be accepted by all involved, but the exact mechanisms for doing so remain problematic.

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