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COMMUNITY BENEFIT AND ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORKS IN AUSTRALIAN RENEWABLE ENERGY TRANSITION: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The renewable energy transition has become a core priority in Australia over the past few decades, with a target to achieve 82% renewable energy in the country's electricity grids by 2030. The social dimension, along with community acceptance of renewable infrastructure developments, is essential. Several publicly accessible documents guide decision-making at the Federal and State levels, as well as the roles of key stakeholders involved in the energy transition. However, obtaining the social license to operate remains a significant challenge, as it is hindered by the gap between strategic suggestions and actual implementation in practice. Therefore, this study employed the Thematic Analysis approach inductively, using NVivo, to collect textual data from documents and frameworks published by state governments and reputable non-governmental bodies in Australia since 2020. The thematic analysis of paragraphs was conducted under four categories (parent nodes): benefits sharing mechanisms, equity and inclusion, transparency and accountability, and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Thereafter, maps were generated to illustrate sub-themes (child nodes) along with referenced documents. In practice, the results underscore the need for more integrated strategies that align with timelines and involve stakeholders, including developers, policymakers, and communities, in future guidelines. Furthermore, the thematic analysis approach adopted in this study provides a proven methodology for analysing differently organised frameworks and reports. As analysis in academic research using industry frameworks is rare in the renewable energy sector from a social perspective, this provides a basis for future research. The created maps could be beneficially used and generalised for future frameworks.

Keywords: *Community Benefits; Community Engagement; Renewable Energy Transition; Thematic Analysis.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, the Australian government enacted laws in 2022 to reduce carbon emissions by 43% compared to 2005 levels by 2030, aiming to achieve net zero by 2050 (Australian Trade and Investment Commission, 2023). The redesigned safety mechanism is a tool designed to facilitate the execution of this objective by directing Australia's top greenhouse gas emitters to keep their net emissions at or below a set baseline. This baseline is reduced annually, and those that exceed it must manage their excess emissions, including by purchasing and surrendering Australian carbon credit units (Wells et al., 2018). The Australian Government aims for 82% renewable energy in the nation's electricity systems by 2030 (Department of Climate Change, Environment and Climate Action, 2022). Under the leadership of the recently elected Australian government, which has pledged to a more ambitious target of lowering national greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 43% by 2030, relative to 2005 levels, this transition to clean energy is anticipated to accelerate (Koskinen et al., 2023). The rapid transition has presented numerous challenges for grid and market operations; for instance, market estimates by the Australian Energy Market Operator have consistently underestimated the pace of the transition to clean energy (Funder et al., 2021).

Subsequently, renewable energy sources are revolutionising the production, distribution, and use of energy (Clean Energy Council, 2019). These systems have the capacity to overturn the current economic and social structure of energy delivery since they provide heat and power in different capacities (Bauwens et al., 2016). It has been suggested that shifting to decentralised and renewable energy generation is a way to address climate change and boost energy supply self-sufficiency (Rae & Bradley, 2012). Several studies disclose that the social dimension is important as the technology component to stress the need for community responses that are more predisposed to successful transition (Lennon et al., 2019; Soltani et al., 2021). Significantly, creating and sustaining a social licence and providing social value to communities are crucial prerequisites for the success of the renewable energy transition from an infrastructure perspective (Kola-Bezka, 2023, Lennon et al., 2019, Miller et al., 2015). As a result, several stakeholders involved in energy research and policy concur that transdisciplinary consortia must lead energy transitions under the direction of social science concerns about the human dimensions of energy transition (Chodkowska-Miszczuk et al., 2021; Lennon et al., 2019; Stephanides et al., 2019). These methods are crucial for achieving community acceptance of green energy solutions among members of a social unit. There are several publicly accessible documents that guide decision-making at the Federal and state levels, as well as the roles of key stakeholders involved in the energy transition. Nevertheless, the content of the documents tends to focus predominantly on a single area (e.g., benefit sharing), or exhibits repetitiveness, overlapping subject areas, and multiple facts that lack practical applicability (Hicks & Mallee, 2023; NSW Department of Planning and Environment, 2023). Therefore, this paper aims to answer the research question, "How *have community benefit and engagement frameworks published after 2020 addressed key aspects of community engagement in the Australian renewable energy transition?*" through a qualitative research approach. Consequently, it highlights the need to identify these overlaps and gaps, particularly in relation to the practical implementation of community benefit and engagement frameworks, in order to guide future research in addressing key concepts within these frameworks and to stimulate meaningful community engagement.

Section 2 presents an overview of the selected documents on community benefits and engagement in Australia after 2020. The adopted methodology for identifying the key themes via NVivo is discussed in Section 3. Analysis and discussion of the findings are presented in Section 4, where the identified key themes (codes) are discussed under four main categories (see Sections 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4). The conclusion, along with its limitations and the way forward, is presented in Section 5. Finally, Sections 6 and 7 are allocated for acknowledgements and references used in this paper.

2. COMMUNITY BENEFITS AND ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORKS

In the past few decades, the Australian Government has considered various policies to mitigate the consequences of climate change, including the emissions trading system, the carbon pollution reduction scheme, and the carbon tax, among others. According to records, all of these have different successive levels and were never implemented. Accordingly, the federal and state governments, as well as various reputable non-governmental organisations (such as the Clean Energy Council and RE-Alliance), have published strategies to guide all aspects of the renewable energy transition. As this paper focuses on the communities and their engagement in the energy transition, seven recently published documents (publicly available) were selected, particularly due to their emphasis on heightened climate action goals, post-COVID recovery plans, and shifts in political will. Considering public accessibility, trustworthiness, and the reputation of the publishing organisations (both state governments and non-governmental organisations), the analysis was limited to seven documents. Table 1 presents the details of the selected seven documents for this analysis, along with their publishing organisations, year of publication, and an overview of the content.

Table 1: Overview for community benefits and engagement frameworks (after 2020)

No	Document	Organisation and Source	Year	Overview
A.	Community Benefits Handbook	RE-Alliance (Re-Alliance, 2024)	August 2024	Emphasises the importance of local engagement in decision-making processes, offers insights into community enhancement funds that can support local initiatives, and highlights opportunities for co-investment and ownership in renewable projects. It also highlights the significance of including First Nations' perspectives to ensure that their rights and knowledge are respected, ultimately aiming for a collaborative approach.
B.	Community Benefits Framework	Queensland Hydro (Queensland Hydro, 2024)	August 2024	Presents sustainable relationships with local communities by prioritising engagement, transparency, and collaboration, while addressing the environmental, economic, and social needs through initiatives that benefit individuals and regional development.

No	Document	Organisation and Source	Year	Overview
C.	Energy and Jobs Plan: Local Energy Partnerships	Queensland Department of Energy and Climate (Queensland Government, 2024)	May 2024	Outlines Queensland's commitment to engaging regional communities in the energy transformation by prioritising local voices, choices, and benefits through a framework that encourages collaboration, resource allocation, and the improvement of renewable energy practices, with a focus on supporting First Nations and local councils.
D.	Renewable Energy Development in Tasmania: Guideline for Community Engagement, Benefit Sharing and Local Procurement	Tasmania Department of State Growth (Tasmania Department of State Growth, 2024)	May 2024	Presents best practices for renewable energy development in Tasmania, emphasising effective community involvement, the importance of understanding social contexts, and mechanisms for sharing benefits. It aims to empower Tasmanian communities to participate actively in the renewable energy sector while ensuring that local businesses and residents gain tangible advantages.
E.	Draft Benefits Sharing Guideline: Energy Policy Framework	NSW Department of Planning and Environment (NSW Department of Planning and Environment, 2023)	November 2023	Provides a comprehensive policy framework aimed at ensuring equitable distribution of benefits from large-scale renewable energy projects in NSW, emphasising community involvement, particularly that of Aboriginal communities, and promoting mechanisms for sharing economic and social benefits to enhance local resilience and support.
F.	Regional Benefit Sharing Discussion Paper	Community Power Agency (Hicks & Mallee, 2023)	October 2023	Explores strategic frameworks for community benefit sharing in regions hosting multiple renewable energy projects, emphasising the need for coordinated approaches to enhance local engagement and maximise positive impacts while minimising community disempowerment and engagement fatigue.
G.	Community Engagement and Benefits Sharing in Renewable Energy Development in Victoria	Victoria Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Change (Department of Energy Environment and Climate Change, 2021)	July 2021	Presents a comprehensive framework for renewable energy developers, emphasising the necessity of active community engagement and benefit-sharing strategies to obtain social license to operate. It outlines best practices for social impact assessments and encourages innovative approaches

These documents frequently refer to case studies, best practice frameworks, and empirical findings to strengthen their recommendations. For example, "Community Engagement and Benefits Sharing in Renewable Energy Development in Victoria" and "A Guide to Benefit Sharing Options for Renewable Energy Projects" include case studies that illustrate successful benefit-sharing mechanisms and community engagement strategies. Moreover, many documents adopt a principle-based approach to maintain the core values of social science content, including benefits sharing mechanisms, equity and inclusion, transparency, accountability, and monitoring and evaluation. Batidzirai et al.(2021) evidence that principle-based approaches protect community rights, especially when working with marginalised groups, ensuring that content does not cause harm or exploitation. Moreover, that consistency facilitates comparison, replication and validation of findings (Walker et al., 2010).

3. METHODOLOGY

Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse and interpret patterns (themes) within the textual data in the selected seven documents. Mainly, thematic analysis can be conducted inductively (letting themes emerge from the data) or deductively (following existing theory or frameworks) (Rosenthal, 2016). As this paper intends to collect textual data from existing documents, thematic analysis was conducted inductively. Moreover, NVivo 15 software was used to analyse the data as it enables easier extraction and categorisation of key themes with reference to the relevant document (via each code connected to the relevant document) (Krishnan et al., 2025). Figure 1 illustrates the flowchart of the executed methodology.

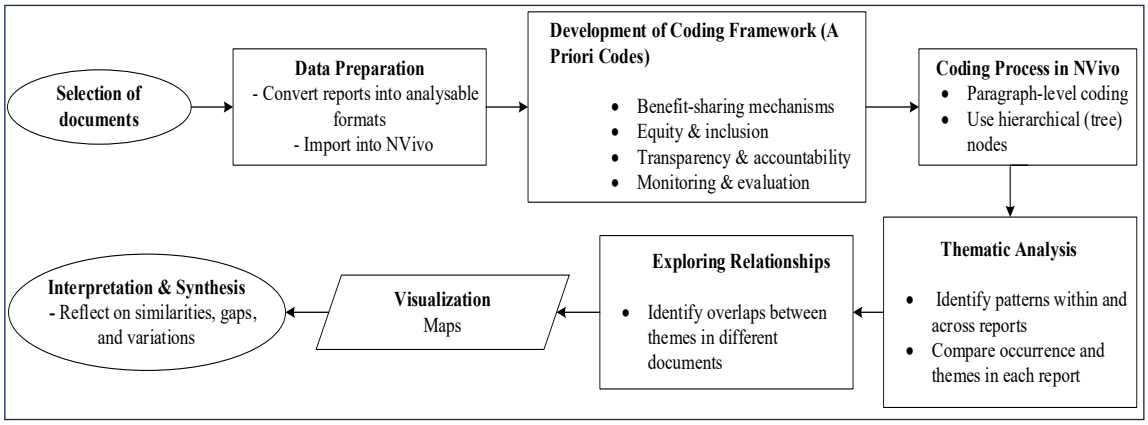

Figure 1: Methodology flowchart

Firstly, the seven documents were selected based on the main criteria of public accessibility, trustworthiness, the reputation of the publishing organisations (as state governments and non-government bodies), and publication after 2020. Then the files were imported into the NVivo software with their analysable formats. As per the third step in the flowchart (refer to Figure 1), coding framework was developed. The coding process was based on hierarchical nodes; it refers to the way nodes are organised into a parent-child structure. For example, parent nodes represent broader themes, such as benefits-sharing mechanisms, and child nodes fall under these parent nodes, representing more specific sub-themes, as seen in section 4.2. The four parent nodes were selected based on their prominence in both the reviewed documents and the broader literature on community engagement (Victoria Department of Energy Environment and Climate

Change, 2021; NSW Department of Planning and Environment, 2023; Tasmania Department of State Growth, 2024). Benefit-sharing mechanisms have emerged as a central theme, as ensuring the fair distribution of all aspects. Equity and inclusion were prioritised to reflect the importance of involving First Nations peoples, landowners, and other marginalised groups, ensuring that engagement processes are fair and inclusive. Transparency and accountability were identified as essential characteristics of good governance, as policy-supporting frameworks must demonstrate openness. Finally, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms were included as effective frameworks require systematic processes to track progress, assess outcomes, and enable continuous improvement after implementation. Other topics that emerged during analysis, such as technical considerations or project financing, were treated as sub-themes or supporting elements under these primary categories, where appropriate. The findings were visualised via "Maps" in the NVivo software, as it offers more visual clarity than presenting numerical values alone. Figures 2, 3, 4, and 5 illustrate the thematic coding structure derived from the data. To enhance visual clarity, parent nodes are consistently coloured in red, while child nodes are presented in various colours to aid in the quick identification and differentiation of categories.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings generated after thematic analysis, with a discussion of the obtained data. By critically analysing the structure according to a principles-based approach (under four parent codes) and strategic priorities, this section reveals the extent to which communities are positioned as active and/or passive beneficiaries in the transition process.

4.1 DEFINITIONS OF "COMMUNITY"

The concept of community and its related forms of engagement have multiple meanings. The community is not a place, a building, an organisation, or an exchange of information (Koirala et al., 2016; Rogers et al., 2008). In the renewable energy transition, communities consist of groups of citizens, social entrepreneurs, public authorities, and community organisations that are actively involved in the energy transition by jointly investing in, producing, selling, and distributing renewable energy (Boulogiorgou & Ktenidis, 2020). Table 2 presents the definitions of community provided in seven documents as they change according to the underlying assumptions and priorities when presenting strategies, i.e. "community", whether geographically surrounded residents or marginalised groups, First Nations peoples or whose voices are heard (Pons-Seres de Brauwer & Cohen, 2020; McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Table 2: Definitions of "community"

A	"a group of individuals living in close proximity to renewable energy projects, who may share common interests, aspirations, or issues related to the projects."
B	"All individuals residing in the geographic area surrounding the proposed renewable energy project, including various interest groups and cultural demographics."
C	"The collective of stakeholders impacted by renewable energy projects, emphasising the importance of engaging these stakeholders to ensure."
D	"Residents, local businesses, and organisations are involved in renewable energy projects"

E "a geographic and social entity, highlighting the need for definitions to be site-specific, based on local demographics and relationships to renewable energy developments."

F "Various groups that reside in or are affected by renewable energy projects, stressing the importance of understanding local dynamics in benefit-sharing discussions."

G "Individuals and organisations within defined geographic areas, stressing the significance of diverse representation in engagement processes."

The "community" has been defined in consideration of three key aspects: the local population living near or affected by renewable energy infrastructure developments, diverse groups based on geographical areas, marginalised and First Nation peoples, and social and cultural perspectives that consider landscape value and heritage. Therefore, people who live in or are connected through shared interests, culture, or location affected by renewable energy infrastructure developments are recognised as a "community" in the context of community engagement and community benefits sharing. The following subsections present the method of aligning the selected documents with these aspects.

4.2 BENEFITS SHARING MECHANISMS

The concept, 'benefit sharing', concerns sharing the rewards of renewable energy developments with communities (NSW Department of Planning and Environment, 2023). This concept is based on a desire to establish and maintain positive long-term connections with the area and to be a stimulator of positive perception among the communities (Tasmania Department of State Growth, 2024). Figure 2 presents the codes (documents), and child nodes (sub-themes) associated with the benefits-sharing mechanism (parent node).

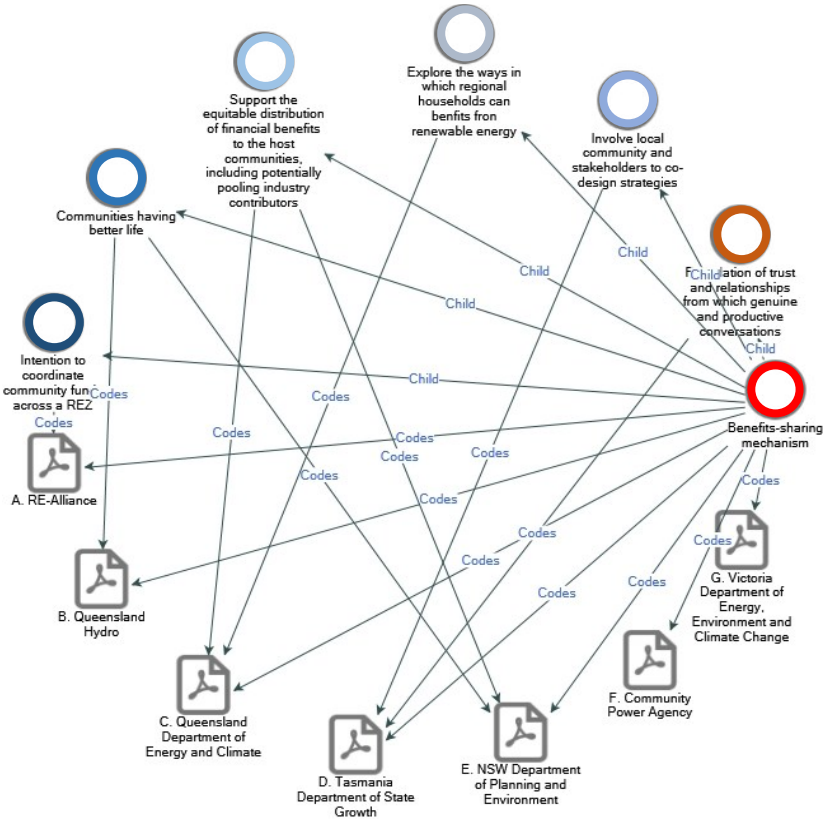

Figure 2: Benefits sharing mechanisms – nodes

The NSW benefits sharing guidelines specify that sharing initiatives offer a means of enhancing benefits for the community in the vicinity of and affected by renewable energy developments. This includes communities that may be affected by projects nearby, as well as members of the broader local community that host the development. All seven documents mentioned 'benefits sharing' as a key concept, along with strategies for implementing it. For instance, building community solar projects for local businesses, developing micro grids for the community, allocating some portion of the project's profit for a revolving fund that can operate in perpetuity, tourism and education programmes, and adding optical fibres to transmission towers are a few strategies to provide a better life for communities.

Ultimately, developers/government expect to create a foundation from genuine contributions and productive conversations (Tasmania Department of State Growth, 2024; Hicks & Mallee, 2023). Furthermore, equitably distributing and coordinating community funds across Renewable Energy Zones (REZs) is also a key consideration in benefits sharing (NSW Department of Planning and Environment, 2023). Nevertheless, power imbalances between stakeholders are a noticeable loophole that critically reflects from the analysed frameworks, i.e. who decides on benefits distribution?

4.3 EQUITY AND INCLUSION

A wind farm project-based research paper found that the "local host community perceived there to be 'winners and losers' from the project, with the 'winners' being host landholders who would receive an annual income and the 'losers' being neighbouring landholders who would be impacted but receive no direct benefits" (Re-Alliance, 2024). In recent years, this perceived inequity has been a cause for increasingly shared agreements between energy project proponents and neighbouring landholders. This theme mainly implies equitable access to opportunities for all communities (Queensland Hydro, 2024).

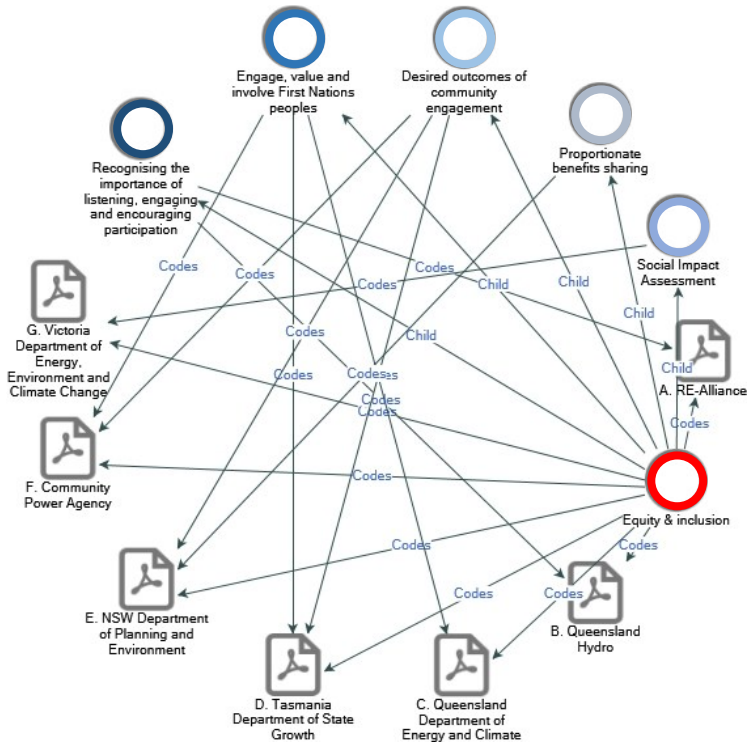

Figure 3: Equity and inclusion - nodes

Figure 3 presents the codes (documents) and child nodes (sub-themes) connected to the equity and inclusion (parent node). Equity and inclusion have sometimes been treated as overlapping, while in other instances as a combined theme. Nevertheless, both aspects are consistently addressed in all the selected documents. For instance, equity and inclusiveness of Aboriginal (First Nations people) through engagement and policy initiatives is a positive approach identified by the Tasmanian government (Tasmania Department of State Growth, 2024).

Accordingly, genuine shared decision-making means that the Tasmanian Aboriginal people are central in all decision-making. Simply, this ensures that First Nations people have ownership opportunities, not just consultation, and offers discounted energy rates to all residents, not just a select few. While all the analysed documents addressed the principles of equity and inclusion at a conceptual level, the critical challenge remains in translating these recommendations into practice.

4.4 TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Adhering to transparent processes and unbiased procedures with accountability provides all the people in the community with an equal chance to engage, benefit and contribute to the energy transition (Queensland Hydro, 2024). Accordingly, developers are committed to openly sharing the outcomes of their initiatives and investments with the community (Queensland Hydro, 2024). This transparency ensures that our stakeholders are informed about the progress and outcomes of the renewable projects. Figure 4 presents the codes (documents) and child nodes (sub-themes) connected to the transparency and accountability (parent node).

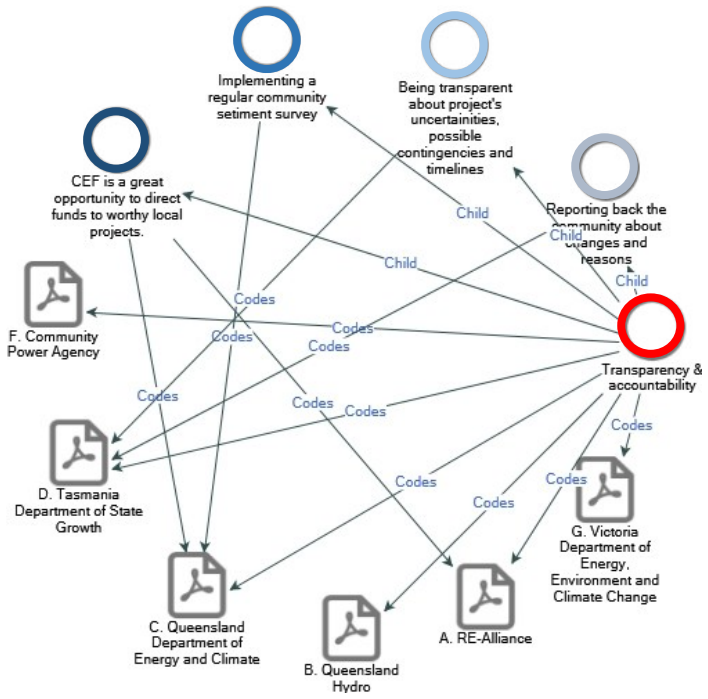

Figure 4: Transparency and accountability

While all the documents discuss the importance of transparency, in many cases, transparency is maintained primarily at the level of information provision rather than through deeper forms of engagement, such as consultation, collaboration, or shared

decision-making. As a result, transparency often remains limited to passive communication rather than active community empowerment, highlighting the need for more systematic mechanisms that embed transparency throughout all stages of engagement.

4.5 MONITORING AND EVALUATION MECHANISMS

Monitoring and evaluation of the community engagement or benefits sharing process's effectiveness were implicitly outlined in the six documents and did not appear in Re-Alliance (2024). It is important to involve communities, stakeholders, and developers in regular review and evaluation processes to assess the effectiveness of the implemented strategies. Ongoing feedback mechanisms should be established to adapt practices as needed, ensuring that projects continue to meet evolving community needs and expectations while remaining strategically aligned with the energy transition goals (Hicks & Mallee, 2023). Figure 5 presents the codes (documents) and child nodes (sub-themes) connected to the monitoring and evaluation mechanisms (parent node).

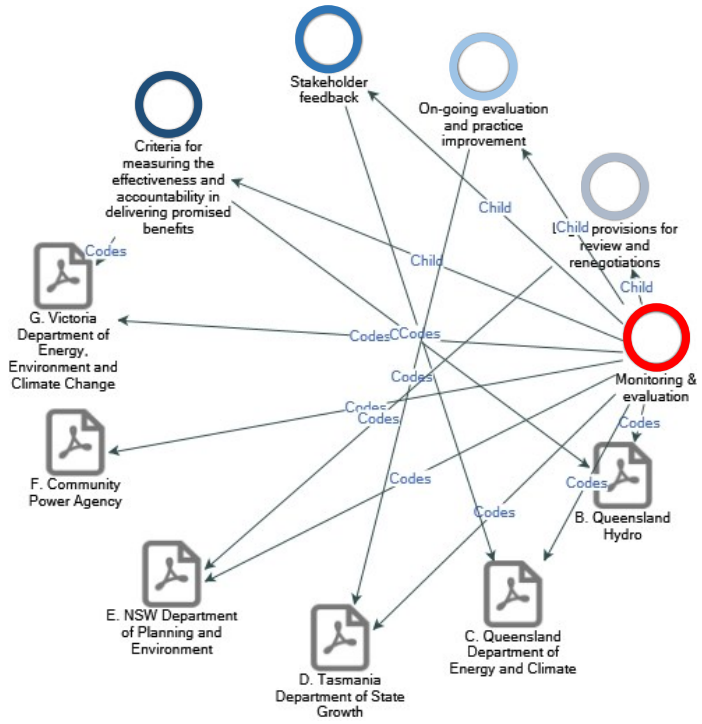

Figure 5: Monitoring and evaluation

Accordingly, coded documents have discussed broader recommendations for monitoring and evaluation without a specific timeline and stakeholder involvement. For instance, monitoring and assessing after an issue develops or while a new plan is being established, occasional community focus groups or surveys and evaluation at significant long-term milestones, are standard practices (Victoria Department of Energy Environment and Climate Change, 2021).

Nevertheless, the way of generalising the recommendations can be considered a gap that needs to be addressed. Without precise monitoring and evaluation practices, it is challenging to ensure accountability, measure outcomes, or adjust strategies in response to community feedback and evolving circumstances. With this, a distance will be created between theory and practice.

5. CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND WAYS FORWARD

There are different types of reports, articles, and discussion papers presented by the Federal/State governments, non-governmental organisations (i.e. Clean Energy Council, RE-Alliance) to guide stimulating community engagement and benefits sharing mechanisms in the renewable energy transition. Nevertheless, these existing documents overlap the same facts, lacking important details or combining different facts, while developing broader strategies that lack defined timelines or stakeholder accountability. Therefore, this paper aimed to address the research question specified in Section 1. Accordingly, the key aspects were identified using a principles-based approach, focusing on benefits sharing mechanisms, equity and inclusion, transparency and accountability, and monitoring and evaluation. Mainly, six sub-themes were identified for "benefits sharing mechanisms" in all seven documents, with 13 references. "Equity and inclusion" for the communities has been implicitly mentioned in six documents. There were four and five sub-themes identified under "monitoring and evaluation" and "transparency and accountability", respectively, with a maximum of one sub-theme connected to two documents. The analysis revealed a lack of consistency across the documents, with noticeable overlaps and repetitions between key factors. Concepts like equity were sometimes discussed narrowly in the context of financial benefit-sharing, overlooking broader social benefits. This inconsistency risks marginalising important aspects of community engagement and highlights the need for a more systematic way of presenting findings.

Conducting an independent analysis to address the research question, this study provides an overview of the key aspects included in existing frameworks and documents. More significantly, the thematic analysis approach adopted in this study offers a proven methodology for analysing differently organised frameworks/reports. In practice, the results underscore the need for more integrated strategies that align with the project timeline and involve stakeholders, including developers, policymakers, and communities. As limitations of this study, document selection bias, along with the published time (after 2020) and selection criteria, are noted. Furthermore, although NVivo assists in managing data, the coding process remains subjective, relying on researchers' judgment. As this type of analysis in academic research using industry frameworks is rare in the renewable energy sector from a social perspective, this provides a basis for developing greater accuracy through additional documents using other techniques, such as Topic Modelling. Further, these created maps could be used and generalised for future frameworks.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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