

Weaving Country into Australia's Energy Future

A Relationship-Based Framework to Support First Nations Self-Determination in the Renewable Energy Transition

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Weaving First Nations knowledges, values and rights within the renewable energy transition does not just support the co-development of sustainable, equitable and resilient energy systems, but centres self-determination and energy justice within our energy future.

Context and Purpose

Large-scale renewable energy development is expanding across First Nations lands, waters and skies, intersecting with rights, responsibilities to Country, and self-determination. Internationally recognised Indigenous rights frameworks, including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), establish Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) as a minimum standard for development on Indigenous lands. In Australia, the First Nations Clean Energy Strategy translates these rights into best-practice principles for renewable energy development.

For energy scientists and specialists, this context reshapes professional responsibility and understanding; decisions within project siting, timelines, data governance, system design and modelling assumptions actively shape whose knowledge is valued, who participates, and who benefits from the energy transition. This research discusses that energy justice and self-determination are not peripheral considerations, but essential components of energy system design. By centring relationships with First Nations, renewable energy systems can be co-developed to be not only decarbonised, but equitable, durable and grounded in Country, producing mutually shared benefits and self-determined outcomes.



Figure 1: (Left) a diagram showing the conceptual framework that sets up the Yindjibarndi renewable energy development partnership, from and (Right) a solar system in an Australian landscape, from Justin McKinney / Adobe Stock (Norman, 2024)

First Nations-Led Renewable Energy

The Yindjibarndi Energy Corporation (YEC) is a First Nations-led joint venture between Yindjibarndi Aboriginal Corporation, Yindjibarndi Ngurra Aboriginal Corporation, ACEN, and partner organisations. YEC is developing up to 3 GW of wind, solar and battery storage on Yindjibarndi Country, whilst embedding First Nations decision-making authority in governance structures. For Yindjibarndi peoples, this includes 25–50 % equity ownership, local contracting pathways, and community-defined benefit frameworks. This demonstrates how relationship-based partnerships can shift renewable energy development from extractive to shared enterprise, aligning technical deployment with cultural responsibilities, economic participation and self-determination.

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION
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Figure 2: (Left) a photograph of Millstream Chichester National park, the spiritual heartland of the Yindjibarndi people, and (Right) an image of Australian landscape from *Leading Practice Principles* (Clean Energy Network and KPMG, 2024).

The Proposed Relationship-Based Framework

This framework proposes three interdependent elements – Connection, Communication, and Co-Creation – which together centre First Nations self-determination in renewable energy development. *Connection* is the foundation for meaningful *Communication*, which in conjunction form a basis for genuine *Co-Creation*. Ongoing evaluation and dynamic design are imperative to designing a meaningful project plan. This framework was constructed through a literature review of policy, theory and practice.

• Connection – Relationships and Trust:

Connection involves acknowledging power imbalances, recognising First Nations sovereignty and cultural responsibilities to Country, and establishing mutual expectations. We must invest time in building trust before decisions are initialised, whilst ensuring knowledge is shared reciprocally rather than extracted. Methodologies can include positionality analysis, two-eyed seeing, and co-designed processes that respect cultural protocols and timelines.

• Communication – Knowledge Sharing:

Communication involves co-designing pathways to enable the sharing of priorities, assumptions, risks and opportunities. Methodologies include yarning circles and two-way learning (e.g. on-Country listening), which should involve data governance agreements. One of the goals is to ensure scientific and technical information is accessible, culturally appropriate, and responsive to community needs.

• Co-Creation – Values, Perspectives and Outcomes:

Co-creation involves promoting First Nations-led decision-making through the co-design of governance structures, benefit-sharing mechanisms, and project outcomes that reflect community-defined wellbeing. FPIC-aligned decision processes enable communities to shape project design, ownership, and long-term stewardship. This is very open-ended and is dynamic to a project's context.

