

RENEWABLE ENERGY

Community matters

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Credit: Bloomberg / Getty

The development of renewable energy projects frequently involves considerations of capital investment, long-term returns, and national policies, but the actual siting of the projects is also famously, and infamously, tied up in local politics, such as when landowners try to prevent wind farms from being built for fear of ruined views.

However, not all local politics follow the mantra of ‘not in my backyard’ (NIMBY), as socio-economic conditions and strong community ties can actually drive the adoption of renewable energy projects. Timothy Fraser at Northeastern University, Massachusetts, studied the sharp increase in renewable power plants in Japan following the Fukushima disaster and subsequent national policy of ‘feed-in tariffs’. The author looked at a range of both technical and social variables — such as land costs, unemployment and proxies for social capital between neighbours — and their effects on the siting of those power plants in Japanese municipalities. Economic distress in the form of higher unemployment and lower land prices leads to more renewable plants of all forms, and lower crime rates and increased social capital leads to additional wind power, potentially signalling the desirability of communal wind farms and local energy policies. Renewable energy projects are not only seen as an economic improvement for disadvantaged areas but also a community resource when seen as a cooperative investment.

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