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THE SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE OF SUSTAINABLE ENERGIES IN INDIGENOUS DIESEL-POWERED COMMUNITIES

NICHOLAS MERCER AND PAUL PARKER

Shifting electricity generation from diesel to greener options like wind or solar power would cut greenhouse gas emissions in off-grid communities. But not all technologies are compatible with local land use and community values, so how do the people who live there feel about renewables?

To find out, the NunatuKavut Community Council's Director of Research, Amy Hudson, invited WISE researchers Nicholas Mercer and Paul Parker and Inuk researcher Debbie Martin to southeast Labrador, where their team surveyed and interviewed more than 200 residents in nine Inuit communities about their perceptions of sustainable energy technologies. Next, they conducted a qualitative analysis to identify what factors influence local support.

Five themes emerged: 1) overall understanding of the technology in question – communities desired a deep understanding of relevant risks and benefits before consenting to development; 2) past experience with similar sustainable energy projects – pointing to negative associations like the Muskrat Falls hydroelectric project or positive associations like distributed solar; 3) threats to cultural and sustenance activities – put simply, what threatens traditional food webs is not considered sustainable; 4) the availability of energy resources (such as the abundance of wind in a particular area); and 5) energy security, including impacts on affordability, reliability, health and the environment. The researchers argued that all themes are important for community support, and projects cannot be justified on the basis of energy security alone.

The researchers then used those themes to develop a framework for understanding community support. Applying the framework revealed broad support for conventional renewables like wind and solar. However, respondents were reluctant to use emerging renewables such as biomass and tidal energy, and they significantly opposed hydroelectricity and small modular nuclear reactors.



The analysis found that energy efficiency applications maintain substantially higher support than most generation options.

This work also highlighted the importance of protecting energy sovereignty and the need for Indigenous Peoples to steer their own energy future. That means ensuring local decision-making power remains at the heart of all developments.

The success of renewables in off-grid communities depends on the leadership and support from the people they serve. Now, thanks to this research, a new tool exists to help gauge support and guide future energy projects.

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Partners: *NunatuKavut Community Council, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada*

Source: Mercer, N., Hudson, A., Martin, D., & Parker, P. (2020). “That’s Our Traditional Way as Indigenous Peoples”: Towards a Conceptual Framework for Understanding Community Support of Sustainable Energies in NunatuKavut, Labrador. *Sustainability*, 12, 6050, 1-32.

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