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Corporate community engagement professionals in the renewable energy industry: Dilemmas and agency at the frontline of South Africa's energy transition

Mikkel Funder*, Holle Wlokas, Tasneem Jhetam***, Karen Holm Olsen******

Abstract

Renewable energy companies increasingly employ community engagement professionals tasked with facilitating dialogue and collaborative activities with communities in project areas. Situated at the interface between corporate renewable energy production and community needs and grievances, these practitioners occupy a potentially significant position in the everyday implementation of socially just energy transitions. In this article we contribute to the understanding of corporate community engagement professionals in the renewable energy sector, with a focus on their challenges and agency inside the companies that employ them. Through an in-depth qualitative study of community engagement professionals in the South African wind- and solar industries we identify three key dilemmas faced by the involved practitioners, namely (i) how to pursue personal ideals in a corporate context, (ii) how to make a difference from a marginalised position inside the company, and (iii) how to deliver results without practice frameworks. We further find that they actively seek to address these dilemmas through a range of measures, such as embedding personal ideals in their everyday work, mobilising their position at the interface between company and community, and creatively piecing together their own approaches to community engagement. Our findings thereby indicate that corporate community engagement professionals should be understood and analysed as actors in their own right, rather than mere extensions of the company leadership.

Key words: Community engagement professionals, renewable energy transition, private sector, community development, South Africa

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1. Introduction

As the development of large-scale wind- and solar projects gathers pace around the world, attention is increasingly turning to the ways in which they interact with and affect local communities and economies. In a number of countries, wind- and solar projects encounter resistance from communities who perceive projects as a threat to their livelihoods or socio-cultural identity or feel excluded from project benefits and decision-making [1-3]. Alongside this, the developing Just Transition debate has pointed to the importance of ensuring that communities obtain real social and economic benefits from the energy transition [4, 5].

Wind and solar projects - habitually associated with sustainable, climate friendly development - thereby find themselves in a contested space similar to conventional resource extraction enterprises such as mining, and are faced with growing expectations to contribute directly to social and economic development. In response to this, large-scale wind and solar projects are increasingly turning to various forms of engagement with communities in the areas where they operate. This may include voluntary actions, but is also a result of developing international standards and national legal requirements for inclusive planning processes and delivery of benefits to project host communities [6].

While there is a growing body of literature on specific mechanisms of community engagement (CE) in renewable energy development, little is known about the internal dynamics of energy companies, as they go about developing such practices. As recently pointed out by van de Grift et al, a critical yet little studied group of actors are the community engagement professionals (CEPs) increasingly employed by renewable energy companies to deal with community relations and activities [7]. Charged with the development and everyday implementation of CE strategies and practices within their respective organisations, they play a pivotal role in CE, yet little is known about who they are and how they deal with their complex tasks.

In this paper, we seek to expand on this important new research agenda by focusing in particular on how internal company dynamics affect the ability of CEPs to shape engagement practices, the dilemmas they experience in this respect, and how they deal with them. We provide insight on these matters through a study of CEPs in South Africa. Here, the government has since 2011 been implementing the nationwide Renewable Energy Independent Power Producers Procurement Programme (REIPPPP). As one of the first of its kind, this auction-based energy procurement scheme requires large-scale renewable energy producers to contribute directly to socioeconomic development in communities through specific, pre-determined financial commitments. As such, it provides a rich setting in which to explore CE in wind- and solar production¹.

Within the REIPPPP, the responsibility for implementing CE activities is in the hands of so-called Economic Development Managers (ED Managers) and their teams, employed by the wind- and solar companies in question. Working at the interface between company and community, these CEPs occupy a complex position. On the one hand they must relate to a variety of external actors and government requirements. On the other they must also navigate a potentially tenuous position inside companies that do not necessarily consider CE a key priority. Their ability to develop CE practices is

¹ Our main focus here is on large-scale wind- and solar projects, which are the main thrust of REIPPPP. While the programme also includes a small number of hydro-projects, we feel that these involve a different dynamic due to their different social and environmental impacts (potentially involving relocation).

thus potentially affected not only by external dynamics, but also by their internal position and agency within the company.

Focussing especially on this latter aspect, our paper examines key dilemmas faced by these professionals, and how they deal with them. In so doing we seek to provide a more nuanced understanding of the position and agency of corporate CEPs inside renewable energy companies. From a normative perspective, an understanding of these dynamics can help provide insights for the developing field of CE in the renewable energy sector.

2. Analytical framework

2.1 The literature on CE in wind- and solar schemes

In recent decades a growing body of literature has explored public perceptions towards wind- and solar projects, and why resistance may emerge [8]. This literature has highlighted that resistance to such projects is about far more than mere “NIMBYism” and is instead grounded in a variety of factors including exclusion from benefits and planning processes, and a perception that projects will have negative impacts on livelihoods, identities and cultural values [2, 3, 9, 10]. A further body of literature has focused on how such community concerns can be addressed. This has included calls for more participatory planning processes and the need to ensure better incorporation of community interests in project planning and execution [11-13]. Extending from this but often with a more radical perspective, the literature on Energy Justice and Just Transition has argued that communities have a right to benefit from and govern renewable energy development, thereby linking CE to broader debates on justice, governance and economic development in the energy transition [4, 5, 14]. Related to these latter debates, a further body of literature has emerged which explores wind- and solar projects through a critical lens. This work points out that seemingly inclusive approaches in wind and solar projects can – if done badly or with ulterior motives - become superficial performances that seek only to overcome community resistance and legitimize particular forms of industrial development [1, 15-17]. Such work links to broader critical research within Political Ecology and development studies, which has pointed out how CE can become a means to co-opt communities into following particular agendas [18-20].

While the existing literature is critically important, it has primarily focused on the processes of CE that take place outside of wind- and solar companies. Less is known about the dynamics through which CE is developing as a field of practice inside renewable energy companies. Moreover, while a small number of studies on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) have examined the willingness of renewable energy companies to provide community benefits, these have focused mainly on company leadership [21]. Very little is known about the professionals who conduct the actual CE work within companies. A notable exception is van de Grift et al’s study of how Dutch CEPs perceive their work [7], although this does not go into detail with their agency to affect change inside companies. An understanding of how CEPs seek to shape their developing field within the corporate context, and the constraints they encounter, must therefore also reach into other literatures. In the following we draw on broader literature from organisational sociology, and the limited work on CEPs in the extractive industry and development studies, to provide a brief analytical frame for our study.

2.2 CEPs and the paradox of embedded agency

From a purely structural perspective it is tempting to assume that CEPs should be understood simply as the extended arm of the corporate or state interests that employ them. We suggest, however, that such an approach would overlook important dimensions of the agency of these professionals.

In line with the so-called “paradox of embedded agency” [22], we see organisational actors as being obviously embedded in the prevailing norms and practices of their institutional environment, but at the same time also competent agents in their own right [23]. As highlighted in the literature on “institutional work”, organisational norms and practices do not arise out of nowhere, but are continuously created and re-created by the involved actors. This affords a degree of agency to practitioners, which they might apply to maintain but also change the organisational contexts in which they are embedded [24, 25].

In extension of this, CEPs are in a particular implementing role, where they must continuously interpret and translate corporate or government strategies and policies into concrete action. As shown in studies of public and private sector practitioners, this position entails much uncertainty for practitioners, but it also affords them a degree of discretion and room for manoeuvre in the shaping of *de facto* everyday practices [26, 27]. As ‘professionals’, they can furthermore lay claim to specialised expertise and experience, which can be a further asset in this respect [28].

Moreover, like all practitioners, CEPs have individual subjectivities and associated ideals for their work that cannot be directly conflated with the dominant rationales of the organisations that employ them. As a case in point, Van de Grift et al’s study found that some CEPs felt they continuously had to justify their work vis-à-vis colleagues in other departments and preferred their work with external stakeholders. While organisational actors may take on and reproduce prevailing organisational discourses for strategic reasons, they may also at the same time harbour diverging professional and personal aspirations, and seek to carve out spaces for their own sense-making and agency in everyday work [29].

Having acknowledged this, it is also clear that as actors negotiate a given social setting, they continuously seek to reconcile their personal ideals and desires with the realities around them [30, 31]. This may lead them to a perception that any effort to invoke change is impossible to accomplish, or strategically unwise, or simply not right. A purely voluntarist perspective must therefore be avoided.

2.3 The external and internal dimensions of CE practice

CEPs are not, then, merely instruments of broader corporate and politics interests - but nor are they fully free-acting agents. The ability of practitioners to shape and influence CE practices are substantially affected by their structural positions in a given setting, and the associated resources available to them. Inspired by the work of Owen and Kemp in the mining sector [32, 33], we see the ability of CEPs to shape practices as affected by factors both external and internal to the organisation in which they work.

External factors evolve around the influence, legitimacy and interactions of practitioners outside their organisation, i.e., their relationships with other actors such as the communities themselves, local and central government, and other corporate actors. This is in turn closely linked to the broader institutional and political context of their work, e.g., their legal mandates and government policies, and the role and influence of the renewable energy industry in the local, national and global political economy.

Alongside this, the less explored *internal dimensions* of CE work also strongly affect the position and practices of CEPs. In their work on the mining sector, Owen & Kemp point to three key internal factors that influence the practices of CEPs, namely (i) their access to resources within the company, notably financial and human; (ii) the formal organisational basis for their work, including their hierarchical position in the company vis-à-vis organisational strategies and decision-making; and (iii) their informal influence and networks in the company [32].

Importantly, we would add that there is an ongoing dynamic between the external and internal context. In particular, the internal context will often be heavily influenced by deeply engrained norms and practices inherited from the wider context. As a case in point, we return later to discuss how the gender and race of CEPs – and the associated intersectionality - affects their abilities to negotiate and shape the CE practices of their workplaces.

The ability of CEPs to shape engagement practices is thus by no means a given and is enabled and constrained by a variety of factors and pressures not only outside but also inside their companies. In the following we focus on the latter aspect, exploring how South Africa’s so-called “ED Managers” deal with the limitations and associated dilemmas that company rationales and structures pose for them in their CE work, and how they deal with them.

3. Methods

The article is based on two main processes of data collection: From April 2014 to February 2015 one of the researchers conducted field research on the institutional work of companies, governments and communities in the implementation of community projects within South Africa’s REIPPPP. Subsequently, from 2018-2020 the full team of authors conducted field research focussing exclusively on the role of ED Managers.

The article draws on (i) in-depth qualitative interviews with ten different CEPs, i.e. ED Managers, working on a total of 31 wind and solar projects within the REIPPPP; (ii) a further 15 qualitative interviews with other relevant actors, i.e. other company staff, community actors, national and local government staff, and industry observers; (iii) participant observation in over 20 practitioners’ sessions and industry working group meetings, (iv) feedback from ED Managers on research findings in two workshops hosted by the authors; (v) secondary data and industry/government documentation relating to ED manager roles².

Our interviews followed a semi-structured format, using probing and encouraging rich narratives [34]. The interviews with non-ED actors provided a contextual understanding of ED manager’s position and work, complemented by participant observation of ED Managers “in action” during CE. We further reviewed available information on ED Manager’s formal scope of work, and company guidelines and reporting on CE.

The interviews with ED managers required us to explore personal and sensitive issues. We therefore applied a qualitative “small sample” approach that allowed for in-depth enquiry [34-36]. Interview access to ED managers is not straightforward, as ED managers worry that research will compromise their position inside companies. An Opportunity Sampling strategy was therefore necessary [36]. We contacted all known ED managers, and ten of South Africa’s 42 ED managers responded positively. The interviewees worked on a total of 24 wind- and seven solar projects, implemented by the companies they worked for. Of the interviewees, we identified seven as Black women, two as Black

² Due to the sensitivity of the issues discussed, the respondents and their companies have been anonymized in this article.

men, one as White woman. Black women are the largest race/gender combination among South African ED managers (see section 5.1), but our interviewees underrepresent male and non-Black ED managers. Workshops with ED managers and interviews with other actors provided additional feedback across gender and race. While this confirmed our overall findings, we do not claim that our study is representative of every ED manager in South Africa.

In accordance with our analytical framework, the interviews with ED managers sought to gain insights into their subjectivities, their perceived positions and challenges within the company, and the agency they exercised to shape the company's CE practices. In order to enquire tangibly about this, our interview guide explored four main themes, asking ED managers about (i) their professional history, aspirations and ideals (as reflections of subjectivities); (ii) their perceived roles, position and challenges within their companies; (iii) their actions to develop CE and address challenges, including specific examples, and (iv) their perceptions of successful CE work. Our focus was on ED manager's role in the construction and especially operational phases of projects, which is where the main thrust of their work lies.

Interview transcriptions and notes were coded using Atlas.ti software, supplemented by manual coding. Statements were first coded according to the above four themes, then according to sub-categories within these themes (e.g. types of aspirations and challenges; types of agency to address them). This provided a basis for condensation and synthesizing, in which we looked for commonalities and differences across the responses [34, 37].

From this it emerged that while ED managers differed in various respects (e.g. their personal traits and histories), they shared a common set of challenges and overall strategies for responding to them. The complexity of the challenges led us to classify them as dilemmas, understood here as paradoxical or contradicting problems experienced by actors. As studies in other sectors have shown, a focus on dilemmas allows for a nuanced understanding of the everyday complexities of organisational life and embedded agency [22, 26, 38]. Our analysis of the interviews identified three overarching dilemmas that stood out as particularly significant across all the interviews, and these are the subject of the current article. While the dilemmas overlap in practice, we separate them here for analytical clarity. The categorization and naming of dilemmas is thus ours, although supported by ED managers during feedback workshops.

4. The institutional context

CEPs operate in a complex, multi-level context of institutional and political requirements and dynamics. While our focus here is mainly on the position and agency of South Africa's ED Managers within their corporate environments, a brief understanding of the wider context is necessary.

The REIPPPP was launched in 2011 by South Africa's Department of Energy as a competitive auction scheme for renewable energy supply, designed *'to go beyond the procurement of energy to also contribute to broader national development objectives, such as job creation, social upliftment, local industry development and increasing opportunities for economic ownership'* [39:1]. The program enables renewable energy companies to bid for access to supply power to the national grid through utility-scale wind, solar, biomass or hydro power projects. In the assessment of company bidding, 70% of the scoring addresses the price, while 30% addresses required contributions to social and economic development within a 50 km radius of the project site, or within the district municipality.

The specific nature of company support to social and economic development is determined by the companies, but must meet a series of overall requirements designed to meet national policy objectives [40]. The requirements include local job creation, enhancing community- and Black citizen

ownership in business development, local procurement in sub-contracting, and social development in communities. Projects thus typically include support to small-scale enterprises and businesses, schools and health facilities, skills development, and various forms of community groups and organisation.

Company support to local development is furthermore defined and monitored by the government through quantitative minimum criteria as well as aspirational targets. This includes a criterium for ownership by local communities of at least 2.5% of equity in a project company. The estimated net income to Community Trusts representing local communities is an average of ZAR 1.340 million per year, a total of ZAR 26,9 billion over the minimum 20-year life of a project company [39].

When bidding in the REIPPPP, private companies are invited to build a consortium of stakeholders to form an Independent Power Producer project company. The competitive bidding process has crowded in a number of larger multinationals, who seek partnership with local, South African owned companies. Overall, foreign shareholding accounts for 48% of total equity, while South African shareholding stands at an average of 52%. Black South Africans own, on average, 33% of project equity, which includes a total community shareholding of 9%. Few companies are fully owned by Black South Africans.

Overall, the REIPPPP can thus be seen as a case of state-driven enrolment of the private sector in community development within the renewable energy sector [41]. This can be interpreted as a progressive effort to ensure that large-scale renewable energy schemes contribute to local development. However, as will be seen below, it also poses potential challenges in terms of balancing corporate rationales with development concerns.

5. The “ED Managers” of South Africa’s renewable energy sector

5.1 Formal roles and characteristics

In order to manage and undertake the required social and economic development projects under the REIPPPP, wind- and solar companies in South Africa employ specialist CEPs known as “Economic Development managers” (ED Managers). Their tasks thus typically include (i) ensuring that the company complies with government requirements for social and economic development, (ii) developing and implementing specific community development projects and activities, (iii) advising superiors and project company boards on projects and activities to be supported, and (vi) general company liaison with communities, local governments, national government and other stakeholders on socio-economic development activities.

ED Managers are either employed within wind- and solar companies themselves, or in outsourced intermediary companies who are contracted to provide CE services to companies. Employment of ED managers is voluntary for companies, but is *de facto* necessary in order to carry out the required CE work under the REIPPPP. ED managers are often responsible for multiple wind and solar sites. ED Managers employed by larger companies tend to work in small teams, overseeing so-called Community Liaison Officers who support them with everyday site-level work in communities. Few ED Managers are formal decision-makers at the strategic level within their companies. Project and activities thus typically require approval by superiors and boards in their company, or that of the contracting company.

The number of ED Managers working within the REIPPPP has gradually grown since the programme's launch. In 2020, we identified a total of 42 ED Managers directly employed in South Africa's renewable energy sector. We grouped 18 of the country's 42 ED Managers as male and 24 as female. The largest group identity are Black women, totalling 17 professionals. ED Managers usually have tertiary degrees in a variety of disciplines, most commonly Commerce, Social Sciences, Environmental Sciences and Engineering. They typically have prior work experience from government, civil society, consulting, and donor organisations. The ED Managers interviewed for this study had worked for their firms and projects for time durations from two to seven years.

5.2 Three key dilemmas

As discussed in section 2, the ability of CEPs to undertake their work is shaped by a variety of factors within and outside their company, as well as by their agency. In line with the overall scope of this paper, we examine here the intra-company dimensions of this dynamic. In so doing we focus on three key dilemmas that we identified in interviews with ED Managers, namely (a) how to pursue personal ideals in a corporate context, (b) how to empower change from a marginalized position within the company, and (c) how to deliver results without practice frameworks. In the following we discuss each of these dilemmas in more detail, describing first the substance of the dilemma, and then how ED Managers seek to deal with it.

6. How to pursue personal ideals in a corporate context?

During our interviews, ED Managers recounted how they have strong developmental ideals about their CE work, yet are positioned in a corporate context where the emphasis is primarily on generating revenue. This leads to a dilemma for ED Managers, in which their personal ideals are different to the priorities and rationales of the company leadership.

6.1 Personal ideals of ED Managers

ED Managers expressed clear normative ideals when discussing their work. Community development was central to these ideals, with a particular focus on fostering poverty alleviation, gender equality and Black economic empowerment. ED Managers thus recounted how their main aims as professionals was to "transform people's lives", with a particular emphasis on empowering what one ED manager called "forgotten communities", i.e. those marginalized in the economic development process. Our interviews showed that these ideals ran deep in the personal sense-making of ED Managers. For example, some ED Managers drew direct links to their childhood and personal histories when discussing their ideals. One explained how she had grown up seeing her family exploited in the mining industry and saw a direct link from these experiences to her decision to work with community development.

Perhaps surprisingly, renewable energy appeared to play a lesser role than community development in the normative aspirations of ED Managers. During discussions of their aspirations, community development dominated. None of the interviewees had intentionally pursued a career in renewable energy, and none had past experiences from working in the sector. This does not mean that renewable energy was considered unimportant, and reference to a green transition was made, but with the caveat that it had to be a "just" transition.

Most ED Managers expressed a positive view of the private sector's role in fostering community development. For some, this reflected a fundamental belief in the role of the private sector as a key contributor to community development as such. For others, the private sector was perceived as the most viable alternative in a situation where they perceived the state as having failed in community development – and indeed as developer in general. For them, working in the private sector did not

reflect an ideological belief, but was the best available platform for practicing community development under current conditions. Ideological perspectives on the role of business in society thus differed, yet ED Managers shared a common strong ideal of community development as the key cause towards which their work was directed.

6.2 The disconnect between personal ideals and corporate rationales

During our interviews, ED Managers described how they saw a disconnect between their own ideals and the rationales and priorities of company executives and board members. They felt there was too much emphasis on “the bottom line” in the companies they worked for, and not enough on the developmental contributions to society. In our interviews, ED Managers often lamented that their company leadership did not *de facto* prioritise CE activities. As one ED Manager said:

“For the board, community engagement tends to get least attention and get cut first if there is downsizing, because they don’t see it affecting the bottom line. For many board members, community engagement is often pure compliance, or at least a nice to have, not need to have.”

ED Managers thus felt that even when the leadership did address community development, they focused only on ensuring basic compliance and good publicity. As described in section 4, renewable energy companies under the REIPPPP must comply with particular government requirements for their support to social and economic development in terms of job creation, Black economic empowerment etc. Funding commitments are furthermore stipulated and must follow particular expense schedules. These requirements are in one sense important for ED Managers, as they ensure that community development does not drop completely from the agenda of the company leadership. However, in the eyes of ED Managers the focus on compliance also means that company executives and boards are only interested in ensuring that funds allocated to community development are spent quickly and with visible results. As one ED manager put it:

“I don’t think they [the board] really understand... because many of them are lawyers, and community development is just one of those things. And they want to see big impact. But they don’t really worry about how these big impacts happen”.

By contrast, ED Managers see meaningful community development as an outcome of lengthy participatory processes which require constant engagement and relationship building in context-appreciative ways.

6.3 Building personal ideals into everyday CE work

A key dilemma for ED Managers is thus how to manage the frequent disconnects between their own ideals and the corporate rationales of their employers. How do they seek to deal with this dilemma?

We found that ED Managers build personal ideals into the CE activities of the company through their everyday work and discretions. For example, ED Managers typically pay particular attention to marginalized groups within communities in terms of poverty, gender and race, even when it is not a requirement. When seeking to identify community projects, ED Managers may allocate particular time and resources to engage with community members who are poor and/or racially marginalized, or set up fora that consist of different wealth and gender groups in order to ensure that their needs are addressed. While such approaches are common in community development work, they go well beyond the formal requirements in the company’s contract with the government, and the expectations of the company leadership.

A further example is the work done by ED Managers to actively warn community members of the risks involved in engaging with wind and solar projects. During interviews, ED Managers explained that they

worried about such risks, and saw it as their responsibility to ensure that communities were not deprived of their rightful benefits under REIPPPP. ED managers organised meetings with community groups to advise them of overly optimistic or false promises from the numerous actors involved in wind farm development processes. One ED manager explicitly instructed communities in the risks of dealing with renewable energy companies such as the one she worked for. Another made sure to point out at community meetings that while he himself was driven by community development, the company he worked for was first and foremost a business enterprise.

While these efforts should not be seen as attempts by ED Managers to undermine their own companies or the role of the private sector vis-à-vis communities, they illustrate how they actively seek to incorporate their own ideals in the work they do.

6.4 Exercising internal advocacy

Apart from these discrete actions to incorporate personal ideals in CE work, ED Managers also seek to promote their ideals more directly within company discourses. They do so during board meetings and when engaging with CEOs, arguing for a greater emphasis on community development approaches that go beyond short-term compliance with the minimum requirements in the REIPPPP.

In so doing they employ narratives that foreground “business-case” rationales as a means to justify their propositions. These narratives focus on the risk posed to company operations if conflict erupts in surrounding communities, thereby potentially constraining the legitimacy of company operations. ED Managers thereby consciously appeal to features that they know matter in corporate settings, i.e., risks to the “bottom line” and the need for companies to maintain good public relations. In extension of these rationales, ED Managers then advocate for more progressive practices. These are rarely presented as personal ideals, as that would politicize matters and overstep corporate norms. Instead, they argue their case from a technical perspective, i.e. that particular approaches are necessary to ensure that community development is successful and sustainable. As one ED manager said:

“Boards and CEOs sometimes dislike funding projects that they see as doing the government’s work, such as schools. Then I would explain to them why it’s still wise to focus on education projects. They also don’t want to support anything associated with religion, politics etc, so I then explain to them how important a church or mosque can be as a key social anchoring point in a community.”

In seeking to advocate for more progressive community development practices in line with their personal ideals, ED Managers thus appeal to standard business rationales and technical arguments around CE. They thereby tactically employ their role as community development professionals, which allows them to speak with authority on “what works” in community development. While clearly strategic, these efforts also reflect a pragmatic approach, in which ED Managers tread carefully and work with the grain, rather than seeking overt revolutions.

7. How to empower change from a marginalized position?

When seeking to introduce their own ideals in CE work, ED Managers are faced with a further dilemma, namely, how to invoke change from a marginalized position within the company.

7.1 The marginalization of ED Managers in companies

In their work on CEPs in the Australian mining sector, Owen and Kemp show how an informal hierarchy exists within mining corporations, in which activities and staff related directly to “the bottom line” have greater status and influence than those related to social development work [32, 33]. During our interviews, ED Managers described a similar situation. Although the official positions of ED Managers within the organizational structure does vary between companies, ED Managers pointed out that the

challenge was not so much their formal position, but rather their low informal status within companies.

When discussing this, ED Managers brought up two main factors. Firstly, they referred to the generally limited priority afforded to community development by the company leadership, as discussed above. This led to a sense of being afforded less attention and influence compared to other staff within the company, such as those working on wind- or solar farm development, or financing sections. During interviews, some ED Managers said that as a result they experienced difficulties accessing resources beyond the minimum stipulated in company contracts under the REIPPPP.

Secondly, Black and female ED Managers felt that race and gender factors negatively influenced their status within the companies vis-a-vis the company leadership. As mentioned in section 4, the South African renewables sector is dominated by White or international ownership. In our study, non-White ED Managers saw this as a challenge to their work, which introduced implicit biases against them. During interviews, they made statements such as: *“The White male manager has always been seen as one step away from God”*.

Some Black ED Managers reflected that the company leadership saw them mostly as a useful means to engage with Black communities, or as token staff in accordance with South Africa’s Black Economic Empowerment policy. Black female ED Managers in particular emphasized how they experienced that their identity, both Black and female, was a disadvantage when trying to exert influence within the informal company hierarchy. One explained how female Black ED Managers were often seen as ‘motherly’ and ‘empathetic’ staff members, useful for interacting with communities and conducting social work, but not for high-level company decision-making. Another reflected on how she had struggled to be taken seriously as a Black woman in a White male dominated company, and how this directly mirrored the struggle to make the company leadership take CE work seriously.

In terms of their informal status within the company, ED Managers thus felt that their CE work was marginalized. Black ED Managers further expressed facing a double or even a triple challenge (low status of their professional work *and* race *and* gender). This was felt to constrain their influence within the company, and the ability to leverage and develop CE practices. Such experiences echo broader research on how organisations mirror race and gender inequalities in the wider society [42, 43], thus highlighting how societal context and the individual traits of CEP staff may affect their position in the company [44].

7.2 Mobilizing the interface position

ED Managers found it difficult to directly challenge or address their marginalized position in the company hierarchy. Instead, they seek alternative ways to navigate their influence within the companies. They do so by strategically acting with what they’ve got, trying - as one ED manager put it - to *“maneuver as you see fit”*.

This includes mobilizing their interface position between company and community, which despite its complexities also has advantages. While ED Managers are marginalized on several fronts within their companies, boards and executives are nevertheless dependent on them in some respects. Most fundamentally, it is ED Managers who undertake community development work and ensure that it is in fact carried out. They thereby form a keystone in ensuring that companies are able to comply with their contracts as stipulated under the REIPPPP and maintain stable company relations with communities. In these respects, ED Managers have one significant asset, namely their niche knowledge and experience on community development. Over time, ED Managers furthermore

develop relationships with communities that can be critical for ensuring implementation, and for avoiding or mitigating conflicts with communities.

ED Managers actively employ this position to elevate their own status and that of CE work within companies. For example, one Black ED manager developed personal networks in communities in order to understand what was going on within them, and how local power dynamics worked. With this knowledge she was often able to predict upcoming contentious situations and grievances vis-à-vis her company's windfarms and solar plants. This made her a valuable asset to the company and over time the leadership afforded her greater autonomy in decision-making.

Likewise, a male Black ED manager initially started out in a junior and very marginalized position within his company. However, as local resistance to windfarm development gradually grew in the area, he increasingly took on a role as mediator between the company and local communities, and built a repertoire of experience on dealing with community conflict. From this position he was able to argue for a greater role for community development within the company, resulting in the allocation of increased funding for a team of community liaison officers which considerably expanded his operational scope.

7.3 Developing strategic relationships

ED Managers furthermore seek to create informal alliances internally in the company as a means to increase leverage. Influence with the nearest local CEO was deemed particularly important by ED Managers. As responsible for company performance local CEOs have a direct interest in avoiding trouble with communities and ensuring successful unhindered operation of wind- and solar farms. During interviews, ED Managers explained how they seek to cultivate relationships with CEOs in order to demonstrate the significance of their role and professional work area. This includes prompting CEOs to join community meetings; arming them with information prior to board meetings; or framing project ideas in ways that they will appreciate.

ED Managers do not engage naively in these relationships. They are well aware of the power dynamics involved, and that a good relationship with the CEO is also good for their personal careers. Even so, the time they invest in such relationships is carefully assessed for its potential to further community development work within the company. As one interviewee put it:

"I had three CEOs. I could tell the difference between one who does not understand vs one who does understand. We could then move budgets, with understanding. It could boil down to personal values and relationships."

Some ED Managers pointed out that race and gender attributes could be employed tactically in these strategic relationships. One recounted how he himself would emphasize to the CEO that, as a Black man of the same ethnic group as the local population, he knew best what worked locally, and how conflicts should be handled. Another ED Manager reflected how her White male CEO knew little about gender issues in communities, and so was dependent on her knowledge as a Black woman. During interviews, ED managers discussed such strategies with ambivalence, well aware of the irony that they might serve to consolidate race and gender biases rather than change them.

8. How to deliver results without practice frameworks?

A third dilemma that faces ED Managers is how to undertake and deliver results on CE in a sector where organisational approaches, methods and techniques for CE – referred to here as practice frameworks - are lacking or considered inappropriate by ED Managers.

8.1 The lack of established practice frameworks

In his work on South Africa's history of community development, Westoby discusses the evolution of a variety of practice frameworks [45]. These have included the Community Driven Development paradigm, Rights Based community development, the Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) approach, and the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach. While these approaches have mainly originated with international development actors, they have subsequently been adopted and internalised by practitioners in the country's public sector and civil society organisations [46].

Yet despite this variety of approaches, South Africa's still young and developing renewables industry has been characterized by a paucity of such practice frameworks. While certain simple modes of CE are pre-determined in the REIPPPP requirements and associated tender bidding material - e.g., "public consultations" - more comprehensive stipulations on how to actually engage communities have been lacking. During interviews, ED Managers typically found that if company principles and guidelines were at all present, they tended to be very broad, irrelevant to their context, or reflected a perceived outdated approach.

As a result, ED Managers are faced with the dilemma of being expected to deliver tangible results by their companies, and harbouring strong personal ideals to do it well, yet lacking any explicitly defined company approaches and tools for doing so. How have they responded?

8.2 Piecing together engagement practices

A common immediate strategy has been improvisation, whereby the means of engaging with a particular community group is decided on an ad hoc basis according to the given circumstances. During interviews, ED Managers reflected that improvisation was not a bad thing, but rather an important approach to CE in itself, since flexibility and situational awareness was critical for success. Nevertheless, they also expressed a need for more long-term, systematic approaches. In this respect we observe a cross-cutting approach among the ED Managers interviewed, whereby they actively seek to "piece together" individual practice frameworks from a variety of different approaches and tools.

For example, one ED Manager set out to establish an approach through which he could identify suitable community projects for the company to support. The CEO wanted an option whereby community members would submit individual applications. However, the ED manager preferred a more engaged communitarian approach, which better reflected his personal ideals. He successfully argued to the CEO that it would be better to apply a process-oriented approach, based on broad-based dialogue with and among community members. As he set about developing this approach he drew partly on (a) techniques learnt from former employment as a government community development worker, e.g., Participatory Rural Appraisal; (b) approaches learnt from his contacts in the NGO sector, e.g. the ABCD approach which emphasises empowering communities as right-holders vis-à-vis government; and (c) personal experimental approaches such as systematically striking up conversations with individual community members in order to harvest ideas.

In seeking to compose their practice frameworks, ED practitioners thus draw on a variety of sources including: (i) experiences and repertoires developed during past professional history outside of the renewables sector; (ii) engaging with practitioners and approaches to community development outside the renewables sector; (iii) ad hoc innovation and learning while carrying out CE activities, and (iv) knowledge sharing with other ED practitioners through personal networks, professional fora and workshops etc. Such a crafting of individual practice frameworks for CE is not unique to ED Managers or the renewable energy sector. Westoby found similar practices among NGO- and public sector staff within South Africa's broader community development sector [45]. More generally, it can be seen as a form of bricolage [47].

8.3 Formalising personal engagement practices

ED Managers seek not only to develop personal practice frameworks, but also attempt to formalise aspects of these within their companies more broadly. During interviews, they emphasized the importance of developing strategies, guidelines or other written statements that set out the company’s approach to CE, and they actively sought to develop these. When doing so, ED Managers sought to incorporate the practices that they had pieced together. For example, during interviews ED Managers spoke of how they tried to integrate their positive experiences with flexible and context-dependent approaches in company guidelines on CE. Likewise, variants of the ABCD approach were adapted and incorporated into strategies. By introducing CE practices through conventional organisational procedures, ED Managers thus render their pieced together practices and experiences formal, i.e., they become “officialised” and legitimate within company discourse.

This may not in itself be sufficient to change the underlying dispositions of company leadership, but it is a step of the way. With strategies and guidelines in hand, ED Managers have a company-approved reference when seeking to convince a board to engage in a given activity. The work of formalising thus not only consolidates their practice frameworks, but also strengthens their position as interface actors. For example, with the official adoption of “flexibility” and “context specific” approaches in corporate guidelines to CE, ED Managers are to some extent institutionalising their discretionary space and the room for manoeuvre that this provides.

More broadly, this work can be seen as an attempt to draw CE approaches from the wider South African context into the corporate settings of the renewables sector. By drawing on approaches within the community development sector and their past professional experiences from other sectors, ED Managers are in effect linking the developing corporate environments in the renewable energy sector to South Africa’s past history of community development.

9. Discussion

9.1 The agency of South Africa’s ED Managers

Table 1 summarizes the three dilemmas of the ED Managers studied, and the strategies they employ to address them. While we do not claim that the dilemmas are universal to all South Africa’s ED managers, they were evident across our interviews and confirmed by ED Managers during subsequent feedback workshops. We found no differences between wind- and solar projects in these dilemmas. When addressing the dilemmas, ED Managers applied different combinations and variations of the strategies discussed. Yet overall it is clear that they all acted creatively on their dilemmas.

Table 1: Summary of ED Managers’ dilemmas and strategies

Dilemma	ED Manager’s strategies	Example
How to pursue personal ideals in a corporate context?	Building personal ideals into everyday CE work	Paying particular attention to marginalized groups even where not required
	Exercising internal advocacy	Applying “bottom line” rationales to justify progressive approaches vis-à-vis company boards

How to make a difference from a marginalised position?	Mobilising the interface position	Using experience-based knowledge from the field for leverage within the company
	Developing strategic relationships	Forming close working relationships with CEOs sympathetic to CE
How to deliver results without practice frameworks?	Piecing together practices	Mixing NGO practices and personal experiences
	Formalising informal practices	Making flexibility a key approach in company guidelines

As pointed out in section 2, the particularities of a given societal and institutional context inevitably affects the intra-company positions and agency of CEPs, as do their particular traits. For example, it is likely that the race and gender aspects discussed here are particularly prominent given the South African context and the traits of our interviewees. The specific nature of CEP dilemmas and agency may therefore vary within and across countries, and this must be explored further as the so far very limited work on CEPs in the wind- and solar industries develops.

Even so, we note that while the Dutch CEPs in van de Grift et al's study appear more heterogenous in their perceptions, they too express challenges in terms of navigating their complex position at the frontline of corporate CE [7]. In this respect, our study has in particular highlighted the agency that CEPs may employ to shape and leverage CE inside companies. In this respect, our findings further align with the broader organisational literature on "institutional work" which highlights the diverse ways in which organisational actors seek to create, maintain or disrupt their institutional environments [23, 25]. In line with this literature, the strategies of ED Managers can be seen as efforts to define and advocate for particular rule systems around CE, and to (re-) construct their professional rights and identities [25].

In conducting this work, ED Managers especially draw on their particular position at the interface between corporate actors and communities. This includes the room for discretionary action inherent in this position, and the knowledge vested in the role as those who "know" communities. Our findings thereby also resonate with the public administration literature on "street level bureaucrats" [26] and the anthropological work on "interface bureaucrats" [27]. Our research suggests that a similar dynamic can take place among corporate practitioners within the renewable energy sector. This is not least relevant when private sector actors take on developmental tasks and roles usually associated with the state, as in the REIPPPP [48].

9.2 South Africa's ED managers as agents of change?

Our main focus in this paper has been the dilemmas and agency of South African CEPs inside wind- and solar companies, thereby contributing insights on the challenges that such practitioners may deal with, and how they address them. To examine the outcomes of their actions in full will require further research beyond the scope of this paper, particularly with respect to the socio-economic outcomes of community projects. Here, we limit ourselves to a brief critical reflection on the outcomes of their work inside companies.

Overall, it seems clear that the efforts of the ED managers studied do have an impact on the nature of corporate CE practices in South Africa's wind- and solar industries. Firstly, as discussed above their discretionary actions and bricolage shape how their companies' CE is exercised in practice. Our

participant observation and interviews with other actors showed that ED managers carried their practice frameworks forward into actual CE activities, thus creating the *de facto* everyday mode of engagement between companies and communities. Secondly, our findings suggest that ED manager's perceptions and grounded experiences are to some extent being incorporated in formal company procedures on CE. For example, at the outset of the REIPPPP, community projects were almost universally identified by companies themselves. Today, companies retain final decision-making power, but board decisions and emerging company guidelines have increasingly provided space for stakeholder involvement in the identification of funded activities. Even the comprehensive and laborious ABCD approach has been formally adopted by some companies. As discussed in section 8, ED managers have been key in this process.

At the same time, we see limits to the agency of the ED managers interviewed. For one thing, the constraints that they face within companies are significant. The marginalisation of their field of work, and of their ideals, race and genders are deep-seated structures in the corporate contexts of which they form part. Moreover, the agency of ED Managers discussed here first and foremost provides successful 'workarounds' for dealing with the constraints they encounter, allowing them to pursue CE practices that are consistent with their own values. In this there is inevitably a degree of reconciling realities and personal values, as pointed out by Voronov & Vince [30]. While there are examples of ED Managers leaving their company as a result of frustrations with corporate rationales, most do continue, accepting the compromises involved. While the work of the ED managers thus does impact corporate practices, the structural constraints that cause their dilemmas in the first place are unlikely to be overturned through their agency alone.

9.3 Implications for policy and practice

As emphasized in the Just Transition literature and related work, communities should not be approached merely as obstacles that must be overcome in the roll-out of the energy transition [4, 16]. Rather they must benefit fully from the transition and participate in its governance [5, 14]. Our findings indicate that CEPs in wind- and solar companies can potentially be progressive actors in this respect, whose ideals and agency can help push corporate actors towards more ambitious approaches to CE, á la the "innovators" and "early adopters" discussed in the literature on diffusion of innovation [49]. This is significant and suggests a need for policy makers and corporate actors in the wind- and solar industries to focus more on supporting, engaging and learning from the agency and practical experiences of CEPs.

At the same time, it seems clear that the agency of CEPs, while critically important, cannot stand on its own. If CEPs are left to devise their own creative solutions to deep-seated dilemmas such as those discussed in this article, there is not only a risk that their intra-organisational challenges will remain, but also that they inadvertently end up as convenient "fixers" for their companies – i.e. staff who deal with troublesome government requirements and find creative solutions to CE on behalf of their companies. While this in the short term solve problems of local resistance and enhance company legitimacy, it does not necessarily empower communities in terms of real ownership and influence [1, 15, 16]. CEPs may thereby potentially end up as producers of corporate security practices rather than developmental change agents, as has sometimes been observed in the extractive sectors [50].

The work of corporate CEPs, while creative and highly important, must therefore be complemented by broader institutional measures and changes. What this entails in detail is context-dependent and as authors we take different positions on the matter. Overall, however, we see two different approaches. One is to recognize that renewable energy companies can and should act as development actors, as per South Africa's current REIPPPP. From this perspective, there is a need to focus more on

establishing frameworks and conditions that better support the work and structural position of corporate CEPs within their companies, and which ensure that private sector contributions support transformative socioeconomic development approaches rather than tick-box exercises and quick-fire projects.

An alternative approach questions whether CEPs should in fact work from within corporate spaces in the first place. Such a perspective is sceptical that renewable energy companies are the right actors to undertake and implement community development. In the South African context, such an alternative approach might entail renewable energy companies simply providing funding directly to Local Governments, who would then be the logical workplace of CEPs.

10. Conclusion

Our study highlights the dilemmas and constraints with which the examined CEPs in South Africa's REIPPPP are confronted and show how intra-company structures and dynamics present critical challenges to their work. What is also apparent, however, is the agency exercised by these practitioners to address their dilemmas and pursue their own ideals for community development, even if these do not align with corporate "bottom line" rationales.

Analytically, this indicates the need for a more nuanced understanding of the role and work of CEPs in the renewable energy sector. Rather than mere extensions of the company leadership, we suggest that they should be seen as actors in their own right whose ability to shape corporate CE is affected not only by external but also intra-company structures, and whose agency to negotiate such challenges may be more complex than it first appears.

We suggest that this is an important research agenda for the study of renewable energy development, which merits further exploration in other settings. Apart from providing greater insight on a group of actors whose role in the energy transition is little studied, such work can help shed light on the more discrete forms of agency that are sometimes overlooked in the study of wind- and solar projects [17]. From a normative viewpoint, insights into these matters can help identify opportunities and constraints in the everyday shaping CE and –development in the energy transition.

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