

## Decide, announce, defend... Abandon? How to move on from the planning cycle of doom

*In a new book, Infrastructure Projects and Local Communities, stakeholder engagement consultant Garry Keegan advocates for deeper and earlier public consultation with local people to get necessary projects such as wind farms across the line.*

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In Ireland these days, it seems there are three things that are certain: death, taxes and planning delays. The current operation of the planning system is wrought with inertia, increasingly becoming a barrier preventing key infrastructural projects from getting past the finishing line.

Whether it's a metro, homes or crucial energy infrastructure required for the green transition, developers are constrained in their ability to meet deadlines amid growing opposition from community stakeholders. This is having severe ramifications for the public image of project managers, leading to less cohesion between them and local communities.

In recent months, the recurrence of accommodation earmarked for asylum seekers being torched across the country brings home the dire implications of a lack of consultation between the State and local communities.

Infrastructure Projects and Local Communities seeks to answer the perennial question facing project planners in Ireland: Why are crucial pieces of infrastructure left in limbo amid difficulties with community stakeholders? While it's easy to scapegoat Nimbys and the politicians representing them, the truth is much more complex.

In the book's thought-provoking and academic analysis, Garry Keegan sheds light on the intricate dynamics between public policy infrastructure projects and local communities, emphasising the recurring theme of fractured relationships that often emerge upon the announcement of vital infrastructural projects.

Drawing from a multitude of global examples spanning energy, transport, waste management, and more, Keegan, a community impact and conflict intervention expert with his Dublin-based firm Infrastructure Projects Consulting (IPC), underscores the challenges that arise regarding the balancing of national interests and local concerns.

The former academic's analysis skilfully unravels the complexities of major infrastructure projects, exposing the vulnerabilities inherent in deciding where to locate major projects surrounded by local communities, known as the siting process. The author contends that the repercussions of project-related disputes extend beyond acrimonious public debates and delays, impacting political landscapes and election manifestos. Indeed, the changing political climate and government transition further complicate matters, creating difficulties when inherited projects clash with new policy directions.

Dissecting the multifaceted nature of infrastructure, Keegan highlights its long-term, risk-prone, and stakeholder-intensive characteristics. Without engagement with the local community from the outset, project planners are doomed to failure and risk damaging their reputation in the long term for future projects.

## **Sustainable infrastructure**

Keegan helps to underscore the necessity of integrated investment strategies and a whole-of-government policy approach to meet economic, environmental, social, and developmental objectives. A significant portion of the book is dedicated to exploring the growing consensus among G20 countries on sustainable infrastructure. Keegan stresses the importance of an informed citizenry, advocating for regular communication and engagement campaigns before project initiation to address concerns and foster trust.

On a macro level, if the State is to reach net-zero emissions target by 2050, key infrastructural projects such as wind farms are crucial. On a micro level, ambitious targets such as 5GW of wind energy on the energy grid by 2035 can only be achieved by setting in place systems to deal with community concerns where such wind developments are proposed.

Keegan argues that wind energy is “more prone” to objection “as they involve the erection of tall wind turbines across wide-open landscapes deemed controversial and unacceptable to a wider population”.

Such a conundrum requires, “a more comprehensive and effective guidance for community stakeholder management in the planning stage.”

The book delves into the global landscape of infrastructure challenges, citing examples ranging from large-scale endeavours including the new Silk Road by China and Neom in Saudi Arabia to smaller yet controversial projects such as the Mauna Kea proposal and the Flint water crisis in the US states of Hawaii and Michigan, respectively.

## **Communication with local communities**

Regardless of scale and ambition, any project in an area with concerned local communities can be perceived as threatening and, as such, necessitates thoughtful communication from the outset. While the entire country may desire certain pieces of infrastructure, ultimately it boils down to what the local inhabitants surrounding such projects discern as either detrimental or beneficial to them.

Accordingly, Keegan says that “consulting and collaborating with the public makes good business sense” as it “can lead to reduced financial risk (from delays, legal disputes, and negative publicity), direct cost savings, increased market share (through good public image), and enhanced social benefits to local communities.” As they say – all planning is local.

Keegan also explores the broader global context, emphasising the role of infrastructure in supporting economic opportunities and well-being. He highlights the stark disparities in infrastructure access globally, with millions lacking basic services contributing to inequalities.

The book features stark statistics, highlighting that 840 million people globally live more than two kilometres from all-weather roads while one billion lack electricity and four billion lack basic internet access. He goes on to stress the urgent need for improvement to avoid severe consequences in healthcare, sanitation, and education. By getting the planning and communication right, worldwide disparities in access to key infrastructure can be alleviated.

## **Local investment, education and employment**

The book takes a critical and analytical turn toward the role of public opposition and the evolving landscape of stakeholder engagement. Keegan argues that public managers, professionals and developers often perceive concerned locals as intruders challenging their decisions.

To overcome this, Keegan suggests a number of ways of overcoming community concerns about projects, including a community fund where the developer delivers a lump sum or regular payments into the fund for the benefit of local residents; the provision of payments for local community facility improvements and educational supports for local people, either through their own investment or during construction and operation; as well as contracting and providing local employment.

The book advocates for a more transparent, multi-stakeholder process, emphasising the importance of communication, coordination, cooperation, collaboration, and consensus – the “5Cs” – to minimise conflict.

Further exploration of alleviating community concerns is conducted when examining a trend known as an “alternative dispute resolution” (ADR) process, which highlights the importance of early intervention, capacity building within organisations, and institutionalising dispute resolution as a prerequisite to any zoning arrangement.

## **Consensus through compromise**

According to Keegan, ADR is “a more effective problem-solving policy-making method than alternatives such as litigation or traditional rule-making procedures”. It stresses the need for a strategic and collaborative approach to achieve consensus through compromise in order to get infrastructure past the finishing line.

A critical theme throughout the text is the role of public consultation in the success of infrastructure projects. Keegan compellingly argues that good consultation is an investment that pays off, while poor consultation can lead to financial losses, delays, and damaged public image.

Advocating for transparency and engagement as essential elements in raising awareness, gaining public acceptance, and building support, Keegan argues that good planning can accrue direct cost savings, increased market share (through good public image), and enhanced social benefits to local communities.

Planners must be pragmatic when engaging with communities. This can involve building channels of communication in local languages with project-affected groups: “Dialogue can be effective only if consultation is convenient and accessible to relevant stakeholders, particularly affected people.”

Keegan says that locations for consultation and dialogue should be close to places of residence or work. “An informed public will better understand the trade-offs between project benefits and disadvantages; be able to contribute meaningfully to project design; and have greater trust in its new corporate neighbours.”

“Identifying all stakeholders, especially the poor and marginalised, is essential to producing good consultation results.”

But, at its core, what are developers currently doing that prevents developments from proceeding?

The three-part process that prevents infrastructure projects from getting community approval consists of “decide-announce-defend” (DAD). This detrimental approach to infrastructure project delivery can prove costly and time-consuming and sometimes lead to project failure in the form of “decide-announce-defend-abandon”. To alleviate this, Keegan states that the likely adversaries should be brought together early, and project promoters need to analyse and define the needs of the communities related to their proposed project so they can negotiate and engage more effectively.

Thus, he concludes by urging project promoters to eschew the “decide-announce-defend” approach, and instead prioritise the need for early engagement and negotiation. Keegan highlights the importance of community-defined benefits and the optimisation of community benefit schemes, stressing their potential in expediting projects.

### **Compensation – a force for good?**

The issue of compensating objectors has sprung to the fore in recent months. An RTÉ Investigates programme highlighted how serial objectors, presenting as environmental NGOs, were compensated by developers to drop their superfluous concerns. However, Keegan argues compensation, in the form of community gain schemes, can possibly act as a force for good in the planning system.

Compensation can redress possible specific losses, thus acting as a loss-reduction measure. But using incentives to buy off host community concerns about certain impacts must be avoided, with compensation and incentives acceptable only when linked to the specific impacts.

Keegan’s engaging, insightful, analytical and informative book provides a comprehensive exploration into the challenges and opportunities in the realm of public policy infrastructure projects. It serves as a valuable resource for policymakers, project managers, and stakeholders seeking to navigate the complex terrain of infrastructure development while fostering community engagement and minimising conflicts.

It is recommended for both policymakers and those interested in the planning system who are passionate about seeing crucial infrastructure projects getting completed while also maintaining cohesion between local communities and project promoters. Infrastructure Projects and Local Communities is self-published and available via IPC’s website.

This review can be found at: <https://thecurrency.news/articles/140363/decide-announce-defend-abandon-how-to-move-on-from-the-planning-cycle-of-doom/>