

## Best Social Engagement Presentation at Environ 2021 Winner Alison Hardiman, University College Cork

### Public Participation with Project Authorisation for Renewable Energy Infrastructure

I am really delighted to have been nominated as winner of the 'ESI Best Social Engagement Presentation at Environ 2021' for my oral presentation on 'Public Participation within Project Authorisation for Renewable Energy Infrastructure'.

With greatly appreciated sponsorship from EirGrid plc, I am a mid-career PhD Candidate in University College Cork (UCC) undertaking legal research that explores the tensions arising between EU and national climate action targets required to be achieved within challenging mandatory timelines and in accordance with Aarhus Convention rights as they are applied. I am analysing this issue from the perspective of project authorisation for renewable energy infrastructure projects in Ireland.



The goals and specific targets for the development of renewable energy output within the European Union are increasingly ambitious. Each country has stringent individual targets leading towards zero carbon output in 2050. Meeting these mandatory targets within the electricity sector is dependent upon the development of individual, legally robust and operationally reliable renewable energy infrastructure projects within tight deadlines. This includes on and offshore wind farms, solar farms, grid reinforcement, storage development and interconnection. As Ireland does not have vast tracts of undeveloped land upon which to develop such projects, this infrastructure must be developed in and around host communities across the country. Each project requires planning authorisation (including an Environmental Impact Assessment) and host communities regularly oppose these projects, utilising their right of access to justice to object and often bring a judicial review challenge before the courts

I am specifically researching the role of public participation within the EIA process in this context. It is my position that given the highly challenging targets and timelines we have agreed within international, European and national policy and legal contexts, we need developers, communities and NGOs/ environmental activists to work together within the project authorisation process rather than to default to inadequate processes, objection and judicial review. This requires mandatory high standards of public participation within the planning process – including at the pre planning stages – and careful

definition of those requirements so that they afford developers with legal certainty.

Development of this research includes analysis of the design and delivery of regional and government policy, the sufficiency of existing legislation, the theory of public participation and the rights of developers among other wide ranging considerations. A primary objective of the right to public participation is to achieve better decisions and it is argued that the local impacts that deeply affect local communities are most effectively and efficiently addressed at the earliest design stages. It would be a great success to build this approach into Ireland's EIA procedures and there are pre-existing processes in relation to Projects of Common Interest and evolving 'SIA' (Social Impact Assessment) international standards from which we can learn in this regard.