Justice in Transition: How Community Action Groups Shape a 'Just' Coal Phase-out in Australia's Hunter Valley

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Abstract

This thesis critically examines how community action groups employ justice frameworks to advocate for a 'just' transition from coal in the Hunter Valley, NSW. Drawing on qualitative framework analysis of social media content and commissioned policy reports, the study investigates how Hunter Renewal and Lock the Gate Alliance operationalise distributive, procedural, recognitional, and restorative justice in their advocacy.

Findings reveal distinct advocacy strategies, where Hunter Renewal prioritises distributive (economic) justice and community participation. Conversely, Lock the Gate employs a broader, accountability-driven approach, emphasising procedural transparency and ecological restoration. However, both groups inadequately integrate recognitional justice, especially concerning Indigenous cultural recognition, highlighting a critical gap informed by recognitional justice theories, as well as Indigenous environmental justice perspectives.

Moreover, despite shaping public discourse effectively, Hunter Renewal experiences procedural tokenism, limiting genuine community empowerment, while Lock the Gate encounters significant institutional resistance consistent with advocacy coalition frameworks.

This research concludes that effective advocacy for a truly just transition requires deeper integration of recognitional justice through explicit inclusion of Indigenous and marginalised community perspectives, genuine co-design processes beyond tokenistic consultation, and strategic coalition-building to counter institutional resistance. These insights provide crucial implications for policy, advocacy strategies, and future just transition efforts globally.

Introduction

The Hunter Valley, 'just' transitions and community groups

Coal has been integral to the Hunter Valley region for over 200 years since the arrival of the first Europeans in the late 18th century (Drinan, 2022). Encompassing both the Goulburn and Hunter rivers, the Hunter region is divided into Lower and Upper sub-regions. The Lower Hunter is generally thought of as the towns on the Hunter River that stretch east beyond Singleton down to Newcastle. The Upper Hunter consists of the two powerhouse towns of Singleton and Muswellbrook, where most mines in the region operate. While mining has played a considerable role in the regional economy, it is only since the 1980s that mining exploded into the behemoth we see today. From 1981 to 2014, mined land increased from 1,742 hectares to 31,500 hectares, with a further 128,000 hectares covered by exploration licenses making up over 64% of the entire valley footprint (Drinan, 2022). It is this rapid increase in the last few decades, that had seen both accelerated financial returns for Government and businesses, at the cost of communities and the environment (Drinan, 2022).

Most coal mines that operate in the Hunter region are large open-cut coal mines, as opposed to operating underground, with even some of the largest sites visible from space. The Government taxes these mines by collecting coal royalties, which are paid to the Government for the coal they produce and are tied to the net value of coal sold. It's a lucrative business, with the value of coal exports from the region reaching $23.1 billion in 2018-2019, of which the government claimed 8.4 per cent (Drinan, 2022). For Australia, coal is both a blessing and a curse, which has helped Australia ride the wave of economic security at the expense of the Hunter Valley's environment, communities and people (Drinan, 2022).

Australia's energy landscape is undergoing significant transformation driven by climate change imperatives, requiring coal-dependent regions like the Hunter Valley to navigate profound socio-economic shifts in energy production and ecological challenges. Achieving a 'just' transition – ensuring fairness and equity within these structural changes (Snell, 2018; Stark, Gale, and Murphy-Gregory, 2023) – is paramount for the

communities that are at the centre of this change. Over the past 15 years, community action groups like Hunter Renewal and Lock the Gate, have emerged as crucial advocates in the regional debate, acting as conduits between communities and decision-makers and have shaped public discourse by influencing government energy and social policy towards equitable outcomes (Hunter Renewal, n.d.; Lock the Gate, n.d.). However, the extent to which they are making a difference is hardly studied and is what this thesis hopes to change.

Despite increasing and current trends in the policy debate around a 'just' energy transition in Australia (Evans, 2008; Evans & Phelan, 2016; Goddard & Farrelly, 2018; Snell, 2018; Abrams et al., 2022; Adey, et al., 2022; Edwards et al., 2022; Eckersley & Fitz-Henry, 2023; Stark, Gale, and Murphy-Gregory, 2023), there remains a limited understanding of how justice dimensions – distributive, procedural, recognitional, and restorative – are effectively integrated into just transition strategies by groups working on the ground (Askland, 2024). This research addresses this critical gap by examining how Hunter Renewal and Lock the Gate utilise and operationalise justice concepts to advocate for and affect change in regional transition of the Hunter Valley. These groups are ideal case studies due to their role in influencing public debates, as well as their varied strategic approaches to advocacy. Hunter Renewal's community-participatory approach corrals communities under a unified voice to shape the Hunter transition away from mining (Hunter Renewal, n.d.). Lock the Gate, instead positions itself as a group that challenges institutional accountability to protect against the environmental, social impacts of mining in Australia (Lock the Gate, n.d.). Both are unique advocacy approaches, but deeper research is critical for understanding just how effective they are.

To guide the research, the thesis intends to answer the following question:

"How do community action groups, such as Hunter Renewal and the Lock the Gate Alliance, use and achieve notions of justice to shape and advocate for a 'just' transition in the Hunter Valley?"

Breaking this question down into manageable sizes, sub-questions help to a coordinate investigation into the specific themes. The first theme is regarding the conceptualising

of justice aims to understand how justice is articulated by both groups. The second theme is regarding the strategies and advocacy approaches employed by the groups to shape the transition; and the final theme focuses on the impact and challenges these groups have made and faced, and answers aims to how the groups have shaped justice discourse, policy frameworks, and stakeholder engagement in the region. Collectively, these three core sub-sections should provide a thorough deep dive into how these groups shape and advocate for a 'just' transition in the Hunter Valley.

The analysis draws on the distributive, procedural, recognitional, and restorative justice theorists (Rawls, 1971; Thibaut and Walker, 1975; Fraser, 2003; Pali, Forsyth and Tepper, 2022), which help frame the analytical exploration of how economic fairness, procedural legitimacy, cultural recognition, and environmental and social restoration inform transition advocacy. Additionally, interwoven in this web of justice theory are theories on participation (Arnstein, 1969), advocacy (Sabatier, 1988), and discourse (Hajer, 1995), which help this thesis understand the effect these groups have on the just transition debate, and the challenges these groups face in advocating for justice.

Employing a qualitative framework analysis, this study critically examines social media communications and commissioned reports by both groups, offering insights into their justice framework and advocacy approaches. Social media analysis provides timely, authentic insights into the groups' public-facing narratives, while analysing commissioned reports helps to reveal their deeper strategic intentions. Analysing government consultation papers and reports on regional transition policy further supplements the extent to which the transition is taking effect.

The dissertation begins by reviewing literature and establishing the theoretical foundation for justice frameworks within just transitions. It highlights where there is a gap in transition literature of studying groups like Hunter Renewal and Lock the Gate in how they utilise justice language to shape the transition. The literature review provides the basis for a rich analysis on how groups can affect change in regional transitions that will be useful for other areas experiencing similar energy transitions.

The methodology chapter, outlines and justifies the research methodology and analytical approach. The methodology chosen involves using a framework analysis of

primary data, social media data, and secondary data, commissioned reports, where the data is subsequently coded, themed, charted and interpreted (Fielding, Lee & Blank, 2017). By analysing the language used, the framework could draw out themes and reveal gaps in advocacy practice. Similarly, it reveals limitations and draws on rationale for choosing this selected methodological approach.

The fourth chapter findings and discussion, explores the key dimensions of justice articulated by each group, the strategic advocacy employed, and highlights limitations and provides suggestions to take forward for each group. The section reveals the comparative differences in their advocacy approaches, the difference in language used, and an analysis on what both groups could do better to be more effective.

The final chapter, the Conclusion, synthesises these insights, highlighting the critical implications for theory, policy, and practice, and offers recommendations for enhancing the comprehensiveness, inclusivity, and effectiveness of future just transition advocacy. The study finds distinct differences in the framing of justice themes, an overrepresentation of economic distribution and government accountability and an underrepresentation of framing around justice of recognition. In addition, the study reveals differences in justice advocacy approaches, from community-oriented participation to accountability-driven tactics, and finally reveals tokenistic engagement and institutional resistance challenges faced by the groups. The study suggests ways these groups could better integrate recognitional justice, tackle tokenistic engagement, and circumvent institutional resistance.

Next, the following section dives into the relevant literature on justice, transitions, the regional context, and the critical gap in the literature this thesis aims to fill.

Literature Review

Introduction

The transition to a low-carbon economy represents a significant policy challenge for heavy polluting industries globally and particularly in Australia, where coal dependency is historically entrenched. To address economic and social impacts equitably during this shift, the concept of a 'just transition' has emerged as a critical policy framework (ILO, n.d.; IMF, 2022; United Nations, 2023; Cigna et al., 2023). While just transitions broadly encompass equitable outcomes, inclusive decision-making, recognition of affected communities, and restoration of environmental harm, scholars note ongoing challenges translating these principles from theory into practice (Abram et al., 2022; Stark, Gale, & Murphy-Gregory, 2023; Edwards et al., 2022). In regions like the Hunter Valley, community action groups, like Hunter Renewal and Lock the Gate, have emerged as key advocates attempting to operationalise these justice frameworks amidst a very complex social, economic, environmental and political landscape (Hunter Renewal, 2021; Hunter Renewal, 2023; MacNeil and Beauman, 2022; Edwards et al., 2022; Crofts, 2023; Askland et al., 2024).

This literature review critically explores the theoretical basis of just transitions, evaluates the role of community action groups in operationalising justice frameworks, and examines the application of distributive, procedural, recognitional, and restorative justice concepts to the Hunter Region's transition. It explicitly identifies an empirical and theoretical gap, that while substantial theoretical frameworks exist, detailed empirical analysis on how community groups practically operationalise these justice frameworks in advocacy remains underexplored, particularly within regional contexts like the Hunter Valley. Addressing this gap, the present research contributes to practical and theoretical insights to enhance understanding of bottom-up advocacy strategies for a 'just' transition.

Theoretical Foundations of a Just Transition

This section examines the theoretical development of the just transition concept, exploring its origins in labour advocacy, subsequent integration into climate and energy justice discourse, and current theoretical debates. The discussion explicitly outlines the four principal justice dimensions underpinning just transition theory – distributive, procedural, recognitional, and restorative – and critically evaluates existing frameworks' strengths, limitations, and practical challenges.

Origins and Evolution of Just Transition

The term 'just transition' originated within the United States labour union movement of the 1970s, initially framing environmental transitions through a 'jobs vs environment' lens focused primarily on protecting works in polluting industries (Abram et al., 2022; Ciplet & Harrison, 2020; MacNeil & Beauman, 2022). The International Labour Organization (ILO) and later the United Nations (UN), reconceptualised just transitions, explicitly integrating labour rights with broader climate action goals, significantly expanding its scope beyond employment concerns alone (ILO, n.d.; Abram et al., 2022; United Nations, 2023). This expansion aligned the 'just' transition with environmental and energy justice frameworks, placing the concept within a broader theoretical tradition and heightening its relevance to contemporary climate policy debates.

Just Transition Frameworks and Dimensions

Scholars broadly agree that just transition rests upon three core dimensions – the 'Triumvirate Tenets' – distributive, procedural, and recognitional justice (McCauley & Heffron, 2018; Velicu & Barca, 2020; Abrams et al., 2022; Stark, Gale, & Murphy-Gregory, 2023; Goddard & Farrelly, 2018;). More recently however, restorative justice has emerged as a crucial, though less integrated, fourth dimension (McCauley & Heffron, 2018; Abrams et al., 2022). The following sections briefly define and critically explore each dimension, laying the foundation for analysing how community groups operationalise these frameworks.

Distributive Justice

Distributive justice in just transition discourse is concerned with how economic benefits, funding, and job opportunities are allocated across communities affected by transition (Stark, Gale, & Murphy-Gregory, 2023). Rawl's (1971) theory on equal distribution emphasises the principle that economic inequalities should benefit the least advantaged. And, in the context of justice discourse, scholars like Ciplet and Harrison (2020) argue that for a just transition to be truly equitable, there must not be a trade-off between sustainability goals and economic fairness. Moreover, Goddard and Farrelly (2018) extend this argument by emphasizing that a just transition should directly benefit local communities, particularly those bearing the economic burden of industrial decline. Conversely, Jenkins et al. (2021) provide a critique of this economic-centric framing as reducing transitions to purely financial terms, thus neglecting other important broader socio-environmental dimensions at play. In the Hunter Valley, distributive justice concerns tend to focus on ensuring economic diversification benefits displaced workers and broader communities, rather than the larger corporate mining interests.

Procedural Justice

Procedural justice in regional transitions refers to how inclusive and participatory decision-making processes are in shaping transition policies (McCauley & Heffron, 2018; Jenkins et al., 2021; MacNeil & Beauman, 2022; Crofts, 2023; Stark, Gale, & Murphy-Gregory, 2023). Routed in Thibaut and Walker's (1975) theory, procedural justice can be achieved when local stakeholders have genuine influence over the processes and decisions. For regional transitions, Snell (2018) notes transition planning has historically been dominated by government and industry, often sidelining workers, local communities, and Indigenous groups in decision-making processes. Moreover, MacNeil and Beauman (2022) further supports this claim, highlighting that successful transitions are unlikely to occur when residents and stakeholders are alienated in the process.

Crofts (2023) goes further to explain that while community consultation is frequently conducted, it often lacks meaningful influence, with community voices excluded from

shaping policy decisions. In the Hunter Valley, procedural justice concerns include community groups struggling to gain decision-making power in shaping post-coal economic futures; local councils having limited authority over state-level transition planning; and barriers to Indigenous community engagement, despite their historical and cultural ties to the land.

Addressing procedural justice, therefore, requires moving beyond tokenistic engagement to bottom-up and co-designed policy processes, where affected communities play an active role in shaping their future (Thibaut & Walker, 1975; Crofts, 2023; Stark, Gale, & Murphy-Gregory, 2023)

Recognitional Justice

Recognitional justice typically concerns historically marginalised communities, and especially First Nations and non-mining locals, as well as the mining communities themselves are acknowledged and being included in the transition process (Sovacool et al., 2017; McCauley & Heffron, 2018). Scholars have argued that civil society organisations and labour unions traditionally represent the fight for recognition in transitions (Goddard & Farrelly, 2018). Abram et al. (2022) adds that recognition is not just about recognising groups of people, but that not all members of society are impacted in the same way, especially when widening inequality is only worsening. For example, in the Hunter Valley context, coal mining has effectively created a two-speed economy between the miners, who benefit from high wages, and the local and First Nations communities, who face economic hardship and social exclusion. Notably, regional studies have highlighted stark differences in inequality between Upper and Lower Hunter (Institute for Regional Futures, 2023). Therefore, recognitional justice requires addressing the needs of Indigenous and excluded communities, ensuring they are not left behind in transition planning.

Restorative Justice

Restorative justice arose as a central component in law regarding questions around past injustices (Pali, Forsyth, and Tepper, F. 2022) and has often been neglected in transitional frameworks (Abram et al., 2022; McCauley and Heffron, 2018). In recent years however, it has emerged as fourth transitional dimension in the discourse,

particularly in regions with significant environmental or social degradation (Abram et al., 2022; Stark, Gale, & Murphy-Gregory, 2023; McCauley and Heffron, 2018). While traditional transition frameworks focus on jobs and economic redistribution, restorative justice calls for remediation of environmental harm and recognition of historical injustices.

In the Hunter Region, Drinan (2022) and Hunter Renewal (2023) reveal major restorative justice challenges for the 130,000 hectares of leftover and degraded mining land. Vast toxic pits have ecological implications for local communities and the First Nation traditional custodians of the land, such as the people from Wonnarua, Awabakal, Darkinjung and Worimi country, whose lands cover this region (WNAC, n.d.; Hunter Renewal, 2021; Drinan, 2022; Institute for Regional Futures, 2023; Hunter Renewal, 2023).

Without strong restorative transitional policies, mining companies may exit the region without fulfilling their remediation obligations, leaving local community, First Nations people, and the remaining ecosystem to bear an unjust cost.

Critiques and limitations of current just transition frameworks

Despite its increasing popularity, a 'just' transition remains conceptually ambiguous, presenting challenges in its practical application. Snell (2018) argues that just transitions lack consistent definitions and clear operational guidance, making real-world implementation difficult. Moreover, Abram et al. (2022) suggest that existing transition frameworks often fail to account adequately for systemic inequalities in environmental justice, advocating for a 'whole-systems' approach that integrates social, environmental, and economic considerations comprehensively. In addition, Schlosberg (2007) maintains that environmental justice, and justice more broadly, is not possible without addressing the capabilities of stakeholders to address concerns that affect them. These critiques thus reveal the need for more empirical studies that explore how regional transitions are interpreted and implemented, particularly by grassroots community groups in specific regional contexts such as the Hunter Valley.

Contextualising Just Transition in Australia

Understanding Australia's unique political, economic, and social context is crucial for assessing the implementation and challenges of a just transition, particularly in coal-dependent regions like the Hunter Valley. This section critically examines Australia's distinct experience, comparing it with international cases, and highlights how Australia's political economy of coal significantly influences the nature, scale, and effectiveness of just transition initiatives.

The political economy of coal

Australia's political economy remains heavily influenced by coal production, which has historically underpinned regional economies and shaped national climate policy debates (Drinan, 2022; Edwards et al., 2022). Edwards, Wiseman and Cahill (2025) argue that Australia's transition experience diverges significantly from European and North American models, largely due to coal's central role in economic identity and employment, as well as enjoying bipartisan political support for decades. Unlike Germany's Ruhr Valley – where early, government-led transitional planning created structured pathways to economic diversification – Australia's efforts have been fragmented, reactive, and predominantly led by community and regional coalitions rather than coordinated national policy (MacNeil & Beauman, 2022; Edwards, et al., 2022; Edwards, Wiseman & Cahill, 2025).

The divergence has crucial implications: while community groups have been vocal advocates, their effectiveness has often been limited by insufficient national policy frameworks, highlighting persistent gaps in procedural justice as communities struggle for genuine participation in formal transition processes (Crofts, 2023; MacNeil & Beauman, 2022).

Comparative Just Transition Cases

Analysing successful and unsuccessful just transition examples provide important insights for Australia's approach, particularly within the Hunter Valley context. Two prominent cases – Germany's Ruhr Valley and Victoria's Latrobe Valley – illustrate distinct pathways and outcomes.

In the Ruhr Valley, Germany implemented structured transition planning through extensive collaboration among government, industry, unions, and communities from the outset. Early, participatory engagement allowed for clear distributive and procedural justice, facilitating economic resilience and community acceptance (Jenkins et al., 2021; MacNeil & Beauman, 2022).

In the Latrobe Valley, Victoria, the sudden closing of the Hazelbrook Power Station led to the creation of the Latrobe Valley Authority (LVA) and exemplifies a reactive but ultimately effective government response prompted largely by community pressure and sudden economic distress (Snell, 2018). Musil and Gerrard (2025) and Hunter Renewal (2021) note that although initially reactive, the transition model eventually provided tangible distributive outcomes through job creation and economic diversification yet faced persistent critiques of procedural shortcomings.

These international and Australian cases highlight critical lessons for the Hunter Valley: proactive, inclusive, government-supported transition models tend to produce more equitable and resilient outcomes, whereas reactive, fragmented responses can amplify community distrust and economic vulnerabilities.

Just Transition in the Hunter Region

This section contextualises the just transition specifically within the Hunter Valley, exploring its historical coal dependency, current transition policies, and grassroots community advocacy. The analysis identifies persistent tensions between government-led initiatives and community-led movements, setting the stage to highlight existing gaps in knowledge regarding practical justice operationalisation.

Historical Context and Economic Dependency

For over 230 years, coal has been deeply embedded in the Hunter Valley's economy, identity, and social fabric, profoundly influencing employment patterns and community livelihoods (Drinan, 2022; Jordan, Crofts and Phelan, 2025). The Hunter Valley coal industry directly employs approximately 15,000 people, indirectly supporting an estimated 40,000 additional jobs, significantly contributing to regional economies and

state revenues through mining royalties (Snell, 2018; MacNeil & Beauman, 2022; Ferguson, 2024; Drinan, 2022).

However, as climate policies strengthen globally, reducing coal demand (Ferguson, 2024), the Hunter Valley faces considerable pressure to diversify economically. Past diversification attempts have often been fragmented and reactive, lacking comprehensive planning or sustained investment. Emerging initiatives, such as the NSW Government's Future Jobs and Investment Authorities and the Royalties for Rejuvenation Fund, reflect renewed attempts at economic restructuring, though these remain contested in terms of effectiveness and genuine community engagement (Hunter Renewal, 2023), are explored in further detail in the Findings and Discussion section.

Current Transition Policies and Initiatives

At the national level, Australia's Net Zero Plan broadly outlines a commitment to reducing emissions through transitioning to renewable energy, clean technologies, and new job opportunities. Nevertheless, Edwards et al., (2022) argue that national strategies lack specific, actionable pathways for coal-dependent regions like the Hunter Valley, creating ambiguity and uneven regional impacts.

At the stage level, the NSW Climate Change (Net Zero Future) Act 2023 establishes ambitious emissions reduction targets – 50% below 2005 levels by 2030 and net zero by 2050 – supported by the NSW Net Zero Plan Stage 1 (2020-2030). This plan specifically incorporates regional initiatives, such as the Industrial Decarbonisation Plans for the Hunter and Illawarra regions, aiming to minimise job losses through collaboration with local industries and stakeholders (NSW Government, 2023; n.d.). When combined with community-focused initiatives, such as the Future Jobs and Investment Authorities, the state is at least attempting to tackle these transitional challenges.

However, community groups remain critical, labelling these emerging policies, as overly bureaucratic, underfunded, and lacking genuine community decision-making power, particularly regarding critical issues like mine rehabilitation (Hunter Jobs Alliance, 2024; Hunter Renewal, 2023).

Community Advocacy and Grassroots Movements

In the face of perceived policy shortcomings and government inaction, grassroots community groups have increasingly advocated for justice-focused energy transitions, yet little is known of their justice advocacy strategies and impact. Scholars including McCauley and Heffron (2018) and Sovacool et al. (2017) emphasise that grassroots activism is critical for achieving inclusive and socially equitable transition outcomes, particularly in regions lacking cohesive government strategies.

Two prominent community groups active in the Hunter include the Hunter Renewal and the Hunter Jobs Alliance. Hunter Renewal is a community outreach project formed to advocate for structured transitions emphasising job retraining, ecological restoration, and equitable economic policies (Hunter Renewal, 2021; 2023; Jordan, Crofts and Phelan, 2025; Askland et al., 2024). Lock the Gate is an environmental organisation advocating for regional environmental protection and sustainable land use. Other active groups include the Hunter Jobs Alliance (HJA) and Hunter Community Alliance, a coalition of union, environmental and faith-based groups campaigning for economic democracy, regional development investment and grassroots engagement in transition planning (Hunter Renewal, 2021; Ferguson, 2024; Jordan, Crofts and Phelan, 2025). Whilst there is a breadth of active organisations, few empirical studies dive into how they use justice to advocate for a 'just' transition.

While community-led initiatives provide crucial advocacy, Ferguson (2024) and Crofts (2023) highlight significant barriers – including limited funding, institutional exclusion, and powerful corporate opposition – limiting the extent to which these grassroots movements can meaningfully influence policy and achieve practical justice outcomes. Arnstein's (1969) participatory framework further reveals that effective citizen participation can only ensure genuine empowerment if tokenism is eradicated. Furthermore, Sabatier's (1988) advocacy framework draws on the importance of forming strong coalitions to shaping policy outcomes, highlighting that without strong coalitions, decision-making inertia can bed-in, making it harder to shape policy.

Community Attitudes and Distrust in Transition

Despite extensive advocacy, significant community scepticism persists regarding the just transition process. MacNeil and Beauman (2022) outline multiple reasons for community distrust, including perceived ideological opposition from urban environmental groups, disrespect for mining identities and skills, inconsistencies between transition theory and practice, and disbelief in coal's rapid decline narrative. This deep-rooted scepticism highlights a crucial procedural and recognitional justice challenge, underscoring the need for more inclusive, transparent, and genuinely participatory transition frameworks that address community concerns and historical identities effectively.

Identifying the research gap and contribution of this study

The existing body of literature extensively theorises just transition principles, critiques conceptual ambiguity, and broadly analyses policy strategies. However, empirical investigation into how grassroots community groups practically operationalise justice frameworks – distributive, procedural, recognitional, and restorative – in their advocacy remains significantly underexplored, particularly within politically and economically complex contexts like the Hunter Valley. Social media is a prominent form of campaigning and communicating among community groups and is a fruitful 'site' to understand and analyse their advocacy work. However, there is limited evidence that these community groups' social media platforms have been analysed to understand impacts and challenges associated with participatory and advocacy in community-led initiatives, which will be discussed in more detail in the methodology chapter.

This research addresses this critical gap by providing empirical insights into the strategies, discourses, and practical governance approaches adopted by the Hunter Valley community groups, specifically Hunter Renewal and Lock the Gate. By explicitly examining how these justice dimensions are defined, articulated, and pursued in community-led advocacy, the research contributes both theoretically and practically, enhancing scholarly understanding of just transition implementation and providing valuable insights for policymakers and community advocates alike.

Conclusion

As Australia moves towards a low-carbon future, the Hunter Valley faces inevitable and complex economic, social and environmental transformations. Ensuring justice within this transition is crucial, not only ethically but also practically, to avoid political, economic and social upheavals that could undermine communities as well as the legitimacy of the transition itself.

This literature review has critically examined the theoretical foundations of just transition, highlighted Australia's distinct experience within the global context, and explored how these frameworks apply specifically to the Hunter Valley. It identified significant gaps in the empirical understanding of how community advocacy groups, such as Hunter Renewal, operationalise the four key justice frameworks in their practical advocacy efforts.

While current literature offers extensive theoretical critique and broad policy analyses, this study uniquely contributes by addressing the empirical and practical dimensions of community-led justice operationalisation. By providing detailed insights into grassroot advocacy strategies, this research will enrich theoretical debates, inform policymaking, and support more effective, equitable, and community-focused just transition processes in the Hunter Valley and other regional economies across the country.

Ultimately, understanding how justice is practically defined, pursued, and enacted by community groups will be essential for achieving genuine and enduring transition outcomes. This study not only fills a critical scholarly gap but also provides actionable knowledge to policymakers and advocates seeking to realised equitable, inclusive, and resilient regional transitions.

Methodology

Research Design

Qualitative research

This research adopts a qualitative framework analysis approach (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994; Gale et al., 2013; Wiesner, 2022), to explore how the Hunter Renewal and the Lock the Gate articulate and operationalise distributive, procedural, recognitional, and restorative justice concepts in the context of a just transition. This study aims to explore how justice notions are mobilised to influence justice discourse and shape policy responses in a region long defined by its coal-based economic and cultural identities.

Given the exploratory nature of the research question, a qualitative approach was best suited to revealing nuanced meanings and perspectives embedded within advocacy practices (Patton, 2015). The study relies on framework analysis to systematically review qualitative data that discovers underlying themes and provide hidden linkages and narratives. Developed by Ritchie and Spencer (1994), the framework analysis method has been used to study policies and has most commonly been used healthcare research (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009' Gale et al., 2013). For the purposes of this study, a framework analysis can help draw out themes hidden in the discourse, which can be systematically analysed to infer the 'how' and 'why' these community action groups utilised justice as a tool to advocate for a just transition (Wiener, 2022; Gale et al., 2013).

Framework analysis was selected as the primary analytical method due to its ability to support a theory-driven interpretation while remaining flexible enough to induce insights that emerge from the data (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994). The data consists of the two selected community action group's publicly available social media content and policy document materials produced between 2018 and 2025. These materials provide naturally occurring data that reflect the groups' public facing-strategies, priorities, and justice-based claims.

Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this study is to explore how community action groups utilise justice to advocate for a just transition. The study is grounded in a four-pillared conceptualisation of justice informed by the work of John Rawl's (1971) distributive justice theories, Thibaut and Walker's (1975) theory of procedural justice, Nancy Fraser's (2003) theory on justice through recognition, and Pali, Forsyth and Tepper's (2022) theory of restorative justice. Moreover, to understand how justice is operationalised, this study adds deeper theoretical insights into participation (Arnstein, 1969), advocacy (Sabatier, 1988), and discourse (Hajer, 1995). Thus, the four justice dimensions are used as analytical lenses to examine how community action groups articulate the pursuit of justice in the context of the Hunter Valley, and our outlined in the Table 1 below.

Table 1: A table outlining the framework analysis for the of the four justice dimensions

Justice Dimension	**Definition**	**Example Indicators in Data**	**Sample Keywords/Ideas to Code For**
Distributive	Fair allocation of material and environmental benefits and burdens (Rawls, 1971; Schlosberg, 2007)	References to economic inequality, energy transition impacts, job creation and losses, funding allocations, environmental degradation	"fair share", "economic justice", "transition support", "royalties", "energy bill impacts", "jobs vs climate"
Procedural	Fairness in decision-making processes, including transparency, participation, and access to information (Thibaut & Walker, 1975)	Calls for inclusive consultation, criticism of opaque processes, advocacy for democratic planning	"we weren't consulted", "closed-door decisions", "community meeting", "local voices", "representation"
Recognitional	Respect for diverse identities, values, and lived experiences, including cultural,	Emphasis on cultural heritage, acknowledgement of community	"respect for our history", "cultural identity", "First Nations voices", "forgotten

	regional, and Indigenous perspectives (Fraser, 2003; Whyte, 2018)	histories, visibility of Indigenous rights	communities", "mining towns ignored"
Restorative	Actions to redress past harms and rebuild trust (Pali, Forsyth & Tepper, 2022), often through reparative measures or structural transformation	Demands for reparations, support for Indigenous-led solutions, intergenerational healing, historical redress	"repair the damage", "restorative action", "truth-telling", "healing country", "justice for generations", "make it right"

Together, these four justice dimensions provide a holistic theoretical framework to identify and classify justice claims made by the community groups. Thus, by aligning closely to the concept of a just transition, the framework helps to set the theoretical parameters in which to code and interpret the findings.

Data Collection

Sampling

This study relied on a purposive sampling strategy to identify and collect materials that related to the just transition and associated justice claims from the two selected community groups (Patton, 2015). Purposive sampling is down to the usefulness in selecting 'information-rich' cases that can be studied deeply (Patton, 2015

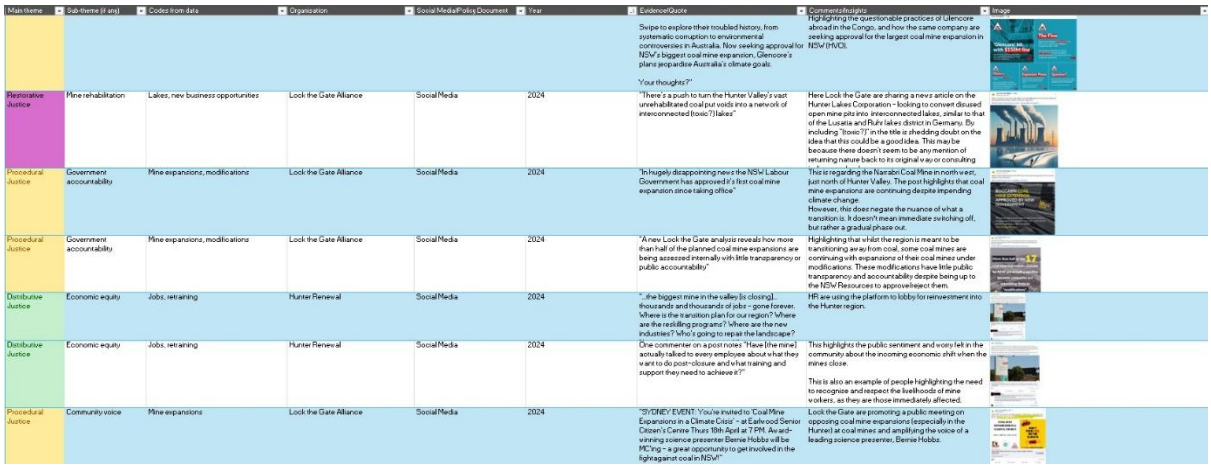
Data Sources

Primary data sources included publicly available social media materials produced by Hunter Renewal and Lock the Gate between 2020 and 2025. The social media data was specifically from their publicly accessible Facebook pages. Secondary data sources were used to supplement this material, and included four commissioned policy reports, two from Hunter Renewal and two from Lock the Gate, as well as multiple NSW Government consultation papers and policy documents on energy transition both across the State and regionally in the Hunter.

The primary data sources were selected because they represent naturally occurring, publicly accessible communication that reflects how the groups express justice-related claims, mobilise support, and influence the public discourse for the energy transition in the Hunter Valley. By selecting this data rather than through an interview-based evidence base, this research aims to analyse discourse that has been strategically crafted for public audiences, thus revealing how groups present themselves and frame issues, and engage with broader transition narratives (Hajer, 1995). Moreover, the study aligns with methodological precedents in digital ethnography and media-based qualitative research, which recognises social media communications as valid and valuable representations of contemporary collective action (Guo & Saxton, 2014; Miller, 2016; Fielding, Lee and Blank, 2017). Justice claims, and especially those relating to recognition and restoration, are often performative and symbolic in nature, thus making digital discourse a particularly rich site for investigation.

Data Collection Methods

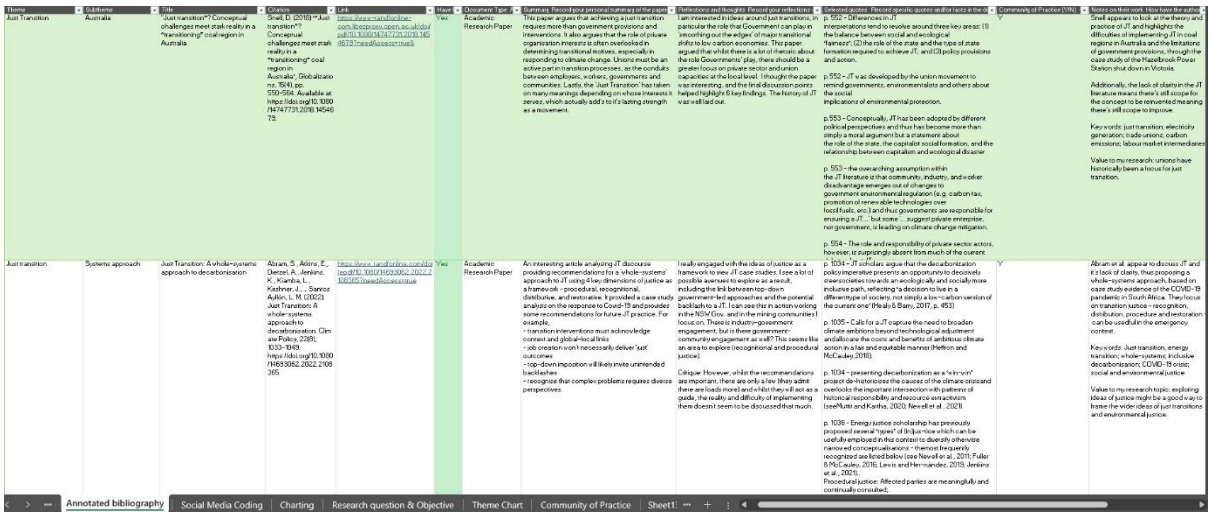
Once approval of the ethics review form was granted in January 2025, data collection was able to commence between January 2025-March 2025. Research targeted social media communications from 2020 to 2025 to ensure relevance to recent years of transition discourse in the Hunter region. The methods to collect the data included manual scraping of their Facebook by searching for specific reference to “Hunter Valley”, “Transition”, “Coal”, “Energy” for each year from 2020 to 2025. The following Facebook posts were archived into an Excel spreadsheet called the ‘Dissertation Mastersheet’, to conduct data coding and analysis. Figure 1 below provides an example screenshot of social media posts once they had been coded by justice theme.



Main theme	Sub-theme (if any)	Codes from data	Organization	Social Media/Policy Document	Year	Evidence/Quote	Comments/Insights	Image
						Swipe to explore their troubled history, from systematic corruption to environmental controversies in Australia. Now seeking approval for NSW's biggest coal mine expansion. Glencore's plans jeopardise Australia's climate goals. Your thoughts?"	Highlighting the questionable practices of Glencore abroad in the Congo, and how the same company are seeking approval for the largest coal mine expansion in NSW (HVO).	
Restorative Justice	Mine rehabilitation	Lakes, new business opportunities	Lock the Gate Alliance	Social Media	2024	"There's a push to turn the Hunter Valley's vast unrehabilitated coal pit voids into a network of interconnected (toxic?!) lakes"	Here Lock the Gate are sharing a news article on the Hunter Lakes Corporation - looking to convert disused open mine pits into interconnected lakes, similar to that of the Lusatia and Ruhr lakes district in Germany. By including "(toxic?!)" in the title is shedding doubt on the idea that this could be a good idea. This may be because there doesn't seem to be any mention of returning nature back to its original way or consulting	
Procedural Justice	Government accountability	Mine expansions, modifications	Lock the Gate Alliance	Social Media	2024	"In hugely disappointing news the NSW Labour Government has approved it's first coal mine expansion since taking office"	This is regarding the Narrabri Coal Mine in north west, just north of Hunter Valley. The post highlights that coal mine expansions are continuing despite impending climate change. However, this does negate the nuance of what a transition is. It doesn't mean immediate switching off, but rather a gradual phase out.	
Procedural Justice	Government accountability	Mine expansions, modifications	Lock the Gate Alliance	Social Media	2024	"A new Lock the Gate analysis reveals how more than half of the planned coal mine expansions are being assessed internally with little transparency or public accountability"	Highlighting that whilst the region is meant to be transitioning away from coal, some coal mines are continuing with expansions of their coal mines under modifications. These modifications have little public transparency and accountability despite being up to the NSW Resources to approve/reject them.	
Distributive Justice	Economic equity	Jobs, retraining	Hunter Renewal	Social Media	2024	"...the biggest mine in the valley [is closing]... thousands and thousands of jobs – gone forever. Where is the transition plan for our region? Where are the reskilling programs? Where are the new industries? Who's going to repair the landscape?	HR are using the platform to lobby for reinvestment into the Hunter region.	
Distributive Justice	Economic equity	Jobs, retraining	Hunter Renewal	Social Media	2024	One commenter on a post notes "Have [the mine] actually talked to every employee about what they want to do post-closure and what training and support they need to achieve it?"	This highlights the public sentiment and worry felt in the community about the incoming economic shift when the mines close. This is also an example of people highlighting the need to recognise and respect the livelihoods of mine workers, as they are those immediately affected.	
Procedural Justice	Community voice	Mine expansions	Lock the Gate Alliance	Social Media	2024	"SYDNEY EVENT: You're invited to 'Coal Mine Expansions in a Climate Crisis' – at Earlwood Senior Citizen's Centre Thurs 18th April at 7 PM. Award-winning science presenter Bernie Hobbs will be MC'ing – a great opportunity to get involved in the fight against coal in NSW!"	Lock the Gate are promoting a public meeting on opposing coal mine expansions (especially in the Hunter) at coal mines and amplifying the voice of a leading science presenter, Bernie Hobbs.	

Figure 1: Screenshot of saved social media posts coded by justice theme

Additional secondary sources were sourced as part of developing an annotated bibliography from October 2024. Sourcing this data included the browsing of community-group websites and publications to retrieve policy documents and public statements; trawling through Government papers; and conducting searches on the OU library for sources related to the Hunter Valley transition. Figure 2 below shows an example of sourcing secondary data sources and storing them in the annotated bibliography.



Theme	Subtheme	Title	Citation	Link	Have	Document Type	Summary. Record your personal summary of the paper	Reflections and thoughts. Record your reflections	Selected quotes. Record specific quotes and/or facts in the pa	Community of Practice (YIN)	Notes on their work. How have the author
Just Transition	Australia	"Just transition"? Conceptual challenges meet stark reality in a "transitioning" coal region in Australia	Snell, D. (2018) "Just transition"? Conceptual challenges meet stark reality in a "transitioning" coal region in Australia. Globalizations, 15(4), pp. 550-564. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2018.1454675	https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14747731.2018.1454675?needAccess=true&role=button	Yes	Academic Research Paper	This paper argues that achieving a just transition requires more than government provisions and interventions. It also argues that the role of private organisation interests is often overlooked in determining transitional motives, especially in responding to climate change. Unions must be an active part in transition processes, as the conduits between employers, workers, governments and communities. Lastly, the 'Just Transition' has taken on many meanings depending on whose interests it serves, which actually add a to it's lasting strength as a movement.	I am interested in ideas around just transitions, in particular the role that Government can play in 'smoothing out the edges' of major transitional shifts to low carbon economies. This paper argued that whilst there is a lot of rhetoric about the role Governments' play, there should be a greater focus on private sector and union capacities at the local level. I thought the paper was interesting, and the final discussion points helped highlight 6 key findings. The history of JT was well laid out.	p. 552 – Differences in JT interpretations tend to revolve around three key areas: (1) the balance between social and ecological 'framers'; (2) the role of the state and the type of state formation required to achieve JT; and (3) policy provisions and action. p. 552 – JT was developed by the union movement to remind governments, environmentalists and others about the social implications of environmental protection. p. 553 – Conceptually, JT has been adopted by different political perspectives and thus has become more than simply a moral argument but a statement about the role of the state, the capitalist social formation, and the relationship between capitalism and ecological disaster p. 553 – the overarching assumption within the JT literature is that community, industry, and worker disadvantage emerges out of changes to government environmental regulation (e.g. carbon tax, promotion of renewable technologies over fossil fuels, etc.) and thus governments are responsible for ensuring a JT… but some '… suggest private enterprise… not government, is leading on climate change mitigation. p. 554 – The role and responsibility of private sector actors, however, is surprisingly absent from much of the current		Snell appears to look at the theory and practice of JT and highlights the difficulties of implementing JT in coal regions in Australia and the limitations of government provisions, through the case study of the Hazelbrook Power Station shut down in Victoria. Additionally, the lack of clarity in the JT literature means there's still scope for the concept to be reinvented meaning there's still scope to improve. Key words: just transition; electricity generation; trade unions; carbon emissions; labour market intermediaries Value to my research: unions have historically been a focus for just transition.
Just transition	Systemic approach	Just Transition: A whole-systems approach to decarbonisation	Abram, S., Atkins, E., Denzel, A., Jenkins, K., Kiamba, L., Kirshner, J., ... Sanoe Aitkin, L. M. (2022) Just Transition: A whole-systems approach to decarbonisation. Climate Policy, 22(8), 1033-1049. https://doi.org/10.1080/14693062.2022.2108385	https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/14693062.2022.2108385?needAccess=true	Yes	Academic Research Paper	An interesting article analysing JT discourse providing recommendations for a 'whole-systems' approach to JT using 4 key dimensions of justice as a framework – procedural, recognitional, distributive, and restorative. It provided a case study analysis on the response to Covid-19 and provides some recommendations for future JT practice. For example, - transition interventions must acknowledge context and global-local links - 'job creation won't necessarily deliver 'just' outcomes - 'top-down imposition will likely invite unintended backlashes - recognise that complex problems requires diverse perspectives.	I really engaged with the idea of justice as a framework to view JT case studies. I see a lot of possible avenues to explore as a result, including the link between top-down government-led approaches and the potential backlash to a JT. I can see this in action voting in the NSW Gov, and in the mining communities I focus on. There is industry–government engagement, but is there government–community engagement as well? This seems like an area to explore (recognitional and procedural justice). Critique: However, whilst the recommendations are important, there are only a few. When admit there are loads more) and whilst they will act as a guide, the reality and difficulty of implementing them doesn't seem to be discussed that much.	p. 1034 – 'JT scholars argue that the decarbonization policy imperative presents an opportunity to decisively steer society towards an ecologically and socially more inclusive path, reflecting "a decision to live in a different type of society, not simply a low-carbon version of the current one" (Healy & Barry, 2017, p. 451) p. 1035 – Calls for a JT capture the need to broaden climate ambitions beyond technological adjustment and allocate the costs and benefits of ambitious climate action in a fair and equitable manner (Heffron and McCauley, 2018). p. 1034 – presenting decarbonization as a "win-win" project de-historicizes the causes of the climate crisis and overlooks the important intersection with patterns of historical responsibility and resource extractivism (see Nuti and Kanitkar, 2020; Newell et al., 2021) p. 1036 – Energy justice scholarship has previously proposed several "types" of (in)justice which can be usefully employed in this context to diversify otherwise narrowed conceptualisations – the most frequently recognised are listed below (see Newell et al., 2011; Fuller & McCauley, 2016; Lewis and Hernández, 2019; Jenkins et al., 2021). Procedural justice: Affected parties are meaningfully and continually consulted;		Abram et al. appear to discuss JT and it's lack of clarity, thus proposing a whole-systems approach, based on case study evidence of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. They focus on transition justice – recognition, distribution, procedure and restoration – can be used/fulfil in the emergency context. Key words: Just transition, energy transition; whole-systems; inclusive decarbonisation; COVID-19 crisis; social and environmental justice. Value to my research topic: exploring ideas of justice might be a good way to frame the wider ideas of just transitions and environmental justice.

Annotated bibliography | Social Media Coding | Charting | Research question & Objective | Theme Chart | Community of Practice | Sheet1

Figure 2: Screenshot of one section of the annotated bibliography

To ensure academic rigour and abiding by the research ethics laid out by the Open University Research Ethics advisory board, the study ensured there was inclusion and exclusion criteria. The two inclusion criteria were that the material collected must be

already published and endorsed by either the Hunter Renewal or the Lock the Gate; and the content selected must only relate to the transition away from fossil fuels, community advocacy, or justice-oriented messaging. The two exclusionary criteria were not to collect any personal content, and if that was unavoidable, to ensure all personal information is censored and stored safely; and to exclude content that is promotional or administrative in nature. As can be seen in Figure 1, where personal data was collected when capturing the image of a Facebook post, special attention was taken to black out a commenter's image, name and timestamp, and paraphrasing information where necessary.

Data was collected with respect for platform-specific terms of service and aligned with the ethical research standards for public digital content as laid out in the outcome of the research ethics application. Where user comments or threads were involved, only content from group administrators or official spokespeople was included to preserve and represent the voice of that of the organisation, rather than specific individuals.

This approach yielded over 76 Facebook posts, of which 32 were from Hunter Renewal and 44 were from Lock the Gate. This was supplemented by two commissioned reports each, which were then prepared for analysis through framework coding according to the four justice dimensions. The method allowed for both systematic comparison across groups and inductive discovery of emerging justice themes unique to the Hunter Valley context.

Data Analysis

Analytical Approach: Framework Analysis

The framework analysis offers a balance between inductive openness and deductive structure, particularly suitable for research guided by clearly defined theoretical concepts or existing frameworks (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). As a methodology, framework analysis enables a systematic comparison across the two community groups; supports analysis driven by existing theories; and allows for transparent, rigorous, and flexible coding processes, enhancing reliability and replicability of findings

as well as the ability to rework ideas which are easily accessible (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994).

The framework analysis approach involves five interconnected stages of familiarisation, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, and mapping and interpretation (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994), which are outlined in greater detail below.

Familiarisation

The first familiarisation stage involves scraping through and reviewing all publicly available materials from the Hunter Renewal and the Lock the Gate from 2020 to 2025. These involved reviewing relevant Facebook posts between 2020 and 2025 and four policy documents by the groups. Initial insights, key themes, and notable justice-related claims were documented during multiple readings in the Annotated Bibliography as part the 'Dissertation Mastersheet'. One example of documenting these justice themes in the familiarisation stage can be found in Figure 3 below.

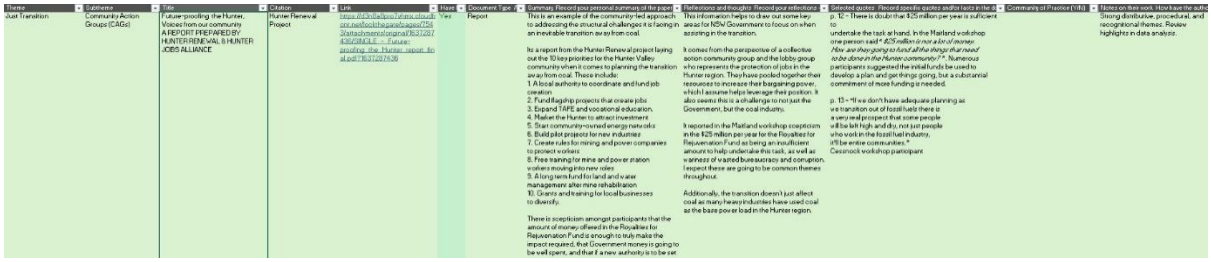


Figure 3: Familiarisation notes on Hunter Renewal's Future Proofing the Hunter (2021) report

Identifying the thematic framework

Once resources were sourced and saved in the annotated bibliography, the following stage required developing a clear thematic coding framework (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). This involved identifying core issues and emergent themes arising from patterns generated.

Indexing (Coding)

Indexing, or coding, involved indexing the relevant primary data captured in the 'Dissertation Mastersheet'. The social media data was systematically coded against the

justice framework, with relevant content assigned to one or more justice dimensions and additional codes captured emerging insights or unexpected themes.

For example, distributive justice themes could be coded in association with 'Jobs', 'retraining', 'economic inequality', 'transition planning'. For procedural justice, coding included associations with 'mine expansions', 'consultation processes', and 'corruption'. Some recognitional justice themes included codes associated with 'future generations', 'respect', and 'cultural values'. Lastly, restorative justice codes were often associated with 'land restoration', 'post-mining', and 'rehabilitation'. By adopting a system of sifting and organising, this proved useful to help draw on early clues for associations that help charting, mapping, and interpreting the data in the subsequent stages (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994).

Charting

The coded data was organised into a thematic matrix that allowed for comparisons between groups and across justice dimensions, and to help build up a picture of the wider data sources (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). For example, Table 2 below provides clarity on how each organisation engages differently or similarly with each justice dimension.

Table 2: A table showing the distribution of justice themes across the two community groups

Justice Theme	Distributive	Procedural	Recognitional	Restorative
Hunter Renewal	16 (Frequent and explicit)	8 (Occasional references)	3 (Very few references)	9 (Occasional references)
Lock the Gate Alliance	15 (Frequent and explicit)	21 (Frequent and explicit)	9 (Occasional references)	5 (Few references)

Mapping and Interpretation

Once all the data had been sifted and charted according to the justice themes, the final stage required pulling together all the key characteristics to interpret the data set as a whole (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994; Braun and Clarke, 2021). Mapping the data involved

firstly defining core concepts and searching for key themes (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). As a result, patterns, relationships, and significant thematic emphasis were identified across and within cases, with special attention was paid to frequency, emphasis, contradictions, and silences. Drawing on the theme chart, it was possible to link the associations between the community groups across the specific or shared justice themes. In doing so, conclusions could be drawn on how justice dimensions were employed by Hunter Renewal and Lock the Gate Alliance, and how these intersected or conflicted in the broader discourse on the just transition. Figure 4 below is a screenshot of mapping and analysing justice themes discovered.

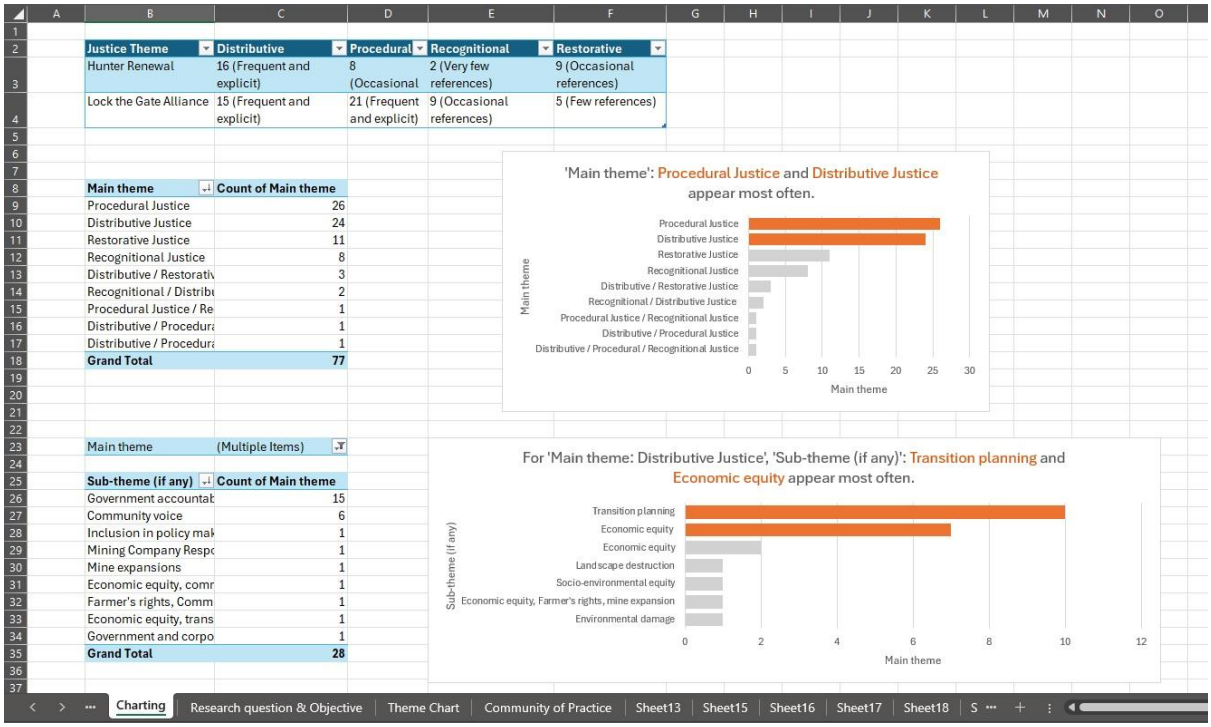


Figure 4: A screenshot of mapping and interpretating social media data based on coded data and justice themes from the social media posts of Hunter Renewal and Lock the Gate

Reflexivity and Methodological Considerations

Careful consideration was given to researcher reflexivity. Qualitative research analysis inherently involves subjective judgements (Unwin, 2006); thus, positionality, biases, and assumptions were transparently acknowledged and reflected upon. For example, as part of collecting the data, it became apparent that by selecting only social media and

published policy documentation might tell only one side of the 'story'. And, while the framework analysis approach provides clear analytical boundaries, care was taken to limit the interpretive process excessively. Thus, particular attention was given to emergent themes and data-driven insights beyond the initial theoretical expectations (Unwin, 2006).

Ethical Considerations

An Ethics Review Form was completed, reviewed, and signed off by the OU's Ethics Review Committee, which outlined clear mitigation strategies to consider issues around informed consent and to minimise the risk of harm. As all social media posts collected were made on behalf of the two community group organisations, there was limited issue about collecting personal data that potentially could be harmful. Also, given the use of publicly accessible information deliberately shared by organisations for advocacy purposes, explicit informed consent from the organisations or its users was not required. Transparency about the research purpose and usage of publicly available data is crucial for maintaining ethical and rigorous standards in research (Sumner and Tribe, 2008). Therefore, attention was given to ensuring the privacy and confidentiality of individuals and groups (Mutsvairo & Wright, 2019; Eynon, Fry, & Schroeder, 2017). Only content clearly published as organisational statements (e.g., official posts, announcements, press releases, or policy documents) was included, thereby excluding potentially sensitive or personal commentary by individual group members or members of the public.

Limitations

As with any thesis that gathers any primary or secondary research, there are inherent limitations associated with any selected research methodology (Fielding, Lee and Blank, 2017). One limitation was choosing to use publicly available social media data provided by the community groups. Social media posts can emphasise polished viewpoints represented by the organisation over a more nuanced understanding of an issue. To combat this, the research tried to frame the social media posts alongside the wider academic justice discourse. This was further supplemented with additional analysis of the two groups commissioned policy reports. This helped to balance the

research in a theoretically and analytically sound way against potentially mis-leading accusations or evidence.

Another limiting factor was not choosing to interview those who work for the organisations. In not doing so, the study is limited in providing a detailed understanding of how these groups conceptualise and advocate justice by not capturing individual motivations or the decisions influencing justice narratives. Due to temporal and geographical constraints, this route was not possible to explore but was seriously considered. Instead, this study relies on the publicly available social media data that is often-overlooked, thus adding to depth to the wider methodological research on social media data collection (Fielding, Lee and Blank, 2017).

Rationale

The rationale for selecting the framework analysis approach is justifiable as suitable for the thesis' research question and objectives. For example, the framework analysis allows the analysis of data informed by pre-established theoretical dimensions of justice, which is critical given the research question's focus on how community groups articulate justice claims within advocacy discourses. A framework analysis also enables clear, rigorous, and transparent comparative analysis between the two groups, whereby the matrix-based structure clearly identifies similarities, differences, and patterns across groups.

The research is significant and relevant because it offers a theoretical contribution that explores four dimensions of justice within the context of just transition advocacy. As a result, the study contributes to a nuanced understanding into how justice claims are mobilised in regional transitions. Similarly, the research offers policy and practical implications in understanding how justice is strategically articulated, thus ensuring better alignment with community expectations and enhancing legitimacy of justice-aligned transitional policies in regional Australia. Lastly, there are broader social justice implications in exploring community-led advocacy for justice around equity, participation, recognition, and repair. This research has the potential to contribute to the broad discourse of social, ecological, and intergenerational justice.

Findings and Discussion

Introduction

This findings and discussion section critically explores how Hunter Renewal and Lock the Gate utilise justice discourse and community advocacy to shape a 'just' transition in the Hunter Valley. The central research question guiding this analysis is:

"How do community action groups, such as Hunter Renewal and Lock the Gate Alliance, use and achieve notions of justice to shape and advocate for a 'just' transition in the Hunter Valley?"

To address this overarching question, this chapter is structured around three sub-questions:

1. Conceptualising Justice: *"What conceptions of justice are articulated and prioritised by Hunter Renewal and Lock the Gate?"*

2. Strategies and Advocacy: *"What strategies and mechanisms have Hunter Renewal and Lock the Gate employed to integrate justice into just transition policies?"*

3. Impact and Challenges: *"How have Hunter Renewal and Lock the Gate influenced public discourse, policy frameworks, and stakeholder engagement in the Hunter Valley?"*

By drawing on the analysis of data primarily sourced from social media posts and commissioned reports by these groups, and policy documents released by the NSW Government, this chapter engages with theoretical perspectives on justice, advocacy and participation. In doing so, it moves beyond a summary of findings towards an interpretation and interrogation of justice discourses and advocacy approaches adopted by both groups.

This analysis highlights clear distinctions between the groups, including the prominence given to distributive, procedural, and restorative justice themes, alongside

a critical reflection on their notably limited engagement with recognitional justice – particularly around Indigenous rights and cultural identity. Thus, the chapter provides an insightful critique of the strengths, limitations, and implications of community-driven advocacy within just transition discourse and practice.

Conceptualising Justice

"What conceptions of justice are articulated and prioritised by Hunter Renewal and Lock the Gate?"

Hunter Renewal prioritises economic dimensions of distributive justice, whereas Lock the Gate adopt a broader conceptualisation of justice integrating more social and ecological viewpoints

Hunter Renewal's social media posts primarily highlight a focus on distributive and restorative justice, with explicit discourse centring on the economic impacts of transition planning, regional economic security, and community financial equity. This is highlighted in Figure 5 below showing the proportion of justice-themed social media posts. The chart reveals that of the 36 social media posts captured, most posts correspond with distribution-based justice claims.

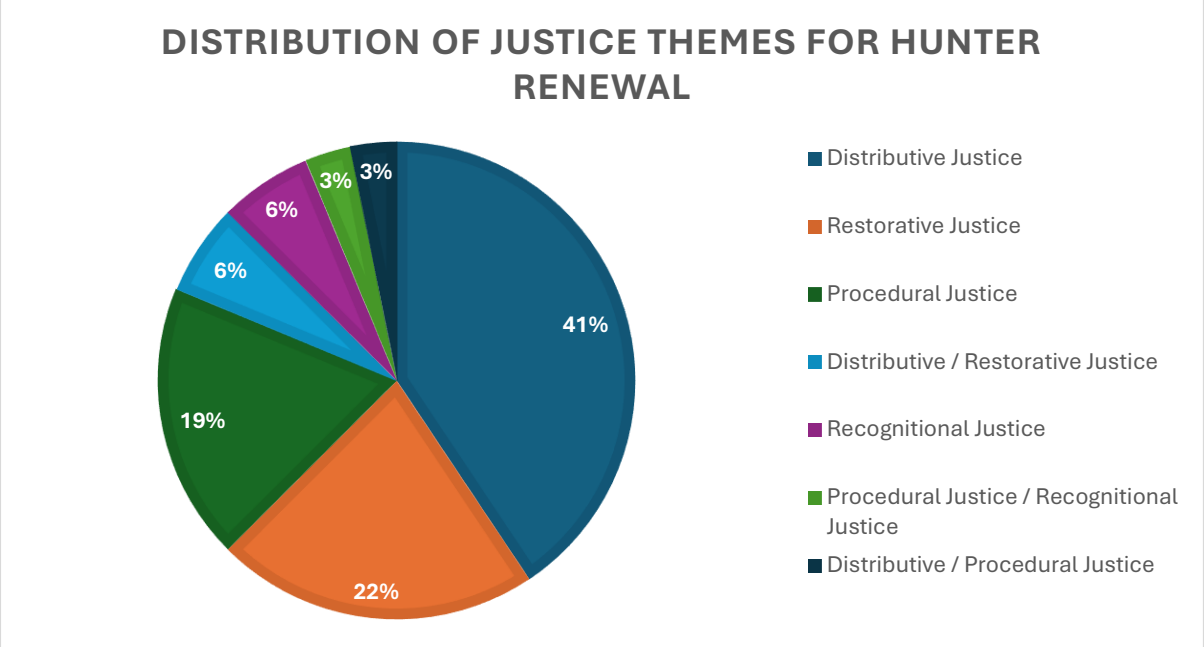


Figure 5: A pie chart showing the distribution of justice theme for Hunter Renewal's social media posts

Further analysis also reveals this prioritisation clearly through repeated and explicit references to economic issues, specifically highlighting how communities economically reliant on coal mining face uncertainties from coal closures. For example, when posting about the Hunter 2050 Foundation, an initiative started by a collection of local authorities across the Hunter region, they were "*pleased to see [it] help the region address looming economic impacts*" (Hunter Renewal, 2020). Similarly, when describing the mining security bonds held by NSW Government, they posted "*why not put $20 billion into a trust and fund regional development across NSW?"* (Hunter Renewal, 2022). Furthermore, when highlighting the economic disparity in towns like Muswellbrook, they note that *"Muswellbrook is surrounded by coal mines that raised close to a billion dollars in public revenue last year, but it remains one of the most disadvantaged towns"* (Hunter Renewal, 2024). Here, Hunter Renewal clearly positions itself as a defender of local economic interests in direct response to the immediate economic insecurities felt within coal-dependent communities.

When analysing this through Rawls' (1971) theory of distributive justice, which emphases the difference principle whereby economic inequalities should benefit the least advantaged, Hunter Renewal explicitly frame transition justice as an issue of economic redistribution aimed at the least advantaged communities. A critique, however, is exemplified by Jenkins et al. (2021), which reveals that the economic-centric framing reduces broader just transition goals to purely financial terms and neglects the essential social and ecological dimensions of transitions. Therefore, if Hunter Renewal focus mainly on the economic distribution of justice, they risk pushing for a less nuanced form of justice that is centred largely around capital reinvestment rather than social and ecological rehabilitation.

Lock the Gate demonstrate a similar distribution of justice themes, that are more closely aligned with procedural justice, but integrating more ecological, social and community welfare dimensions alongside economic and procedural justice concerns. This is represented in Figure 6, which shows the distribution of justice-themed social media posts collected. Out of the 50 references to justice themes from their social media posts, distributive and procedural justice were core elements thus showcasing a broader range of their justice advocacy.

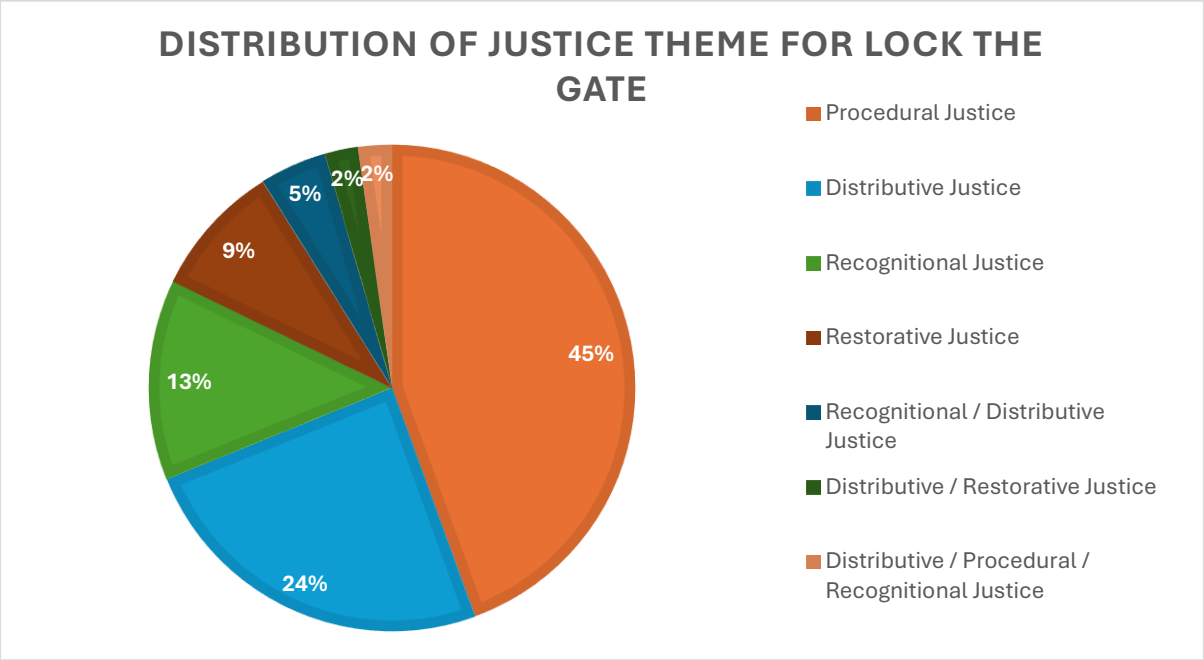


Figure 6: A pie chart showing the distribution of justice themes from Lock the Gate's social media posts

Further social media analysis reveals a nuanced and explicit link of economic justice with environmental harm, community rights, and regional sustainability. For example, when discussing risks to investment in wine and agricultural sectors, they posted *"Many millions of dollars of investment in the wine tourism sector... is at risk [due to coal mining]."* (Lock the Gate, 2021), further noting that if *"[Mining companies] want to explore right in the heart of prime wine growing country... local people are not going to take it lying down."* (Lock the Gate, 2022). When discussing the effects of coal mining on communities around Muswellbrook, they note that the *" coal mining industry is ripping off [Muswellbrook]... that money should be spent locally to improve quality of life"* and that outsiders "*don't appreciate the noise and the dust... the general pollution... the environmental destruction... the social dislocation... caused by coal mining"* (Lock the Gate, 2024). All of which supports the notion they have a varied approach to their justice advocacy.

Drawing on Schlosberg's (2007) multidimensional justice framework helps frame Lock the Gate's approach with the theoretical assertions that environmental justice should simultaneously address economic equity alongside recognition, participation, and ecological sustainability. Based on their social media data, they integrate multiple

procedural and social justice dimensions in their messaging around economic redistribution.

Recognitional justice is under-represented by both Hunter Renewal and Lock the Gate

Analysis of both organisations' justice advocacy indicates limited engagement with recognitional justice, particularly in relation to Indigenous and culturally marginalised groups. Hunter Renewal briefly references First Nation's engagement highlighting the need for the Future Jobs and Investment Authority to include *"genuine collaboration with locals and First Nations,"* (Hunter Renewal, 2024), yet on the surface their advocacy remains predominantly economically focused. Lock the Gate have similarly referenced Indigenous rights and cultural landscapes, yet these dimensions appear more sporadic or supplementary rather than central to their justice discourse. For example, when discussing the environmental and cultural destruction of the Ravensworth Homestead at the hands of major miner in the region, they posted that *"members of the Wonnarua people have called for this area to be protected because of that history, and to recognise its importance to truth-telling and reconciliation."* (Lock the Gate, 2022), and *"Scott Franks - from the Plains Clans of the Wonnarua People – has been trying to get the attention of the NSW Minister for Heritage for two years now."* (Lock the Gate, 2023), However, despite these two major references to recognition of the destruction of culturally important sites for First Nations people, there is limited outward engagement on social media.

Fraser's (2003) view on recognitional justice critically reveals this gap, suggesting that without fully acknowledging and incorporating cultural identities both groups risk reinforcing marginalisation or neglecting historically disadvantaged groups. Similarly, justice as recognition is essential for the environment and Indigenous perspectives whereby neglecting recognitional justice risks failing to address critical structural inequities around cultural identity, heritage and community integrity, and further risks excluding marginalised groups to the periphery (Schlosberg, 2007; Whyte, 2018). If these groups were to instead strengthen their argument to incorporate recognition of the diverse communities within their frameworks, they might help their legitimacy and inclusivity in advocating for justice in the regional transition.

Procedural justice is framed differently by each group, reflecting organisational priorities

Procedural justice manifests differently between the two organisations, reflecting differing strategic priorities. Hunter Renewal, for example, predominantly emphasise community collaboration and inclusive procedural engagement when discussing their participatory practices, posting that it's *"great to be out in the community to hear what folks in the Upper Hunter think of NSW coal royalties."* (Hunter Renewal, 2023). Additionally, when discussing the Future Jobs and Investment Authorities, they note for it to succeed there must be "*transparent governance, genuine collaboration with locals and First Nations."* (Hunter Renewal, 2024).

On the other hand, Lock the Gate primarily frames procedural justice around accountability, transparency, and direct challenge to government and corporate processes. They reveal an unfairness that takes place when challenging governments on the decision to expand coal mines, noting "*Why is the democratic right to test the merits of decisions in court routinely stripped for coal mines?"* (Lock the Gate, 2024) and *"A new Lock the Gate analysis reveals how more than half of the planned coal mine expansions are being assessed internally with little transparency or public accountability"* (Lock the Gate, 2024). This ultimately outlines their distinct combative approach to challenging government and corporate interests.

Hunter Renewal's advocacy strategies appear to be aligned with securing procedural legitimacy through meaningful participation. Yet, their ultimate effectiveness hinges significantly on whether that translates this procedural involvement into genuine influence over policy outcomes. Whereas, highlighting perceived unfairness and opacity in existing decision-making structures, Lock the Gate's approach explicitly challenges a lack of both process control (absence of transparent and open processes) and decision control (the removal of procedural rights such as merits reviews), which aligns with Thibaut and Walker's (1975) assertion that procedural legitimacy is central to stakeholder acceptance.

Therefore, these findings indicate that Hunter Renewal employs procedural justice to strengthen local democratic legitimacy, while Lock the Gate adopts a confrontational

framing of procedural injustice, which strategically positions themselves as watchdogs highlighting systemic exclusions and accountability gaps.

Strategies and Advocacy

"What strategies and mechanisms have Hunter Renewal and Lock the Gate employed to integrate justice into just transition policies?"

Hunter Renewal employs community-oriented participatory advocacy strategies compared to Lock the Gate's accountability-driven advocacy

Hunter Renewal vocally discuss employing participatory, community-focused advocacy tactics through their social media posts and their commissioned reports. These include grassroot approaches such as door-knocking campaigns, for example when posting about the work volunteers were doing in Muswellbrook, they posted they *"recently helped us door knock in Muswellbrook … to hear what folks think." (Hunter Renewal, 2023)*. Similarly, as part of developing their *Future Proofing the Hunter* (2021) and the *After the Coal Rush, the Clean Up* (2023) reports, the group utilised a series of workshops to gather community perspectives and to "bring local voices to the table" (Hunter Renewal, 2023). These participatory strategies effectively leverage local identity and legitimacy, with the potential to generate strong community support.

The approach aligns with participatory advocacy frameworks (Arnstein, 1969), where effective citizen participation requires genuine empowerment beyond tokenistic involvement. Further supported by Crofts' (2023) work on developing participation techniques for community engagement on behalf of Hunter Renewal, their strategies are evidence that Hunter Renewal focus deeply on embedding community participation in their advocacy strategy. Though, having strong local participation does not automatically translate that into meaningful policy influence, and without delegated power or citizen control (Arnstein, 1969), making a difference may be constrained by institutional corporate or government resistant to genuine power-sharing. Thus, Arstein's (1969) theory reveals inherent tensions between Hunter Renewal's push for genuine empowerment and potentially finding themselves confined to tokenistic engagement.

Lock the Gate adopts an alternative advocacy strategy that emphasises direct challenge, accountability, and transparency. For example, they routinely call out the Government for approving the expansion of mine sites, "*In hugely disappointing news the NSW Labour Government has approved its first coal mine expansion since taking office*" (Lock the Gate, 2024), and "*Labor betrays climate promises! Environment Minister Tanya Plibersek just approved three massive coal mine expansions in NSW…"* (Lock the Gate, 2024). Similarly, when challenging procedural injustices in relation to air pollution breaches, they state "*the coal mines in the Hunter region are ignoring breaches of air pollution conditions, and the government directed them to do just that*" (Lock the Gate, 2021).

These confrontational tactics, albeit via social media, are examples of them trying to expose the systemic issues and injustices related to procedure. In doing so, they are enhancing their public visibility and legitimacy among those distrustful of governance and corporate actors. While this advocacy style does carry risks of polarisation or backlash from powerful stakeholders (Keck and Sikkink, 1998), this advocacy tactic appears to be the space that Lock the Gate choose to be in to target their intended audience.

Both organisations use restorative justice rhetoric strategically and differently, with Hunter Renewal through community and economic recovery and Lock the Gate via social and ecological rehabilitation

Rhetoric around restorative justice appears to be used strategically in different ways for both groups. Hunter Renewal frames restoration in the broader economic and educational aspects of sustainable re-use of mining land and retraining. For example, when mentioning the rehabilitation funds necessary to clean-up the Hunter Valley once the mines leave, they suggest that the security bonds levied through the Government don't nearly begin to cover the economic costs, stating that the "*NSW public is shouldering the risk [of security bonds]… of $22 billion"* and that "*… Mining companies need to pay their own clean-up bills"* (Hunter Renewal, 2023). They go on further to suggest that there is a need to think carefully about the reuse of lands and how re-education is important to training workers to enter new industries by posting that there

is a *"need to start thinking about restoration and reuse of mining lands, prioritising ecosystems for future generations"* and that "*Hunter workers need opportunities for training in the regional industries of the future… like renewable energy and landscape restoration… [which are] are desperate for more workers.*" (Hunter Renewal, 2023).

Lock the Gate, on the other hand, make explicit mention of the financial costs and benefits of restoring the landscape and suggest that *"forcing mining companies to rehabilitate mining land can create many jobs and boost economic activity…"* (Lock the Gate, 2020). Though there is additional mention of the irreparable harm caused by mining, thus highlighting the true costs laid bare for Indigenous communities in the Hunter region whose connection to Country is being all but completely diminished, in one post they state that coal mining has "*cleared critically endangered bushland, with irreplaceable refuges and Gomeroi cultural landscapes like the Leard and Piliga forests in north west New South Wales"* (Lock the Gate, 2024).

By drawing on restorative justice literature, Lock the Gate's advocacy approach resonates with theoretical frameworks that position ecological restoration as intrinsically linked to justice – such as recognising the inherent rights of nature, intergenerational justice, and reconciliation with Indigenous communities whose lands and cultural landscapes have been damaged (Pali, Forsyth & Tepper, 2022). Conversely, Hunter Renewal's approach embodies principles of community empowerment, emphasising repair through economic and social regeneration, which aligns closely with restorative justice frameworks that stress collective repair following structural and economic harm (Pali, Forsyth & Tepper, 2022). Both approaches have strong restorative justice advocacy mechanisms and both groups can be seen as employing restorative justice strategies differently but effectively.

Impact and Challenges

"How have Hunter Renewal and Lock the Gate influenced public discourse, policy frameworks, and stakeholder engagement in the Hunter Valley?"

Both organisations have successfully shaped public discourse, framing regional transition as an issue of economic restoration, environmental accountability, and community inclusion.

Both Hunter Renewal and Lock the Gate have actively shaped just transition narratives in the regional public discourse. For Lock the Gate, they have explicitly integrated themes of economic restoration and environmental sustainability through commissioning reports such as *Diversification and Growth: Transforming Mining Land in the Hunter Valley* (EY, commissioned by Lock the Gate, 2022), which have outlined economic scenarios post-mining as well as the economic challenges posed by upcoming mine closures. Moreover, they have actively promoted that work amongst their followers stating they "*commissioned consultancy EY to develop scenarios and lay out a vision of different economic restoration pathways*." (Lock the Gate, 2022).

Similarly, Hunter Renewal has centred community voices, emphasising the economic and social dimensions of regional transitions through their commissioned reports, such as their *Future-proofing the Hunter: Voices from our community* (Hunter Renewal, 2021) report that provides direct community perspectives into public policy frameworks; and, the *After the Coal Rush, the Clean Up: Community Blueprint to Restore the Hunter* (Hunter Renewal, 2023) report, which explicitly advocates for a holistic community-driven restoration.

These strategic communications illustrate both groups' framing of transition discourse. On the one hand, Lock the Gate's advocacy successfully positions economic restoration as inseparable from ecological responsibility, providing a narrative framework through expert-led scenarios. Hunter Renewal complements this discourse by grounding transition planning in local voices, thereby framing public understanding of a just transition as not merely economic or ecological policy decisions, but as fundamentally democratic and community driven. By consistently linking their advocacy to tangible community concerns and outcomes, both groups have influenced the broader just transition discourse, pressuring policymakers to consider these issues seriously. However, the ultimate test of their effectiveness lies in their ability to translate these narrative shifts into concrete policy outcomes.

Hunter Renewal and Lock the Gate's approaches can be analysed through Hajer's (1995) discourse analysis, to identify the narratives that shape public understanding and the degree to which they become dominant and helps to understand the process by which they effectively construct compelling storylines. Lock the Gate's EY report (2022) on transforming mined land in the Hunter presents a framing of economic restoration as tied to environmental accountability, capturing the concerns of regional stakeholders and provides a focus for how the region can realise the economic opportunities beyond mine. Hunter Renewal instead deploys a community-oriented focus on community voice storylines in their *Future-proofing the Hunter* (2021) and *After the Coal Rush, the Clean* Up (2023) reports, that call for community participation and inclusion as essential to transition policy.

Applying Hajer's (1995) theory helps to understand how the two organisations attempt to shape public discourse, their storylines appeal powerfully to stakeholders and community-participants alike. By dominating the space in community-advocacy, they form a powerful discourse coalition, which helps them to embed their framing in the broader regional debate and policy context.

Hunter Renewal influences policy mechanisms and consultations but faces challenges of perceived tokenism in government engagement processes

Hunter Renewal's community participation has tried to influence NSW government policy initiatives such as the Royalties for Rejuvenation Fund and the subsequent Future Jobs and Investment Authority (FJIA), but there is limited knowledge yet on how much impact they have made. For example, Hunter Renewal's *Future-proofing the Hunter* report (2021) and *After the Coal Rush, the Clean Up* (2023) provided feedback for a public consultation process led by the Hunter Expert Panel and later the FJIA. They paired this with consistent social media engagement and posted the key objectives and outcomes of each report to maintain their accountability to their participants. Moreover, when encountering superficial engagement concerns, they used their social media to engage with the public, "*having applied for some information on the progress of the panel, this is what we got.*" (Hunter Renewal, 2024). Similarly, they posted on their social media about the need for NSW Government's Future Jobs and Investment Authority to

succeed, "*it must meet expectations: transparent governance, genuine collaboration with locals and First Nations"* (Hunter Renewal, 2024).

As has already been said, achieving procedural justice requires stakeholders to have genuine influence over processes and decisions that affect them (Thibaut & Walker, 1975). Hunter Renewal's advocacy approach explicitly addresses the need for transparent and inclusive consultation, or process control, as they consistently use their platform to advocate for transparent governance processes. However, despite their role in corralling community voices together, there is limited understanding on whether their efforts have done much to influence policy outcomes. We await the outcome of the FJIA consultation period, but until then, perceptions of procedural unfairness or tokenism may continue for those who participated in the Hunter Renewal workshops.

Lock the Gate's accountability-driven advocacy faces significant institutional resistance due to entrenched corporate and government interests

Lock the Gate's strategy explicitly calls for greater governmental and corporate accountability, focusing on transparency and fairness in decision-making processes concerning coal mine experiences and rehabilitation. Their report *Mind the Gap: How Fixing Mine Rehabilitation Shortfalls Could Fuel Jobs Growth in the Hunter Valley* (Lock the Gate, 2018), exemplifies this approach by highlighting economic and social opportunities missed due to poor corporate accountability and inadequate regulatory oversight. Through their social media advocacy, Lock the Gate consistently challenges governmental decision-making processes and corporate accountability, asserting that *"forcing mining companies to rehabilitate mining land can create many jobs and boost economic activity*" (Lock the Gate, 2020), and criticising opaque decision-making: "*more than half of the planned coal mine expansions are being assessed internally with little transparency or public accountability"* (Lock the Gate, 2024).

However, by openly criticising powerful governmental and corporate actors, Lock the Gate inadvertently positions itself in direct opposition to deeply entrenched institutional interests. This inevitably results in resistance, whereby government agencies and mining corporations defensively maintain the status quo (Sabatier, 1988). In other

words, Lock the Gate's confrontational advocacy style creates a natural adversarial dynamic between them and existing institutional frameworks.

Sabatier's (1988) Advocacy Coalition Framework helps explain this dynamic. According to the framework, policy outcomes result from competition between coalitions that hold distinct sets of core beliefs and policy preferences. Lock the Gate constitutes an advocacy coalition that promotes environmental accountability, transparency, and procedural fairness, directly challenging the established, powerful coalition of mining corporations and governmental institutions who benefit from maintaining traditional economic priorities and regulatory arrangements.

Thus, the challenges Lock the Gate faces in terms of institutional resistance can be seen as inherent to their role as a reformist coalition confronting the established dominant coalition. While their advocacy efforts undoubtedly influence public discourse, the entrenched power and established policy preferences of the dominant pro-mining coalition limit Lock the Gate's practical policy influence, creating a persistent tension between accountability advocacy and regulatory inertia.

Synthesis

The findings and discussion section critically analysed how Hunter Renewal and Lock the Gate conceptualise and advocate for justice to influence a 'just' transition in the Hunter Valley. It reveals distinct yet complementary advocacy approaches. Hunter Renewal prioritises distributive justice, closely aligning with Rawl's (1971) economic fairness, specifically advocating economic redistribution for coal-dependent communities. In contrast, Lock the Gate integrates broader environmental, social, and procedural dimensions, aligning with Schlosberg's multidimensional justice framework, emphasising ecological integrity alongside economic equity.

However, a critical gap identified is that both groups have notably underrepresented recognitional justice. Despite references to Indigenous voices and local communities in their social media posts, neither group appear to prioritise cultural recognition or identity in their advocacy, resulting in a narrow understanding of justice that risks perpetuating historical marginalisation. Drawing on Fraser (2003) and Whyte (2018), this

analysis highlights how insufficient focus on recognitional justice, particularly Indigenous cultural integrity, limits their ability to advocate comprehensively for a genuinely inclusive transition. The predominance of distributive and procedural justice, and even restorative justice, without adequate cultural recognition, restricts both group's effectiveness, risking continued marginalisation of historically disadvantaged groups.

Regarding advocacy strategies, Hunter Renewal employ participatory strategies that actively involve local communities to build their legitimacy and support. Yet, their strategy reveals limitations of tokenistic engagement in governmental decision-making (Arnstein, 1969; Thibaut and Walker, 1975). Lock the Gate, tends to focus on accountability-driven strategies that challenge corporate and institutional governance. While effective in highlighting systemic issues and injustices, their confrontational approach faces strong resistance from entrenched corporate interests and government structures (Sabatier, 1988). Their adversarial strategy, while necessary for public accountability, thus limits their direct policy influence.

In terms of challenges in influencing public debate, both groups have successfully shaped regional narratives around economic restoration and ecological accountability, and community engagement. Applying Hajer's (1996) discourse coalition theory reveals their significant capacity to embed their advocacy in regional policy debates. Yet, translating narrative influence into tangible policy outcomes remains limited due to procedural and institutional barriers.

This analysis reveals critical implications for just transition advocacy. The most significant improvement both organisations can achieve is integration recognitional justice more explicitly and meaningfully, particularly around Indigenous community engagement and cultural recognition. Both groups should look to prioritise Indigenous partnerships and leadership by partnering with local Indigenous groups, elders and organisations to shape advocacy messaging. Whilst there is evidence of this in Hunter Renewal's commissioned reports, less can be said for Lock the Gate's reports or either's public engagement on social media. They should therefore look to establish

advisory roles to ensure that Indigenous representatives directly influence campaign strategies, messaging, and policies advocated by both organisations.

Furthermore, Hunter Renewal should seek strategies beyond tokenistic consultation, striving for genuine community empowerment and decision-making influence. One way this could be done is by pushing for the establishment of community seats on decision-making panels or governance bodies, such as the Future Jobs and Investment Authority, which aligns with recent academic studies that suggest the NSW Government should partner with community groups to shape regional transitions (Edwards et al., 2022). By negotiating with the NSW Government for guaranteed positions on advisory or governance committees, they could influence the allocation and oversight of transition funding.

Lock the Gate should review their confrontational stance by building broader coalitions to overcome institutional resistance. One way this could be done is by looking to influential groups beyond their traditional allies, towards working with respected academics or policymakers, thus building on the work they have already produced with EY. For example, Lock the Gate could collaborate with influential academic institutions, such as the University of Newcastle based in the Hunter Region, to produce evidence-based reports on the transitional planning, making it harder institutions to dismiss their proposals as purely oppositional. Or similarly, they could look to engage with coal communities who are deeply embedded in the communities. These groups understand the finite position and the challenge that coal finds itself in the inevitable solution, so partnering with them might help ease concerns over transitional inertia.

These solutions would significantly enhance both organisation's advocacy effectiveness, increasing their legitimacy, inclusivity, and capacity to shape comprehensive and 'just' transition outcomes in the Hunter Valley.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis explores how Hunter Renewal and Lock the Gate Alliance advocate for a 'just' transition in the Hunter Valley by analysing distributive, procedural, recognitional, and restorative justice themes portrayed through their social media and commissioned reports. Analysis of this primary data identifies clear contrasts in the groups' justice conceptualisation and operationalisation approaches. Hunter Renewal, for example, predominantly emphasises economic distributive justice, focusing on local economic fairness. Whilst they do incorporate other justice themes regularly, they tend to focus on examples regarding the distribution of economic benefits to local communities. On the other hand, Lock the Gate tends to portray a broader justice advocacy approach that integrates ecological sustainability, procedural transparency, and community welfare. Their predominant focus on distributive and procedural justice themes is often interwoven with environmental and social issues that suggest a more holistic approach to justice discourse. Whilst both groups both appear to be successful in influencing regional discourse and policy frameworks in favour of a 'just' transition, it is also clear they face persistent advocacy challenges.

One significant critical finding of this research is the underrepresentation of a recognitional justice framing, especially concerning Indigenous cultural identity and rights. This thesis argues that this omission limits the comprehensiveness, inclusivity, and legitimacy of their justice advocacy, potentially perpetuating existing injustices rather than resolving them (Fraser, 2003; Whyte, 2018). The Hunter region is home to disadvantaged communities and First Nations peoples who face economic hardship as well as disrespect towards their honorary positions as traditional custodians of the land (Institute for Regional Futures, 2023; WMAC, n.d.; Hunter Renewal, 2021; Hunter Renewal, 2023). By failing to properly recognise, amplify and champion their voices transition in the region, both community action groups might cause an exacerbation of present injustices. Therefore, to effectively advocate for genuinely equitable transitions, Hunter Renewal and Lock the Gate must strengthen their approaches to recognitional justice, integrating local, cultural and Indigenous perspectives more explicitly and consistently.

This thesis also presents some practical limitations for Hunter Renewal and Lock the Gate. For example, Hunter Renewal are consistently plagued with issues around procedural tokenism that currently inhibit their ability to affect change. This is due to the nature of their participatory advocacy approach, which may trivialise their position as conduits to change making, thus continuing to limit their effectiveness as a community action group. One action that Hunter Renewal could do is take a stronger stance approach that doesn't just focus on local community participants but rather incorporates businesses and other regional stakeholders under a more unified banner of action, which may provide more lobbying power on the government.

Lock the Gate, on the other hand, are impacted by their inability to form broad coalitions that might help them to overcome institutional resistance. They could challenge this is by adopting softer rhetorical stances on their social media and even look to branch out to corporate and government interests, to bring them on the journey with them towards a fair and equitable transition. This could present its own issues, such as losing their traditional base of supporters in appearing to side with big business over environmentalist. But it might help them to break through the regulatory inertia. Similar steps could be found with another regional transition in the Latrobe Valley in Victoria and the Ruhr Valley in Germany, where scholars highlighted inclusive, but government-supported, transition models produced more resilient and equitable outcome for regional communities (Musil and Gerrard, 2025; Jenkins et al., 2021).

Theoretically, drawing on distributive, procedural, recognitional, and restorative justice (Rawls, 1971; Thibaut & Walker, 1975; Fraser, 2003; Pali *et al*., 2022) as part of a multidimensional justice framework, provides robust analytical clarity and insight that demonstrates the interconnections between each justice theme. By supplementarily diving deeper into practical theories on advocacy and participation (Arnstein, 1969; Keck & Sikkink, 1988) and public discourse (Hajer, 1995), this thesis provides a theoretical basis for analysis that is rich and concise.

Methodologically, the qualitative analysis of social media and policy reports effectively captured authentic advocacy strategies, though future studies might further diversify data sources to include direct community interviews or ethnographic observations of

those inside the organisations as well as participants on the ground. Unfortunately, a limit in different types of primary data sources means that conclusions are limited in representing the entire story. With additional time and resources, supplementing research with conducting interviews or ethnographic observations would provide richer insights on the effectiveness and advocacy practices of community action groups.

Finally, further research should go deeper to explore Indigenous experiences and priorities within the transition advocacy. In doing so, research can be used to compare strategies across multiple regions experiencing similar coal-dependent transitions globally. Research already exists within the Australian context, see Latrobe Valley in Victoria, but this must extend across borders to countries currently reliant on coal but are yet to transition. Such research would significantly enrich just transition scholarship, providing essential insights for policy and practice worldwide.

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