Why we need an 'energy Landcare' to tackle rising power prices

February 27 2017, by Nicky Ison

This array in Indiana is one of a growing number of "community solar gardens" in the US. Credit: Robford15/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA

Rising electricity prices have become a fact of life in Australia – and are likely to be so for a few years to come.

However, while the cost of generating electricity will rise as cheap but ageing coal power stations go offline, that doesn't mean your electricity bills need to follow suit.

Households and businesses can take greater control of their energy future and slash their power bills in a range of cost-effective ways. Solar panels and battery storage are among the most obvious strategies. But not everyone can afford them, which is why we are seeing the rise of community projects that aim to give more people access to clean energy.

Australia now has more than 1.6 million solar roofs. Last year 6,750 battery storage systems were installed, up from just 500 in 2015.

Yet many households and businesses are still effectively "locked out" of this energy revolution. Many renters, apartment-dwellers and lower-income households face a series of market barriers that make these options hard to access.

Renters often find that their landlord does not want to invest in solar. Those living in apartments can have the same problem with their strata or body corporate, with the added problem of not always having access to their own roof.

Poorer households typically can't afford [solar panels](#) or batteries, even if they would save money over the longer term. On top of the expense, buying solar panels and other clean energy products can be complicated and confusing.

Club together

The good news is that there are several initiatives around Australia that aim to get around these barriers. One example is [Darebin Solar $avers](#), a collaboration between local government, community and industry that has installed solar panels on 300 low-income households in Melbourne's northern suburbs. There was no upfront cost to these households, ensuring they were financially better off from day one.

Another example is the community solar gardens model, which has become popular in the United States. Solar gardens work by installing a central solar array, generally near a population centre. Energy customers are invited to buy (or subscribe to) a share in a handful of the array's solar panels. The electricity generated is then credited on the customer's electricity bill. Often, poorer households are offered discounts to be able to participate.

One issue with these kinds of schemes, however, is that they are complicated to set up. They usually involve many partner organisations – at least one of which has to have an interest in ensuring that users are better off. It is hard to see how the market can deliver these schemes on its own.

Where markets fail, it is typically governments' job to step in and help. So how can governments go about helping people get access to affordable clean energy?

In the United States, the Obama administration set a national target of 1 gigawatt of solar panels to be installed on low- to moderate-income homes by 2020 as part of the [Clean Energy Savings for All](#) program. The [National Community Solar Partnership](#) brought together 68 organisations to help set up community solar gardens and make them easier to access.

This week, Australia's second national [Community Energy Congress](#) in Melbourne will hear from Barack Obama's climate and energy adviser, Candace Vahlsing, who will outline how these policies can help ensure wider access to green energy.

In Australia, a proposal to establish a network of 50 Regional Energy Hubs is gaining traction. The federal [Labor](#) Party, [Greens](#) and [Nick Xenophon Team](#) all made commitments in the lead-up to the 2016 federal election.

The Regional Energy Hubs proposal is modelled on the [Moreland Energy Foundation](), a non-profit organisation in inner-north Melbourne set up in 2000 in the wake of Victoria's energy privatisation. The foundation has a team of energy and engagement experts working with households, businesses, community groups and governments on innovative approaches to implementing sustainable energy supply – the Darebin Solar $avers program being one example. The idea would be to set up dozens more similar organisations, all linked together across the nation.

The program can be thought of as like [Landcare]() but for clean energy. Landcare is a nationwide network of volunteers who care for our land and water, with the aim of boosting both environmental protection and agricultural productivity. Similarly, energy hubs would aim both to make energy more environmentally friendly, and to make clean energy more affordable and accessible.

This is why we have to move past just talking about "costs" and start thinking about investment. [Modelling by Marsden Jacobs and Associates]() shows that every dollar of government investment in community energy can leverage A$10-17 of community investment. At the same time, this delivers many other benefits to communities: closer connections between neighbours; opportunities to learn new skills or access new income streams; easing social inequity; and improving health.

Given the myriad possible solutions to our energy challenges, we need to nut out what works best, and where. The best way to do this is by putting all of our heads together – local government, state government, federal government, private enterprise, innovators in the clean [energy]() sector, and the communities that stand to benefit. That way we can make the [clean energy]() transition fairer and more accessible to all.

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