In Theory

Negotiating Identity Conflicts in Green Mega-Infrastructure Projects

Matthias Vanhullebusch

Green mega-infrastructure projects are increasingly central to the global green energy transition. Yet they often generate conflict when stakeholder engagement fails to address underlying issues of identity, recognition, and belonging. These dynamics unfold against a backdrop of institutional logics that prioritize efficiency, planning authority, and investment security. This article re-examines stakeholder engagement through the lens of negotiation theory, arguing that existing frameworks often remain conflict-blind and reduce identity to procedural categories. Drawing on Rothman's ARIA framework, it extends the logic of interest-based negotiation by introducing a relational, identity-sensitive approach to conflict in green mega-infrastructure project governance. Accordingly, the article advances the concept of identity narratives—dynamic and relational storylines through which actors, communities, and developers alike articulate identity claims of belonging, legitimacy, and recognition in conflict. It integrates this typology within the ARIA framework by structuring antagonism, resonance, invention, and action around contested identities to promote a more recognition-sensitive approach to stakeholder engagement.

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Introduction

The accelerating climate crisis has placed rapid decarbonization at the center of national and international agendas. To achieve this, governments and industries are advancing green mega-infrastructure projects—offshore wind farms, solar parks, transmission grids, hydropower dams, and mining for critical minerals—that promise to power the green energy transition. These projects are presented as engines of job creation, industrial renewal, and energy security. Yet their scale and speed also generate growing contestation. In Norway, Sámi communities have mobilized against wind farms that threaten reindeer herding (Associated Press 2023). In Argentina's Puna region, Indigenous groups have pursued legal action against lithium mining, citing environmental degradation and exclusion from decision-making (Stacey 2019). Fishing communities in Europe and North America have challenged offshore wind developments over access to marine areas and long-term ecological risks (Haggett et al. 2020). These conflicts expose the limits of planning and permitting regimes: unresolved grievances and disregard for local knowledge repeatedly stall projects, provoke litigation, and reveal the green energy transition itself as a deeply contested political terrain (Lennon 2015; Sovacool et al. 2019).

Consultation processes have become central institutional tools for engaging opposition to green mega-infrastructure projects (Flyvbjerg, Bruzelius, and Rothengatter 2003). Stakeholder engagement approaches such as participatory design and the social license to operate seek to extend transparency and inclusion by giving stakeholders an opportunity to shape decisions that affect their environments and livelihoods (Naumann et al. 2011; Prno 2013). These frameworks echo policy commitments to a just transition, such as the EU Just Transition Mechanism and the World Bank's Environmental and Social Framework, where procedural and distributional fairness are well established. While recognition justice is increasingly invoked, in practice recognition is usually reduced to procedural inclusion—measured by who gains access to consultation or sits at the table—rather than addressing more profound questions of belonging, legitimacy, and recognition (Fraser and Honneth 2003). As a result, the deeper roots of resistance in histories of dispossession, cultural marginalization, or symbolic claims are often overlooked. These shortcomings are reinforced by institutional logics that privilege fast project

development, centralized authority, or regulatory weakness, narrowing the scope for genuine recognition and participation (Anthias and López Flores 2024; Arabadjieva and Bogojević 2024).

Negotiation theory offers a more explicit orientation toward conflict and its core principles of transparency, procedural fairness, and equitable distribution have the potential to shape stakeholder engagement practices equitably (Fisher and Ury 1991; Crocker, Hampson, and Aall 2004; Susskind and Field 2006). Interest-based approaches in particular have advanced tools for moving beyond positional deadlock by uncovering underlying needs and generating integrative solutions. Yet in the context of green mega-infrastructure project disputes, these tools encounter some limitations. By focusing on rational interests that can be traded or compensated, they often sidestep the deeper questions of recognition and belonging that fuel resistance (Smyth 1994; Tully 2000; Hicks 2001; Sanpietro 2025). Where negotiation scholarship has addressed identity, it has largely drawn on social identity theory, which illuminates in-group and out-group dynamics but tends to cast identities as fixed boundaries and sources of bias (Tajfel and Turner 2004; Thompson 2009). This framing reinforces the identity-blindness of stakeholder engagement. It treats belonging as an impediment to cooperation rather than as a resource that can be engaged. To move beyond these constraints, this article advances a relational perspective that conceives of identity not as categorical but as dynamic, articulated through identity narratives (Shapiro 2010; Jenkins 2014; Ting-Toomey 2015).

Identity narratives are the dynamic and relational storylines through which parties to a conflict articulate identity claims of belonging, legitimacy, and recognition in conflict. Like the two ends of a double arrow, these narratives take shape in relation to one another—at times in antagonism, at times in resonance—and can, through negotiation, shift toward a middle ground where a zone of possible agreement becomes reachable. In disputes over green mega-infrastructure projects, such narratives are voiced not only by communities defending territory, culture, or livelihoods, but also by developers, regulators, and professionals grounding their legitimacy in mandates, expertise, or responsibility. Recognizing these narratives as relational positions rather than static labels makes it possible to understand why conflicts escalate and how they might be transformed. To operationalize this perspective, this article develops a typology of five recurrent dimensions of identity narratives—territorial, cultural-historical, ecological, occupational, and autonomy—through which identity claims are advanced. This typology frames identity not as background context but as a resource for negotiation; it maps the dimension through which identity claims are articulated, contested, and potentially reconciled.

For such identity narratives to become actionable in practice, negotiation requires a framework that treats recognition of identity as central rather than peripheral to conflict engagement. Rothman's ARIA framework—Antagonism, Resonance, Invention, and Action—offers such a structured process of engagement, building on the tradition of principled negotiation (Rothman 1997; Rothman and Alberstein 2013). Its phased design begins by legitimizing adversarial positions (Antagonism), then seeks to uncover underlying values and shared meanings (Resonance), generate creative and mutually acceptable solutions (Invention), and support their implementation through collaborative action (Action). Although ARIA has often engaged identity through relatively static categories—ethnic, professional, and national—rather than as dynamic and relational narratives, it creates space for identity narratives to surface and resonate across divides. This article builds on ARIA's proven value while reworking its foundations. By integrating the typology of five dimensions of identity narratives, it advances a conceptual and practical framework to more effectively surface and address identity conflicts in green mega-infrastructure project governance.

In doing so, this article makes two contributions. Conceptually, it develops a typology of five dimensions of identity narratives that captures how belonging, legitimacy, and recognition are articulated in conflicts around green mega-infrastructure projects. Methodologically, it integrates this typology with the ARIA framework to show how such narratives can be engaged in negotiation practice. Taken together, these contributions advance a more relational and recognition-sensitive approach to stakeholder engagement. The article proceeds in three steps. First, it examines the challenges of stakeholder engagement in green mega-infrastructure projects, showing how institutional logics entrench power asymmetries and prevailing frameworks remain conflict-blind and identity-blind by reducing recognition justice to procedural inclusion. Second, it develops a typology of five dimensions of identity narratives that frames identity as a dynamic and relational resource in negotiation. Third, it integrates this typology into the ARIA framework, demonstrating how identity narratives can be operationalized to more effectively surface and address identity conflicts in green mega-infrastructure project governance.

Challenges to Engaging Stakeholders in Green Mega-Infrastructure Projects

Institutional Logics and Resistance

Green mega-infrastructure projects concentrate political, economic, and regulatory authority in ways that generate structural asymmetries long

before stakeholder engagement begins (Gellert and Lynch 2003). Their strategic importance to national decarbonization agendas means that policy logics of urgency, efficiency, and investment security shape the terms of centralized decision-making from the outset, effectively ruling out alternative perspectives to shape project trajectories. Governments present such projects as engines of energy security and industrial renewal, embedding climate goals within accelerated approval procedures and streamlined permitting frameworks (Lennon 2015; Ward 2020). These priorities cascade downward into institutional procedures that privilege standardized assessments, technical expertise, and administrative efficiency over more plural or deliberative forms of governance (Flyvbjerg, Bruzelius, and Rothengatter 2003). Yet asymmetry does not arise only from fast-tracking development projects. In other contexts, it reflects the opposite, where weak or fragmented regulatory regimes leave enforcement inconsistent and oversight minimal (Anthias and López Flores 2024). These structural asymmetries are not neutral background conditions but are actively reproduced through stakeholder engagement, where recognition is channeled into procedural formats that stabilize dominant priorities and foreclose more substantive forms of participation and co-ownership (Sovacool et al. 2019).

Within asymmetrical governance settings, recognition processes are often framed as a means of inclusion (Newig and Fritsch 2009), yet they risk reproducing exclusion in subtler ways. Rather than transforming decision-making, recognition is channeled into procedural formats that stabilize dominant institutional priorities—efficiency, investment security, and legal certainty—while marginalizing competing claims (Fraser and Honneth 2003). Public hearings and consultations are frequently scheduled after key decisions have been taken, reducing participation to a formality. Contributions are confined to technical categories or impact assessments that render identity claims legible to regulators but strip them of their political edge (Kopperoinen, Albert, and Itkonen 2016; Yenneti, Day, and Golubchikov 2016). This selective accommodation turns recognition into symbolic rather than substantive inclusion, where identities are acknowledged only in forms that do not challenge authority (Le Billon and Middeldorp 2021; Tornel 2023). The result is instrumentalization: engagement produces data that legitimizes projects but rarely reshapes underlying power relations, laying the ground for mistrust and eventual resistance (Gunningham, Kagan, and Thornton 2004).

These procedural constraints rarely produce neutral outcomes. Instead, they foster tokenism, where community participation serves primarily to legitimize pre-determined decisions. Contributions that fall outside the narrow procedural frame are sidelined, while those that fit are translated into mitigation measures that leave core project

trajectories untouched (Arnstein 1969; Cooke and Kothari 2001). Over time, such instrumentalization generates mistrust, as affected groups come to view engagement less as a vehicle for genuine negotiation than as a performance of inclusivity (Cornwall 2008). This erosion of confidence is seldom static—mistrust often crystallizes into resistance, whether in the form of legal appeals, collective mobilization, or the withdrawal of cooperation from official processes. While the forms of resistance vary, the underlying refusal remains the same; communities contest the symbolic nature of their participation and challenge processes that exclude them from meaningful influence. Resistance thus emerges as a rejection of procedural inclusion on terms that leave existing authority structures unaltered.

Resistance can unsettle the governance of mega-infrastructure projects in significant ways. Legal appeals may delay approval processes, protests can disrupt construction, and public campaigns often generate reputational costs for developers and authorities. In some cases, sustained mobilizations have even forced project redesigns or the withdrawal of corporate actors (Bebbington et al. 2008; Temper et al. 2018). Such actions highlight that resistance is not marginal; it is a signal that existing governance arrangements have reached a political limit and cannot continue unchanged (McCreary and Milligan 2013; Jones and Youngs 2025). Like pain in a living body, resistance exposes vulnerabilities that institutions prefer to keep hidden (Bauer 1995). Yet its transformative potential remains constrained. Authorities often absorb disruption by reinforcing established procedures or reframing dissent as obstructionist, thereby reasserting control (Kirsch 2007). Resistance thus demonstrates both the fragility of mega-infrastructure project governance and its resilience in neutralizing challenges. What remains foreclosed is genuine co-ownership or joint decision-making processes, where communities shape how outcomes are reached rather than merely legitimize them.

Because of the persistence of resistance, stakeholder engagement remains a central mechanism for managing opposition to green mega-infrastructure projects. Engagement is framed simultaneously as a regulatory obligation, rooted in international conventions and permitting regimes (UNECE 2000) and as a strategic tool for building legitimacy by reducing conflict and fostering acceptance (Gunningham, Kagan, and Thornton 2004). Its normative appeal lies in principles of transparency, inclusion, and responsiveness, with public hearings, consultations, and feedback mechanisms presented as ways of enhancing procedural fairness and improving project design (van den Hove 2006; Reed 2008; Ward 2020). Yet, as the preceding discussion has shown, such processes are rarely free from the institutional asymmetries that shape them.

Stakeholder engagement often embeds those asymmetries procedurally, transforming resistance into an obstacle to be managed rather than a conflict to be addressed. It is this conflict-blind design of stakeholder engagement that the next section examines in greater detail.

The Conflict-Blind Design of Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholder engagement is widely presented as a means of enhancing the legitimacy of green mega-infrastructure projects by allowing affected communities to participate in shaping decisions that impact their lives (Ward 2020). In practice, however, traditional formats of consultation are beset by structural shortcomings. Public hearings and community consultations are often scheduled only after major project decisions have been taken, leaving little scope to influence strategic outcomes. Participation is typically confined to narrow, technical concerns—noise, biodiversity, and displacement—rather than lived experience, cultural meaning, or symbolic harm (Kopperoinen, Albert, and Itkonen 2016). Engagement is also treated as a one-off obligation tied to permitting milestones, with little continuity once projects move forward (Diduck and Sinclair 2002). As a result, many communities experience engagement less as dialogue than as compliance. These practices reinforce a logic of linear project development in which participation is largely symbolic. They reduce recognition to procedural inclusion and undermine trust, setting the stage for recurring resistance and protracted conflict.

In response to these limitations, more participatory frameworks have gained traction across policy and industry arenas. Participatory design (PD) and the social license to operate (SLO) both promise to deepen engagement by addressing shortcomings in timing, scope, and inclusivity. PD emphasizes iterative and locally attuned forms of collaboration, ranging from co-design workshops to collaborative scenario-building (Wesselink et al. 2011). SLO, widely adopted in mining, renewable energy, and forestry, encourages companies to demonstrate legitimacy by securing the acceptance of affected communities and thereby reducing reputational risk (Thomson and Boutilier 2011; Lesser et al. 2021). Both approaches have been taken up in the context of green mega-infrastructure projects and are often reinforced by broader policy commitments such as the EU's Just Transition Mechanism. Their normative appeal rests on the idea that earlier, more inclusive engagement can repair trust and prevent escalation. In this sense, PD and SLO appear to offer corrective tools—ways to move beyond the procedural tokenism that has long characterized stakeholder engagement.

Yet despite these ambitions, PD and SLO remain shaped by a deeper conflict-blindness. Both treat disagreement as a problem of design or communication, correctable through earlier input, better dialogue, or more

inclusive procedures (Reed 2008; Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2017). This framing assumes that resistance stems from miscommunication, misguided public perception, or technical oversight rather than from fundamentally incompatible worldviews or historically rooted grievances. Implicit in this logic is the belief that consensus is the natural endpoint of participation and that conflict is a deviance to be managed rather than a constitutive feature of governance. By equating legitimacy with procedural fairness, these frameworks overlook the ways in which disputes are sustained by contested identities, symbolic claims, and memories of exclusion. The assumption that disagreement can be "smoothed out" through improved design conceals its generative potential as a source of recognition and transformation. In this sense, PD and SLO repackage rather than transcend the very shortcomings they claim to resolve.

The tendency to treat conflict as a communication deficit produces procedural dynamics that privilege harmony over confrontation. Engagement exercises often aim to neutralize contestation, encouraging compromise through facilitated dialogue or consensus-oriented workshops. This orientation narrows the political space of engagement, framing disagreement as an obstacle to overcome rather than a legitimate expression of divergent worldviews. In practice, participatory initiatives often reduce opposition to input that can be translated into mitigation measures or project adjustments, while leaving core trajectories untouched (Beierle and Konisky 2000). Such smoothing strategies may temporarily ease tensions, but they also strip engagement of its capacity to grapple with deeper value-based disagreements. Conflict is acknowledged only in forms that do not destabilize institutional authority, reinforcing the very structural asymmetries. In privileging procedural harmony, PD and SLO risk converting participation into performance—symbolically inclusive yet substantively limited—thereby deepening mistrust among affected communities.

Insights from negotiation and conflict theory stand in sharp contrast to the harmony-seeking orientation of those participatory frameworks. Rather than treating disagreement as a flaw to be corrected, these approaches recognize conflict as a generative force that can reveal unmet needs, surface unspoken tensions, and establish the basis for more inclusive and durable agreements (Susskind and Cruikshank 1987; Kemmis 1990). Conflict, in this perspective, is not an obstacle but an opportunity to reshape relationships and expand the range of outcomes under consideration. By framing participation primarily as a vehicle for consensus, PD and SLO ignore this potential and instead privilege procedures that minimize disruption. What results is a narrowing of political space, where engagement remains performative and resistant voices are channeled into formats that defuse their transformative capacity.

Without explicitly engaging the generative dimension of conflict, participatory initiatives often risk reinforcing, rather than unsettling, the asymmetries that sustain mistrust (Arnstein 1969; Beierle and Konisky 2000; Cornwall 2008).

These limitations become most visible when resistance is rooted not only in interests but in identity. Green mega-infrastructure projects often challenge attachments to territory, culture, and history, provoking disputes that cannot be reduced to technical adjustments or procedural inclusion. In such contexts, early consultation or fairer design does little to remedy the sense of symbolic loss or cultural displacement. The very terms of engagement may themselves be contested, leaving frameworks like PD and SLO ill-equipped to respond. When conflict turns on questions of recognition and belonging, stakeholder engagement cannot rely on harmony-seeking procedures without (mis)representing what is at stake. This is where the limits of current approaches are most acute; they fail precisely where conflicts are most enduring. Addressing such tensions requires a different lens, one that foregrounds the relational, historical, and affective dimensions of disagreement. It is to this neglected terrain of identity conflicts in stakeholder engagement that the next section now turns.

The Forgotten Terrain of Identity Conflicts in Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholder engagement frameworks have long struggled to grapple with conflict directly, often preferring to design processes that work around it. They are even less equipped to engage with the identity dynamics that frequently underpin resistance to green mega-infrastructure projects (Flyvbjerg, Bruzelius, and Rothengatter 2003; Devine-Wright 2009). Opposition to such projects is rarely confined to questions of siting, compensation, or environmental impact. Instead, it reflects deeper struggles over belonging, recognition, and historic legacies of exclusion that shape how communities experience and respond to interventions in their landscapes and livelihoods. In many cases, projects confront communities not only with physical disruption but also with symbolic erasure, unsettling the stories and attachments that sustain collective life. Yet within most consultation processes, identity is treated as secondary, leaving its role in shaping conflict largely unexamined (Agyeman and Erickson 2012). This neglect makes it difficult to understand why disputes around green mega-infrastructure projects escalate so readily and why conventional engagement often fails to build legitimacy (Lennon, Dunphy, and Sanvicente 2019).

Where identity is acknowledged in stakeholder engagement, it is usually rendered in static and depoliticized terms—reduced to

demographic profiles, cultural references, or community descriptors that appear in background documentation, but rarely shape how engagement is structured (Macharis and Nijkamp 2013). This treatment reflects a deeper flaw: identity is approached as contextual detail rather than as a constitutive element of conflict. Consultation frameworks assume that concerns can be surfaced through standardized procedures, as if all participants enter from equal positions and share a common vocabulary. Such assumptions flatten the meanings communities attach to places, practices, and institutions, narrowing their capacity to express harm, exclusion, or legitimacy. This blindness is then reinforced procedurally in planning and permitting, where agencies and consultants predefine stakeholders through maps, filters, and scoping reports (Yenneti, Day, and Golubchikov 2016; Bendtsen, Clausen, and Hansen 2021). These practices privilege property ownership or formal organization as markers of legitimacy, while rendering identities grounded in ancestry, memory, or cultural practice illegible from the outset.

These silences are not neutral but reflect entrenched asymmetries of power. Institutional actors—planning agencies, regulators, or private developers—hold mandates and resources that communities cannot easily match. By embedding participation in administrative routines of efficiency and legibility, institutions effectively define what counts as valid knowledge or legitimate voice. Oral histories, customary practices, or symbolic claims are often disregarded because they cannot be codified within regulatory formats. Exclusion, in this sense, is not accidental but designed: a function of institutional logics that privilege technical expertise, economic growth, and procedural order over relational recognition (Pellizzoni 2011). These logics shape the very architecture of engagement, positioning some actors as authoritative and others as peripheral. This imbalance does more than narrow the space of participation. It produces resentment and mistrust, as communities come to view engagement less as an opportunity for dialogue than as a mechanism for managing dissent. Resistance, in turn, becomes a way of contesting not only project outcomes but also the structural power relations embedded in the process.

Bureaucratic silences and power asymmetries trigger resistance across the permitting timeline—before, during, and after consultation. Communities mobilize early through protests, open letters, or ceremonial gatherings to assert belonging on their own terms (Le Billon and Middeldorp 2021). During consultation, they push back against formats that demand translation into environmental, economic, or cultural impacts (Bendtsen, Clausen, and Hansen 2021), rejecting the reduction of lived realities to procedural categories. After consultation, resistance often escalates in litigation, blockades, or withdrawal from participatory

forums. Accordingly, Sámi groups in Norway have pursued court cases against territorial exclusions (Associated Press 2023); Indigenous communities in the Argentine Puna have occupied roads to oppose lithium extraction (Stacey 2019); and fishing communities in Europe and North America have withdrawn from forums citing the erasure of spatial identity (Haggett et al. 2020). For those affected, exclusion is not experienced as procedural oversight but as an attack on their identity. Boundaries harden, internal solidarity intensifies, and mistrust toward authorities and developers deepens—transforming resistance into a defense of recognition rather than simply opposition to development.

Identity matters in conflict not simply because it marks difference, but because it frames how harm, exclusion, and recognition are understood. It shapes the stakes of disagreement and the narratives through which communities interpret disruption, injustice, or exclusion. These dynamics are rarely articulated in procedural terms; they surface through silence, affect, or symbolic acts that signal presence when institutional formats cannot accommodate voice (Shapiro 2016). Where identity is at stake, disagreement becomes less about material outcomes and more about existential recognition—the right to define meaning, contest dominant narratives, or assert continuity with the past. In this sense, identity is not background context but a constitutive element of conflict itself (Rothman 1997; Rothman and Olson 2001). It is forged internally through kinship, memory, and place and externally through encounters with others, including adversaries. Hence, identity is always relational and processual, taking form through ongoing interaction (Jenkins 2014). To understand resistance, then, is to see how identity asserts itself relationally—an insistence on recognition that transcends distributive categories of loss, impact, or compensation.

Moreover, stakeholder engagement frameworks are ill-suited to address these dynamics because of the epistemological assumptions on which they rest. Participation is typically imagined as the aggregation of discrete individuals, each with rational interests to be voiced, balanced, and reconciled through fair procedures. Conflict, within this logic, is treated as a temporary misalignment of preferences, resolvable through compromise or compensation (Kremer and Jordahl 2022). Such assumptions may be adequate for distributive disputes, but they fail to register the relational and collective dimensions of identity-based conflict. Exclusion, however, is rarely experienced in individualist terms; it is felt as a threat to collective belonging, intensifying solidarity within and mistrust toward external actors (Umemoto 2001). Yet as the following section will demonstrate, addressing identity-based conflict in green mega-infrastructure projects requires an explicit theoretical engagement with identity itself—one that moves beyond treating identity as

background context toward a relational dynamic perspective attentive to how belonging, legitimacy, and recognition are narrated and contested.

Engaging Identity in Green Mega-Infrastructure Projects: Toward Identity Narratives

Social identity theory has long shaped how negotiation and conflict scholarship explains escalation. It illuminates the psychological mechanisms through which ingroup-outgroup distinctions emerge, boundaries harden, and mistrust intensifies when groups perceive threats (Tajfel and Turner 2004). These insights are particularly relevant for green mega-infrastructure projects, where planning procedures or permitting disputes often activate group solidarities and sharpen resistance. Social identity theory helps clarify why communities may entrench in opposition, viewing engagement with developers or regulators as a risk to collective belonging. Yet the strength of social identity theory as a diagnostic lens also reveals its limitation. By casting identity as relatively fixed and bounded, it treats difference as a barrier to cooperation rather than a potential resource. Negotiation, from this perspective, becomes a matter of managing bias or bridging divides, while leaving unexplored the deeper meanings that sustain conflict. To move beyond this rigidity, scholars have turned to relational perspectives on identity.

Relational identity perspectives start from a different premise. Identities are not static boundaries but dynamic, situational, and co-constituted through interaction (Shapiro 2010; Jenkins 2014; Ting-Toomey 2015). This view is valuable for highlighting how recognition and misrecognition unfold in encounters and for showing that identities can shift when they are engaged relationally. Yet in contexts such as green mega-infrastructure project development, where conflicts are deeply collective and often politicized, relational approaches have their own limitation. Much of this scholarship has evolved in the study of interpersonal interaction, privileging the micro-scale of individual negotiation. This emphasis risks overlooking the ways entire communities mobilize identity claims around territory, history, ecology, or livelihood, thus asserting belonging in collective terms. In such cases, the challenge is not only to recognize fluidity but also to capture how shared narratives structure group resistance and recognition demands. This gap points to the need for an intermediate conceptual layer: identity narratives, which link the fluidity of interpersonal identity processes with the collective stakes of conflicts that shape green mega-infrastructure projects.

In this sense, identity is best approached not as a fixed category, as in social identity theory, nor only as emergent interactional processes, as in relational identity perspectives, but as a set of identity

narratives—dynamic and relational storylines through which actors articulate identity claims of belonging, legitimacy, and recognition in conflict. These narratives take shape in interaction, harden in moments of misrecognition, and shift when acknowledgment is offered. Identity claims are not confined to communities resisting projects but also arise among developers, regulators, and professionals, who ground legitimacy in mandates, expertise, or responsibility. By engaging these narratives, identities shift from background context to a central terrain of negotiation. In green mega-infrastructure project conflicts, identity narratives provide a lens for understanding why opposition escalates and how recognition might be rebuilt. The following discussion illustrates this more concretely by examining five recurrent dimensions of identity narratives—territorial, cultural-historical, ecological, occupational, and autonomy—through which identity claims are most often articulated in these disputes.

Firstly, territorial identity is among the most immediate and tangible dimensions of identity narratives in green mega-infrastructure project conflicts. For many communities, territory is not merely a physical space, but a relational landscape—embedded with memory, seasonal movement, and collective continuity. Land is not just occupied, but inhabited through ancestral ties and, thus, carries social meaning. For Sámi reindeer herders in Norway, for instance, the disruption of reindeer migration routes by wind energy developments marks not just a spatial intrusion, but a break in seasonal rhythms and land-based practices rooted in place-based movements. Yet, territorial identity is not exclusive to local communities. For institutional actors—developers, spatial planners, and regulators, territorial identity is articulated through mandates of spatial ordering and planning authority, where legitimacy is grounded in the capacity to classify, regulate, and optimize land use. These territorial identity claims come into direct tension with community understandings of land as lived place, positioning conflict around not only where projects are located, but what land is understood to be. These divergent relationships to land structure the very terrain on which conflict unfolds (Manzo and Perkins 2006; Devine-Wright 2009).

Secondly, cultural-historical identity grounds conflict in narratives of memory, continuity, and collective experience. For many groups, especially those with histories of cultural marginalization or displacement, cultural identity is maintained through shared stories, rituals, and spatial attachments that link generations across time (Heersmink 2021). Resistance to infrastructure projects may therefore reflect not only present-day concerns, but a defense of continuity—of being part of a historical trajectory that is threatened by imposed change. In parts of North America, for example, Indigenous opposition to oil and gas

pipelines has invoked not only ecological risks, but the desecration of sacred sites and the continuation of settler colonial dispossession. Within this narrative, institutional actors often locate themselves within histories of progress, technocratic modernization, and national development, framing infrastructure expansion as a continuation of collective historical responsibility (Estes 2019). These underlying narratives shape how actors understand their place in history and what forms of continuity they seek to preserve or advance. Conflict emerges when such forward-looking claims collide with community claims grounded in memory, continuity, and experiences of historical marginalization or dispossession.

Thirdly, if cultural-historical identity emphasizes continuity through memory and shared pasts, ecological identity focuses on kinship with non-human nature, including forests, rivers, animals, and ecosystems, as a basis for belonging and resistance. In many contexts, resistance to green mega-infrastructure projects emerges from this place-based ecological identity (Cohen 2017). Among Andean communities affected by high-altitude solar and lithium mining projects, for example, opposition is not only about land use, but about damage to sacred lagoons, grazing ecologies, and mountain spirits that inform seasonal and cosmological rhythms (Stacey 2019). These forms of ecological knowledge are relational, cumulative, and embedded in everyday practice. In contrast, institutional ecological identity is commonly articulated through scientific expertise, climate mitigation targets, and metrics of environmental performance, enabling actors to claim ecological responsibility at a planetary scale. This logic can frame itself as not only urgent, but superior—casting local knowledge as partial, symbolic, or resistant to progress. While both communities and institutions invoke care for the environment, conflict arises when these identity claims advance different understandings of what ecological responsibility entails and whose knowledge defines it.

Fourthly, occupational identity ties people to forms of work that are more than economic functions—they are ways of knowing, living, and being in the world (Christiansen 1999). For many fishing communities, for instance, the sea is not simply a workplace, but a domain of inherited knowledge, intergenerational skill, and daily risk. Livelihoods are embedded in tide cycles, species patterns, and codes of conduct at sea. Offshore windfarm project developments, increasingly central to the green energy transition, have disrupted these worlds—not only by limiting access to fishing grounds, but by introducing technologies that alter ecosystems and undermine the viability of traditional fishing practices. For engineers, planners, and regulators, occupational identity is often grounded in professional norms, codes of ethics, and technocratic ideals (e.g., neutrality, efficiency, and objectivity). Through these professional norms, institutional actors claim technical responsibility as a basis for

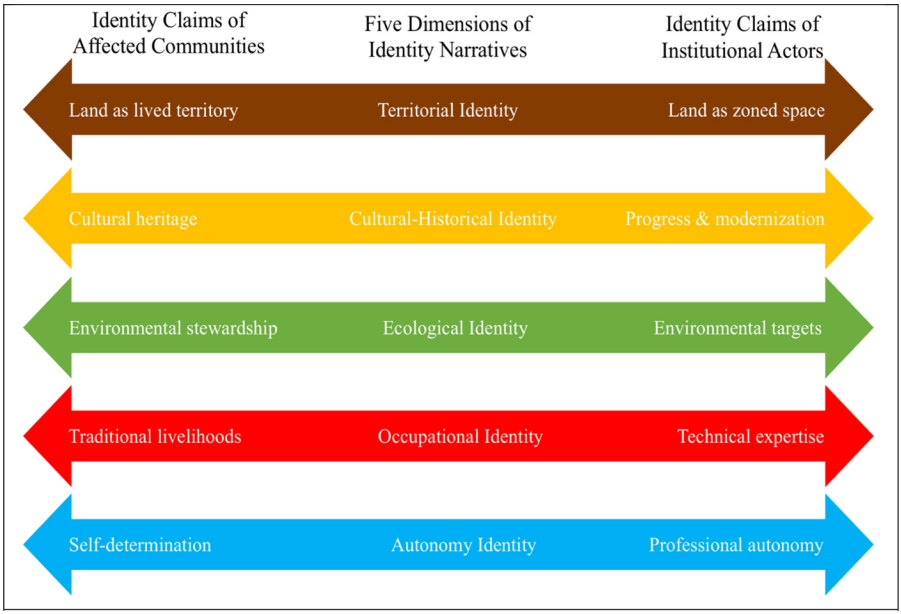
legitimacy in contested decision-making. These professional narratives may clash with community-based occupational identities that prioritize embodied knowledge, stewardship, and intergenerational practice, reflecting divergent ways of knowing and valuing work.

Fifthly, autonomy serves as both a distinct identity dimension and a deeper connective tissue across others. It reflects a desire to define one's life in relation to land, labor, knowledge, and governance—not through imposed categories, but through self-determined practice. In conflicts over green mega-infrastructure projects, autonomy often surfaces as the refusal to be managed, mapped, invited, or interpreted through institutional—technocratic—terms that deny local authority. Among Indigenous and rural communities, this may take the form of asserting sovereignty, defending customary governance, or simply withdrawing from dialogue (Doyle 2014; Tornel 2023). Within institutional frameworks, autonomy is articulated as the capacity—and obligation—to act independently and against external pressure in pursuit of legally or societally mandated goals, such as regulatory and procedural fairness, planning coherence, climate mitigation, or national development. These institutional autonomy claims often conflict with community claims to self-determination over ancestral land and customary governance. These autonomy claims clash not because responsibility is rejected on either side, but because each is working from a different locus of authority.

Taken together, these five dimensions—territorial, cultural-historical, ecological, occupational, and autonomy—demonstrate how identity narratives provide a systematic lens for understanding conflict in green mega-infrastructure projects. While the notion of identity narratives has been used in other fields to describe personal or organizational stories (Humphreys and Brown 2002; McAdams and McLean 2013), its application here is distinct. Rather than treating narratives as individual life accounts, this framework develops them into a typology of collective and dynamic identity claims that emerge across parties to a dispute, from local communities to developers and regulators. This move offers conceptual clarity by showing how identities are not only diagnosed but can be engaged in negotiation (Shapiro 2016). By mapping recurrent narrative forms, the typology provides a basis for recognizing patterns of misrecognition and for exploring how these can be constructively addressed.

These identity narratives do not stand in isolation but are relationally constituted, taking shape through interaction with opposing identity claims. The metaphor of the "double arrow" captures this relational dynamic by conceptualizing identity narratives as positioned along a spectrum rather than fixed at opposing poles. Drawing on relational identity theory, the double arrow reflects the insight that identities are forged through processes of mutual (mis)recognition, and that

Figure 1
Identity Narratives



antagonism and resonance are not separate states but coexisting possibilities within the same narrative dimension. As such, the double arrow functions as a facilitation guide during the Antagonism and Resonance phases of the ARIA framework. It respectively invites parties to articulate their identity claims fully at one end, while simultaneously opening space to explore parallel meanings articulated by others. In this way, movement along the arrow does not require abandoning identity claims, but re-situating and visualizing them relationally so that a zone of possible agreement in the middle may come into view (see Figure 1).

The next section therefore turns to the ARIA framework, which operationalizes this relational dynamic within a structured negotiation process to transform entrenched conflicts into opportunities for recognition and collaborative problem-solving.

Operationalizing Identity Narratives through the ARIA Framework

To see how identity narratives can be engaged in practice, it is first necessary to consider the limits of traditional negotiation approaches. The model of principled negotiation developed by Fisher and Ury (1991)

made an enduring contribution by distinguishing between positions and interests, showing how rational motives could be disentangled from rigid claims. Interests are understood as tangible and often tradable stakes—such as financial compensation, project timelines, or access to resources—that lend themselves to compromise and redistribution. In some conflicts around green mega-infrastructure projects, such interests may indeed dominate. Negotiated settlements can be reached on this basis. Yet many of these conflicts are more deeply politicized, entangled with unmet needs for security, dignity, or recognition (Azar 1990; Fisher 1990; Bush and Folger 1994). Where identities are threatened—how actors see themselves and their legitimacy in relation to others—interest-based negotiation alone is insufficient, producing technically sound but socially unsustainable agreements (Elliott and Kaufman 2016).

The ARIA framework builds on the tradition of principled negotiation (Fisher and Ury 1991), which shifted attention from rigid positions to underlying interests and encouraged parties to separate people from problems, clarify priorities, and generate options for mutual gain. Like principled negotiation, ARIA follows a sequenced process of diagnosis, reframing, option generation, and agreement. Its distinctiveness lies in what it layers onto this familiar structure: nontradable human needs, such as security, dignity, and recognition and the deeper identity claims that often sustain protracted conflict (Azar 1990; Fisher 1990; Rothman 1997, 2012). These additions expand the scope of negotiation beyond material or instrumental motives, recasting conflict not merely as a barrier to resolution but as a relational opportunity. By integrating needs and identities alongside interests, ARIA broadens the integrative logic of negotiation into domains where conventional approaches struggle, offering a framework that can engage mistrust at its social and symbolic roots.

ARIA's potential is evident in its application across a wide range of conflicts worldwide. It has been used in community dialogues, transitional reconciliation processes, and efforts to address protracted geopolitical disputes. In each of these settings, the framework has helped practitioners move conversations beyond positional deadlock by creating structured opportunities to voice grievances, extend recognition, and explore possibilities for cooperation. What makes these experiences significant is not only their diversity but also the consistency with which ARIA has been able to generate movement in contexts marked by historic mistrust (Kaufman, Davies, and Patel 2012). Rather than serving as a prescriptive formula, the framework functions as a heuristic tool that can be tailored to context while maintaining its emphasis on relational transformation. This adaptability underscores ARIA's promise: it expands the integrative logic of principled negotiation into domains

where conflicts are shaped as much by symbolic exclusion and identity claims as by material interests.

Yet ARIA's promise also exposes a key conceptual limitation. Within the framework, identity is presented as a third level of conflict, layered alongside interests and needs. This move has been crucial in ensuring that symbolic and relational concerns are not ignored, but it risks portraying identity as simply another dimension rather than as the constitutive ground of many protracted disputes. In practice, ARIA often addresses identity in categorical terms—ethnic, professional, or national groupings—rather than as dynamic narratives that shift through interaction. This limitation mirrors the critiques of social identity theory discussed earlier. In both cases, identity is reduced to fixed categories, which obscures its evolving, relational qualities. Such framing has practical advantages; it renders identity visible and negotiable and it equips practitioners with language for acknowledging grievances. But it also constrains engagement, limiting the ability to capture how identities harden, resonate, and transform in the course of conflict. To address this tension, the next discussion advances the concept of identity narratives within the operationalization of ARIA's four phases—Antagonism, Resonance, Invention, and Action—reconceiving identity not as a static layer but as dynamic and relational.

Operationalizing the ARIA framework around identity narratives does not simply add conceptual nuance; it alters how each phase of the framework is facilitated and what kinds of outcomes become possible. Identity narratives function here as dynamic and relational storylines that shape how antagonism is expressed, how resonance is recognized, how options are invented, and how action is legitimated. To make this shift concrete, the discussion of the four ARIA phases below is illustrated through a single running example: conflicts involving Sámi reindeer herders and wind energy developers in Norway. Used not as a case study but as an illustrative thread, this example demonstrates how territorial, cultural-historical, ecological, occupational, and autonomy identity claims surface, harden, resonate, and are reworked across the Antagonism, Resonance, Invention, and Action phases. In doing so, it shows how identity narratives operate not only at the point of confrontation, but throughout the negotiation process, shaping both facilitation practices and the durability of negotiated outcomes.

The Antagonism phase marks the entry point of ARIA and the first step along the spectrum of identity narratives. At this stage, stakeholders often hold hardened positions, animated by a sense that their identities have been denied or misrecognized (Rothman 1997). Antagonism is rarely one-sided—communities resist projects that threaten continuity or belonging, while developers, regulators, and professionals resist

challenges to their authority, mandates, or expertise (Sandercock 2003; Bulkens, Minca, and Muzaini 2015; Ameel 2017). In conflicts involving Sámi reindeer herders and wind energy developers in Norway, antagonism has crystallized around territorial, ecological, occupational, and autonomy identity claims. Sámi communities have framed wind farms as a threat to reindeer migration routes and seasonal grazing patterns, articulating territorial identity through lived landscapes and occupational identity through inherited herding practices. Violations of these community claims are often experienced as denials of Sámi self-determination and customary governance. At the same time, developers, regulators, and professionals have advanced their institutional identity claims grounded in planning authority, climate mitigation mandates, and technical expertise, framing Sámi resistance as an obstacle to legally sanctioned land use and national renewable energy targets. Antagonism thus emerges not as a clash of interests alone, but as a confrontation between identity claims grounded in different sources of belonging and authority.

The facilitator's role is not simply to acknowledge these clashes but to actively surface them, using identity narratives as guiding posts to invite expression of opposing identity claims. By structuring conversations around the identity dimensions such as place, history, ecology, livelihood, or autonomy, antagonism is deliberately brought into the open as a legitimate starting point. Methods such as stakeholder mapping, narrative interviews, or storytelling forums create safe ways for parties to voice grievances without judgment. In this way, antagonism is transformed from a barrier into the necessary ground for movement toward resonance.

The Resonance phase marks the first movement along the spectrum of identity narratives, as opposing identity claims begin to be heard as expressions of underlying needs and identities rather than irreconcilable demands. Where antagonism legitimizes grievance, resonance enables recognition. Parties start to see that their identity claims of territory, history, ecology, livelihood, or autonomy, while different, are rooted in parallel quests for belonging, recognition, and legitimacy (Rothman 1997). Facilitators play a central role by encouraging parties to listen for echoes across divergent stories—for example, how both developers and communities frame their claims in terms of stewardship, responsibility, or continuity. In the Sámi wind energy context, resonance becomes possible when facilitators help parties recognize that apparently opposed identity claims are articulated through shared narrative dimensions. While Sámi herders frame stewardship in terms of sustaining reindeer migration routes and seasonal grazing ecologies, developers and regulators often articulate stewardship through climate responsibility and

the pursuit of long-term green energy transition goals. Although these identity claims remain distinct and grounded in different sources of belonging and authority, resonance emerges when each side begins to recognize the other's identity claims as meaningful expressions of care, continuity, and responsibility articulated across the different identity dimensions, rather than as obstacles to be overcome—marking movement along the respective spectrums of identity narratives.

Methods such as reflective listening, joint storytelling, or narrative reframing can help participants notice common themes without erasing difference. The purpose of resonance is not to dissolve conflict but to shift perception: identity claims, once hardened into markers of division, are reframed as relationally negotiable. This creates the conditions for invention where new possibilities can be imagined.

The Invention phase builds on the recognition achieved in resonance by turning identity claims into resources for creativity. Once parties have acknowledged each other's claims as legitimate, facilitators can invite them to imagine ways of addressing needs that honor multiple identity claims simultaneously (Rothman 1997). Here, antagonistic stories of loss or exclusion can be reframed into shared opportunities. Territorial claims become a basis for co-management of land use, cultural-historical narratives suggest heritage-sensitive design, and ecological concerns inspire new standards of environmental care. Invention does not seek compromise through trade-offs, but rather aims to generate integrative options. In the Sámi wind energy setting, invention becomes possible when recognition of parallel identity claims opens space for reimagining project design and governance. Rather than framing wind energy development as a binary choice between reindeer herding and renewable energy production, facilitators can invite exploration of options that acknowledge Sámi territorial and occupational narratives alongside institutional climate and planning mandates. Examples include adaptive siting that preserves key reindeer migration corridors, seasonal operational adjustments, or co-management arrangements that formally recognize Sámi knowledge and monitoring practices. These options do not resolve underlying differences in authority or worldview, but they translate recognized identity narratives into concrete proposals that address multiple claims together.

Structured dialogue methods, joint scenario-building, or design workshops allow stakeholders to experiment with aligning their distinct storylines while preserving difference. In this way, the identity spectrum metaphor shifts: rather than moving closer by collapsing distance, parties create new relational positions where recognition is embedded in tangible proposals. This phase lays the groundwork for practical commitments of action.

The Action phase anchors the relational progress of ARIA in concrete agreements and implementation. By this stage, antagonism has been acknowledged, resonance has fostered recognition, and invention has generated integrative options. During the Action phase, these gains are translated into durable commitments that reflect the identity narratives at stake (Rothman 1997). Agreements are not only technical arrangements but also symbolic acts that affirm belonging, authority, and responsibility. Here, territorial identity claims may be recognized through joint monitoring roles, ecological narratives embedded in environmental safeguards, or professional identities affirmed by transparent decision-making procedures. In the Sámi wind energy context, action can take the form of institutionalizing recognition through concrete governance arrangements rather than final settlements, illustrating how identity narratives can be embedded in implementation practices. This can include formal consultation protocols with Sámi representatives, co-management or monitoring roles that acknowledge herding knowledge, and adaptive licensing conditions that allow project operations to be adjusted in response to impacts on migration routes. Such measures do not necessarily resolve underlying disagreements about land use or authority, but they translate recognized identity narratives into durable commitments that sustain dialogue and recognition over time.

Facilitators help parties design implementation mechanisms that balance distributional fairness with symbolic recognition, ensuring that no narrative is left invisible (Adebayo and Werker 2021). This grounding of identity in practice strengthens trust and accountability, reducing the risk that agreements unravel when tensions resurface (Umemoto 2001; Wall and Haslam McKenzie 2024; Bekkers 2025). In ARIA, action is thus more than closure: it is the continuation of recognition in institutional form, transforming fragile relational shifts into a basis for ongoing collaboration.

Taken together, these four phases show how ARIA provides a structured path for engaging identity narratives in ways that interest-based negotiation alone cannot. By legitimizing antagonism, fostering resonance, encouraging invention, and embedding recognition in action, ARIA operationalizes identity as a resource for negotiation rather than a barrier to it. This approach translates the typology of five dimensions of identity narratives into practical tools that allow parties to move along the spectrum of belonging, recognition, and legitimacy, making agreements more robust and more sustainable. Such progress also depends on safeguards at the table itself, including equal opportunities to speak and measures to reduce information imbalances, which ensure that recognition is not undermined by procedural inequality (Forester 2009). Yet negotiation processes do not unfold in a vacuum. Even when relational

progress is achieved, outcomes remain shaped by institutional logics and power asymmetries that structure green mega-infrastructure projects.

Conclusion

Conflicts around green mega-infrastructure projects demonstrate that resistance is not a marginal disturbance but a constitutive feature of governance. Where recognition is confined to procedural inclusion, communities perceive stakeholder engagement as symbolic rather than substantive and resistance emerges as a means of asserting legitimacy. Protests, litigation, and refusals to participate are not simply obstacles to efficient project delivery; they are signals that institutional arrangements have crossed political thresholds and can no longer contain deeper tensions. In this sense, resistance makes visible what institutional logics seek to suppress: enduring asymmetries of authority, histories of exclusion, and contested claims to belonging. To treat such opposition as noise to be managed is to miss its diagnostic value. Resistance shows that the terrain of negotiation is not primarily about distributing impacts or benefits, but about recognition—whose voices count, which identities are legitimized, and how authority is claimed and contested.

What these conflicts also reveal is that resistance is never one-sided. Developers, regulators, and professionals also carry identities into negotiation, grounding their legitimacy in mandates, expertise, or responsibility. When these institutional identities collide with community narratives of territory, history, ecology, livelihood, or autonomy, the conflict becomes relational; each side resists misrecognition by the other. This relational quality is best understood through identity narratives, which are not static categories but dynamic and relational storylines that take shape in interaction. Like the ends of a double arrow, opposing identity claims can harden or move toward resonance when parties recognize that they are articulating different facets of the same identity dimension. For example, both developers and communities may frame their claims in terms of stewardship—one as professional duty, the other as cultural continuity. Attunement across such parallel narratives does not erase difference, but it opens the possibility of negotiating recognition on shared ground rather than across unbridgeable divides.

To make this relational movement actionable, negotiation requires a framework that does not suppress conflict but engages it as a resource for recognition. Rothman's ARIA framework provides such a structure. By legitimizing grievances, surfacing shared meanings, generating creative options, and embedding recognition in implementation, ARIA offers a sequenced process through which identity claims can shift along the double arrow from antagonism toward resonance. Accordingly, this article has integrated a typology of five dimensions of identity narratives—territorial,

cultural-historical, ecological, occupational, and autonomy—that captures the dynamic ways in which belonging and legitimacy are contested in green mega-infrastructure projects. Together, the typology and ARIA framework do not resolve asymmetries of power, but they illuminate how recognition can be negotiated within them. In an era of accelerated transitions, such clarity is essential for understanding when and how conflict can open space for more legitimate and sustainable outcomes.

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