

Slash and Social Licence: An examination of the role of institutional assemblages in (re)negotiating a social licence to forest in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Nina's report examines the role of 'institutional planning assemblages' in (re)negotiating social licence to forest. The case study chosen was the Gisborne/Wairoa region post Cyclone Gabrielle. Nina's research question was:

What is the role of institutional (planning) assemblages in (re)negotiating a social licence to forest in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Nina argues the definition of social licence remains contested but is broadly understood as 'a signifier of acceptance or approval from communities and/or stakeholders of (industry) activities'. Nina also makes distinctions between different kinds of licence that are provided for activities, such as legal, regulatory, political, and actuarial licences. This highlights how social licence to operate could be viewed as part of a 'web of licenses' where 'institutions' capture both the informal and formal rules and norms that influence social licence to operate.

Nina combined various qualitative research methods including case study analysis, controversy analysis, spatial analysis, document analysis, and media analysis. Given the post-disaster recovery context, Nina did not collect primary data through interviews and surveys as this may have burdened the recovery process. The data used for the analysis was publicly available from various media, cartographic sources, and regional council and central government policies and standards.

The results set out three ways in which institutional planning assemblages help (re)negotiate social licence to forest in a post-cyclone environment: 1) scaling effects, 2) cascading effects, and 3) the (de)stabilisation of the negotiation process. By scaling effects, Nina is referring to how forestry practices are constrained and moulded by demands made by national standards and international markets and consumers. Cascading effect refer to planning assemblages that promote different responses at different scales, with an emphasis on national-scale responses over local responses. For example, advocates elevated the issue of forestry slash – which is experienced locally – as a national-scale issue, linking nationally developed policy to the environmental destruction experienced in Gisborne and Wairoa. When referring to (de)stabilisation of the negotiation process, Nina claims planning assemblages have destabilised the negotiation of forestry's social licence to operate by historically remaining silent around these concerns. The author cited consistent calls, expressed through public submissions to plans and policies, to strengthen local voice and involvement in the development and implementation of forestry solutions. Despite this, legal institutional assemblages primarily focused on ministries, councils, and industries as key actors, not the local community.

In summarising, Nina argued that social licence for forestry in New Zealand requires multiple licences at different scales to be (re)negotiated. Social licence to operate is intricately connected with the wider 'licensing web' which also includes the earlier mentioned legal, regulatory, political, actuarial licences. Nina also argued that withdrawal of social licence can be a generative event for (re)negotiating that social licence, creating a moment where actors might begin paying closer attention to the institutional assemblages that currently make up the social licence negotiation process.