



## Using public comments to gauge social licence to operate for finfish aquaculture: Lessons from Scotland

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### ABSTRACT

Research and development in the aquaculture industry tends to focus on environmental and economic outcomes. However, with increasing use of marine space, competition between different industries and priorities for coastal communities is a social issue that is coming to the fore. Public perception and local social acceptability have been identified by the industry as key factors in the sustainable growth of finfish aquaculture. With the EU, and the UK and Scottish Governments targeting Blue Growth sectors for development, the drivers of social acceptability issues with finfish aquaculture require attention. Social Licence to Operate (SLO) is a theory which has proved useful in describing the relationship between industry and local communities. This study thematically analyses public comments made on planning applications for new finfish farms in Scotland, and uses SLO theory to explore local scale social interactions and the drivers of public perception of the aquaculture industry. It reveals the complexities of SLO, including areas of concern for engaged members of the public and shows that there are key actors which shape and drive engagement with the debate around whether finfish farms are acceptable. It finds that information used by the public to make decisions around aquaculture is often compiled and distributed by the key actors. This brings into question how much influence local communities have in SLO negotiations. Finally, it reflects that further thought and dialogue within and between research institutes, regulators, industry and local communities is needed to create a more equitable approach to negotiating SLO for finfish aquaculture.

### 1. Introduction

Social licence to operate (SLO) is an industry-coined term (Gehman et al., 2017) that has become a popular theory in trying to understand and improve the relationships that host communities have with aquaculture (FAO, 2016; Hughes and Black, 2016; Leith et al., 2014; Marine Scotland, 2014). The theory was first conceptualised in literature about heavy industry such as paper manufacturing (Gunningham et al., 2004), and mining (Boutilier and Thomson, 2011), but has since been adopted and adapted to other activities which imply a social cost (Moffat and Zhang, 2014). SLO is described as an on-going negotiation between a host community and an organisation (industry, NGO, business) which has environmental and social implications associated with its activities, where the organisation is held to certain standards set by the local community in exchange for the trust and support of the community (Rooney et al., 2014). Documented characteristics of SLO include trust, transparency of information and decision-making, community benefits, and positive relationships between companies and host communities (Baines and Edwards, 2018; Kelly et al., 2017; Leith et al., 2014; Moffat et al., 2016; Moffat and Zhang, 2014). Having SLO is seen as a ‘risk management strategy’ by some companies as it reduces the

likelihood of local opposition which can have businesses costs, such as decreased reputational capital and rejected licences or applications (Franks et al., 2014; Gunningham et al., 2004). Despite the increasing popularity of the term SLO and the use of either the pyramid model (Boutilier and Thomson, 2011) or ‘three strand model’ of the works of Gunningham et al. (2004) in numerous articles, both research and otherwise (Gehman et al., 2017), there is still a very limited amount of literature exploring SLO in relation to the development of aquaculture. Given the spatial and environmental implications of the marine aquaculture industry, and the proximity to the communities which host and sometimes work within it, SLO could provide a good framework for building understanding about these interactions.

Leith et al. (2014) discuss why SLO is important for aquaculture, emphasising that in areas where there are different users and often opposing views on what constitutes acceptable uses of the marine environment, it is important to strike a balance between these users’ perspectives and the aquaculture operators. However, it has been noted that SLO, within the context of aquaculture, has only been recognised as a legitimate theory after the industry has suffered losses or set-backs due to conflict and/or lawsuits (Williams et al., 2012). Krause et al. (2015) highlight that there is a ‘people – policy’ gap in current

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aquaculture management, where aquaculture is failing to meet its potential because of a lack of integration of knowledge relating to social, ecological and economic issues. In their review of SLO research, Gehman et al. (2017) argue that although there is an increase in discussions around SLO from the perspective of industry, politicians and policy-makers are slow to recognise the emotive aspects of managing natural resources and choose instead, to focus on the economic and technological features of these discussions.

This disconnection is especially evident where marine space is being vied for by several users with different world-views, wealth, and access to power. Decisions around propriety of use then becomes highly politicized and often contentious (Leith et al., 2014). The specific location of marine industries, (i.e. the local social and economic context) has a bearing on the social acceptability of different uses of the marine environment (Hofherr et al., 2015; Scientific Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries & Aquaculture (STECFA), 2014). This is increasingly becoming the case in Scotland, where the aquaculture industry has regularly been in the Scottish press for negative reasons including; environmentally damaging chemical treatments that wildlife tourism and fisheries businesses are concerned will harm local wildlife and wild fish stocks (Edwards, 2017; Scottish Environment Protection Agency, 2017); and fish escapes which are of concern to anglers, and rivers and fisheries trusts, who fear a reduction in genetic variability of wild salmon stocks due to interbreeding (McLeod, 2017). The industry has also been in the press for announcements relating to expansion and increased effort, supported by the Scottish Government (BBC News Scotland, 2016).

Historically, aquaculture research on Atlantic salmon was focused on improving biological processes, disease management and limiting environmental degradation by progressing good farming practices (Black, 2008; Pelletier et al., 2009). As a result of the resources and effort that has been put into research and development (through both public and private funding), farming salmon has become a very lucrative industry (STECFA, 2014). As such, the Scottish Government identified the expansion of the aquaculture industry as an economic growth strategy (Marine Scotland, 2009) and set targets for increasing Scottish salmon production to 210,000 tonnes by 2020 and 300,000–400,000 tonnes by 2030 from the current rate of production of 179,022 tonnes (2014 figures). Despite these targets and support from the Scottish Government, the volume of salmon produced in Scotland is not increasing at a high enough rate to reach these production goals (Bostock et al., 2016). The reasons for this pattern of stagnation or projected stagnation in growth of the industry has been identified as a mix of lack of space due to competing uses and social acceptability issues and is found across most EU member states (FAO, 2016; STECFA, 2014).

The aim of the EU Horizon 2020 research project *AquaSpace*, was to increase and optimise the space available for aquaculture in EU countries based on the Ecosystem Approach principals of integrating social, economic, and ecological understandings as the basis for sustainable production (Costa-Pierce, 2010), with a particular focus on stakeholder engagement (<http://www.aquaspace-h2020.eu/>). SLO provides a framework for engagement at a local level, but its potential to contribute to the Ecosystem Approach and the sustainable development of the finfish farming industry is not yet known.

As part of the Scottish case study, one of the 16 EU case studies explored in detail by the project, a stakeholder workshop was held at the Scottish Association for Marine Science. There were 25 attendees representing shellfish and finfish companies, shellfish and finfish industry organisations, governing agencies, fisheries organisations, and scientific researchers. Its aim was to capture the issues facing the industry in the county of Argyll and Bute (see Fig. 1). Public perception was one of the six issues discussed in detail by the stakeholders, who expressed concern about misinformation linked with accountability, poor public perception, and lack of Social Licence to Operate. With peer-reviewed literature pointing at social research gaps, and stakeholders expressing concern about social issues, this manuscript aims to



Fig. 1. Location of Argyll and Bute Country in Scotland. The Shetland Islands have not been included in the map for space purposes. Source: QGIS Open Source.

add to current knowledge regarding local social interactions with the aquaculture industry, specifically the drivers of public perception, good or bad. It asks the questions; what are the perceptions of the people who object to or support aquaculture development; what is or who are the drivers of these perceptions; how do these findings relate to social licence to operate?

## 2. Policy and governance context

In order to understand how SLO is negotiated and the ramifications of non-compliance, compliance or beyond-compliance measures by the aquaculture industry, it is important to consider the legal context in which social licence is being negotiated. This is because the terms and conditions of an SLO negotiation can vary depending on the planning structure of a country or region (Gunningham et al., 2004).

This manuscript explores local scale social issues which are derived from policies set at supranational, national, and regional scales. The relevant policies from the European Union are the Blue Growth Agenda (BGA), the Maritime Spatial Planning Framework Directive (MSPFD) and the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD). The BGA sets out a strategy to, ‘support sustainable growth in the marine and maritime sectors as a whole’ (European Commission, 2012), including aquaculture and tourism, both of which are part of Scotland's Economic Strategy because they are particularly important to the rural Scottish economy and the Scottish economy as a whole (The Scottish Government, 2011, 2014a). The MSPFD aims to reduce conflict between maritime sectors which compete for space whilst protecting the marine environment and encouraging investment through ‘establishing a framework for maritime spatial planning’ (The European Parliament, 2014).

As part of the MSPFD and in line with the MSFD, the Scottish Government created a National Marine Plan (NMP) which envisions, ‘Clean, healthy, safe, productive and diverse seas; managed to meet the long term needs of nature and people.’ (Marine Scotland, 2015). The NMP refers to Scottish Planning Policies and Local Development Plans for planning for both aquaculture, tourism, and community and public engagement (Marine Scotland, 2015). The NMP sets the broad remit for maritime spatial planning in Scotland with Regional Marine Plans currently being developed to address planning at a more granular scale.

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