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Enhancing social acceptance in marine governance in Europe

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ABSTRACT

In this article we address social acceptance in marine governance. Public support and opposition are critical to any future developments of marine areas, and are often neglected aspects. Whilst one of the main new developments in European marine areas is the increase in sites for offshore wind, social acceptance of renewable energy developments in Europe is shown to be low in a series of on-going studies. There is perhaps often a sense that renewables such as wind, wave and tidal will be 'out of sight, out of mind' when developed offshore but the empirical research evidence from across Europe suggests otherwise. People are protesting against offshore wind, and doing so very effectively, preventing and delaying the development of projects. This article articulates the term 'social acceptance' as a goal in marine policy implementation in European waters in general, and provides illustrations of the implications of social acceptance of offshore wind in a series of case studies. The experiences of social acceptance, together with theoretical insights, should be taken into account in future innovations for blue energy at sea, including the wind farms, but also wave and tidal devices and other technological developments.

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1. Introduction

The marine sector presents opportunities for expanding new economic activities, whilst preserving traditional uses and conserving ecological conditions. The EU has launched 'The Blue Growth Strategy' to enhance the exploration of marine areas for job creation, research and development, and the delivery of technology improvements and innovation (Børresen, 2013), in which five marine sectors are particularly promoted: blue energy, aquaculture, tourism, minerals, and blue technology (European Commission, 2012). Within these developments one of the fastest growing sectors offshore is wind energy. While wind farms not only support the Blue growth strategy, they also contribute to government targeting of increased generation of renewable energy. A vision aiming towards increasing renewable energy to gain both environmental and economic benefits, often referred to as a 'win–win' strategy, is visible across European countries, including the UK, Germany, France and the Netherlands.

However, these developments are not without concerns. The extended areas to be used for wind farms have other user groups and interests attached to them, which require attention. The large investors in offshore wind farms in Europe have experienced a persuasive hurdle to these developments, namely a lack of social acceptance (Wüstenhagen et al., 2007). Meegeren (2001) explains that social acceptance depends on what affected people think of implemented measures (see also Rudolph, 2014). It therefore concerns procedural- and distributional justice as well as trust (Wüstenhagen et al., 2007). The reference to social acceptance is in most research rather general, and there is a need for a more specific interpretation of social acceptance.

Research on social acceptance has taken place across Europe related to wind energy, among others, finding that the *process* of development matters (see for example; Aitken, 2010a; Bell et al., 2005; Boyd and Ellison, 2008; Breukers and Wolsink, 2007; Devine-Wright, 2009, 2005; Ellis et al., 2007; Gray et al., 2005; Haggett, 2011, 2008; Haggett et al., 2014; Jobert et al., 2007; Rudolph, 2014; van der Horst, 2007; Wolsink, 2012, 2010). A lack of communication between local people, developers, and decision makers can create the ideal conditions for converting local scepticism and negative attitudes towards wind farms into actual actions against specific projects, and also, 'if local interests are not given a voice in the decision-making processes, conditional supporters may turn into objectors' (Wolsink, 2012, 2007:2694). The

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development processes, the opportunities for engagement, trust, transparency and perceptions of the engagement all strongly affect social acceptance (Aitken et al., 2014). If people feel the process has been fair, they are much more likely to support the outcome; or to oppose the outcome of a process deemed to be faulty (Gross, 2007). *Cooperation* among different actors is thus critical to obtain social acceptance (Mallett, 2007).

The offshore differs from onshore because social acceptance at sea encompasses at least three more core challenges in terms of specifying; 1) a community, 2) property rights and 3) so called 'nimbyism'. First, because no one actually lives in the marine areas used for marine development projects, there are questions over how the legitimacy of public concern/support is defined in relation to offshore planning processes and to what extent this is bound up with proximity of more relevance at sea. Second, a core aspect of wind farm conflicts is the way people perceive the relation between private property and public access (Bromley, 2006). Courts often have problems with the terms private property rights against incursions for public use, because they are in fact not very well defined at sea (Soma and Vatn, 2009). The public rights at sea implies that people feel a sense of 'ownership' over natural resources (such as landscapes and seascapes), even while they realise that they do not own them in a material sense (Haggett, 2009). Third, lack of social acceptance is often wrongly explained by the idea of 'nimbyism', when people are assumed to support the technology in principle but want it 'not in my backyard'. As Haggett (2011) describes in detail, this conceptualisation is often both unhelpful and inaccurate, even more at sea than on land, and does not move forward an understanding of why people object to wind farms.

The existing literature clearly shows that social acceptance is of importance to new offshore developments. However, it remains unclear how to best ensure social acceptance through public engagement in practice. There is thus a need for improved understanding of practical implications, which can contribute to increased social acceptance.

This research is motivated by the challenges observed for achieving sufficient levels of social acceptance in new marine developments. Against this background, the main aim of this article is to explore how public engagement can shape social acceptance in practice. Based on an analysis of four case studies conducted in the UK, we particularly want to contribute with improved understanding of: 1) theoretical interpretations of what social acceptance actually is, and 2) implications of engagement in practice illustrated across the four off-shore wind farms in the UK.

In order to find how public engagement can shape social acceptance, we firstly define the concept of social acceptance, to understand different societal roles and to search for what public engagement can contribute with. Secondly, we examine when social acceptance is lacking and when it is perceived by means of societal experiences based on case studies of offshore wind farms.

Accordingly, we first address existing theoretical insights of public engagement and social acceptance (Section 2), and explore actual societal experiences in UK case studies on offshore wind farms (Section 3). This is followed by a discussion (Section 4). Finally, we present some concluding remarks (Section 5). We base our conclusions on experiences drawn from selected case studies, and on theoretical descriptive analyses, and do not claim causal inference.

2. Theoretical insights of social acceptance

2.1. Defining social acceptance

Social acceptance has been distinguished as 'socio-political acceptance', 'community acceptance' and 'market acceptance' (Firestone et al., 2009; Wüstenhagen et al., 2007). This interpretation of social acceptance points to differences between the general public, the community, and the market actors, and demonstrates discrepancies between the general public and the community opinions (Wüstenhagen et al., 2007). This makes sense if purpose is to address market- and public contexts separately, and also, when the general public has different views than a community, because they are not as strongly connected to affected areas. However, such distinctions are not always of most relevance. For instance, they do not cover the varieties within a community where actors operate in many more different roles, and they do not reflect on the actual reasons why social acceptance is appearing or lacking. Because the interplay between the three definitions is not always clear, there is a need for a more governance based interpretation of social acceptance.

In recent literature, *public response* has been introduced, which can be interpreted as social acceptance if it is positive, whereas when public support is negative, it is referred to as public opposition, protest, disputes or inquiries (Haggett, 2011; Walker et al., 2014). In this article, we interpret social acceptance by focussing on the public response, within and outside communities towards the physical intervention of building offshore wind turbines. Moreover, a hypothesis based on earlier research is that when changes are instructed from inside the community, the opposition is less (Haggett, 2011). There is thus a public response to external entrepreneurs and even more to the policy makers who allow new project developments to happen. Furthermore, a third opposition direction relates with how a community is treated. This is process related. If people think they are sufficiently involved throughout a process, the opposition can decrease (Bates and Firestone, 2015; Château et al., 2012).

Focussing at a community level in this article, we therefore specify that social acceptance depends on three core dimensions of; 1) what the actual interventions are, 2) how the new development is generated through processes of engagement, and 3) the people who are entitled to make rules, i.e. accountability of authorities. The 'actual intervention' refers to, in this case, number of wind turbines and any restrictions imposed to present activities, while processes of public engagement comprehends relevant actors perceiving themselves as being involved in a process that considers their preferences in a fair and balanced way (Eliasen et al., 2015: 229). 'Accountability' refers to the obligation to explain and justify management and leadership (Bovens, 2010), the allocation and acceptance of responsibility for decisions and actions, as well as the demonstration of whether and how these responsibilities have been met (Lockwood et al., 2010). See Fig. 1.

Whereas this interpretation would be applicable to market and public contexts, in this article we focus on a community situation with specific wind farm projects under development. Based on this reasoning we suggest a following interpretation of social acceptance; 'agreement and justification of shared rules by a community in terms of what is accepted intervention, how development is generated and who is entitled to make rules'.

2.2. Public engagement

Public engagement refers to when affected people are involved prior to a policy decision. The formats of public engagement are plentiful, ranging from simply distributing a questionnaire to impacted people on the one hand, to arranging meetings with comprehensive dialogues, on the other. The different methods of participation may be used for different reasons; more inclusive and extensive methods may be used if there is a real intention to try and involve stakeholders and citizens in a mutual dialogue; rather than

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