



Moving from consultation to participation: A case study of the involvement of fishermen in decisions relating to marine renewable energy projects on the island of Ireland



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ABSTRACT

The development of the marine renewable energy (MRE) will impact traditional users of the marine resource, such as commercial fishermen. This could potentially lead to opposition and spatial conflict. The successful development of the MRE sector will heavily depend on the acceptance of projects by fishing communities. Effective stakeholder engagement is crucial to enhancing acceptance among fishermen. The consultation process is one of the key ways in which to engage fishermen and enable them to participate in decision-making. There is agreement among experts in the field that despite its importance, the consultation process is not effective and it is often carried out from the top down with little opportunity for real participation. A mixed methods research approach was used to examine the experiences of fishermen on their level of involvement in consultations and decision-making on marine renewable energy projects. In total, 104 surveys and 14 in-depth interviews were carried out with fishermen operating from ports at three case study sites around the island of Ireland where MRE projects were being developed. Just over half (56%) of those surveyed felt that they had been involved in consultations, while only 22% felt that they had been involved in decisions made on the projects. The use of participatory mapping tools in the selection of sites for MRE development provides an opportunity for fishermen to influence decisions. Designing and implementing marine spatial plans could also help to provide clarity and transparency over how trade-offs in the use of sea space are dealt with.

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1. Introduction

Marine Renewable Energy (MRE) refers to offshore wind, wave and tidal energy and is an expanding sector across Europe and worldwide. The island of Ireland has vast potential MRE resources and national plans have been designed to further develop the sector (Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment Northern Ireland, 2012, Department of Communications Energy and Natural Resources, 2014). Although it has been suggested that in comparison to land-based renewable energy developments, offshore sites are less likely to be impacted upon by public opposition (Farrier, 1997; Still, 2001; Ladenburg, 2008), the expansion of MRE could theoretically result in the displacement of existing marine

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industries which could lead to spatial conflicts. Traditional uses of the marine environment, such as the commercial fishing, are likely to be most affected by the development of MRE (Gray et al., 2005; O'Keefe and Haggett, 2012; Alexander, Potts et al., 2013a; Alexander, Wilding et al., 2013b). While the exact impacts are unknown, MRE projects are likely to result in benefits and costs to fishing communities (Blyth-Skyrme, 2010; Perry and Smith, 2012). Potential benefits include alternative employment opportunities and improvements to harbour infrastructure while the costs to fishermen could include negative economic impacts due to reduced access to traditional fishing grounds (Blyth-Skyrme, 2010; Perry and Smith, 2012; Hoagland et al., 2015).

The fishing sector is a strong lobby group with the ability to influence the progress of MRE projects. As a case in point, in 2009, Columbia Energy Partners (CEP) investigated the possibility of deploying wave energy converters (WECs) in Tillamook County, Oregon. Commercial fishermen in the area had concerns over loss of access, displacement of fishermen, navigational hazards, impacts on fish and aesthetics (Stefanovich and Fernandez-Chozas, 2010).

CEP eventually abandoned its plan to deploy WECs citing the inability to reach a consensus with the local fishing groups as a major influencing factor in their decision. As such the successful development of the MRE sector will depend to an extent on the acceptance of projects by fishermen. The focus of this article is to examine the participation of fishermen in consultations and decision-making on the development of MRE projects on the island of Ireland (comprising the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland). Commercial fishing remains an important industry on the island of Ireland in terms of employment and contribution to economic output. In 2012, the sector contributed €178.2 million in terms of Gross Value Added (GVA) to the economy of the Republic of Ireland, while employment was at 2233 full time equivalent (FTE) (Vega et al., 2014). In 2011, there were 578 full time fishermen in Northern Ireland and 688 in total (full and part time) with the trawling fleet accounting for the vast majority of jobs (Service et al., 2013).

Effective and early engagement of stakeholder fishermen who may be impacted by the development of a MRE project is crucial to enhancing acceptance. The formal consultation process, namely the provision of information on projects to fishermen and the discussion of issues and concerns they may have, is one of the main ways to engage fishermen and enable them to participate in the decision-making process. Previous studies have shown that fishermen hold largely negative views of the consultation process (Gray et al., 2005; Alexander, Potts et al., 2013a). Gray et al. (2005) examined the involvement of fishermen in the consultation process on offshore wind energy development in the UK through interviews with fishermen, developers and regulators. Many of the fishermen interviewed believed that there was little meaningful discussion between fishing and wind energy representatives and it was merely a box-ticking exercise where fishermen may sometimes be able to influence the process but the power ultimately remains with offshore wind farm developers. The study concluded that offshore wind activity in the UK would be better implemented if stakeholder consultation was more extensive. Similarly, Alexander, Potts et al. (2013a) noted that there was a perception among a group of fishermen from the west coast of Scotland who were interviewed that the consultation process was merely “lip service” and the imbalance of power meant that the opportunity for fishermen to influence decision-making was limited. The study also identified the lack of trust between fishermen and the MRE industry as a major issue, as was the lack of trust in the government and other authorities. In this context, trust can refer to the need to collectively gain confidence in the consultation process and to progressively build social capital (Berghöfer et al., 2008). These studies would suggest that despite its importance, the consultation process is not effective in its current form. A recent study on establishing a social agenda in MRE research carried out by geographers, economists, social scientists, anthropologists, planners and business experts, made a recommendation for further research on the failings of existing consultation procedures and alternative forms of consultation (Kerr et al., 2014). The literature on Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and engagement with the public shows that stakeholder participation in the decision-making process is highly beneficial (O’Faircheallaigh, 2010) and as such, developing an approach which delivers effective engagement remains a key challenge for planners and developers.

As the MRE sector is not yet fully established in Ireland and there are no commercial projects in operation the issue of consultation on projects has not been fully researched. This paper addresses this gap. The overall aim of this study is to describe the consultation process relating to MRE projects at present, draw key conclusions and recommend better practices for engagement and consultation with fishermen on MRE projects. This will involve providing a

typology of levels of participation of fishermen in MRE projects. The study also aims to assess the effectiveness of consultation processes in gathering baseline data which may not be currently available, such as spatial and economic information on fishing activity. This will require examining the willingness of fishermen to provide this information which could then be used to influence decision-making. A further objective is to address how participation can aid the design and implementation of projects. In addition, the study aims to explore the role of trust in consultation and the potential impacts of this on the participation of fishermen in decision-making.

Thus the key objectives are:

- i. To assess the perceptions of fishermen of their level of participation in MRE projects at three different levels of engagement;
- ii. To examine the effectiveness of consultation processes in gathering new data and the willingness of fishermen to provide this information;
- iii. To identify potential mechanisms which are effective in enhancing the participation of fishermen in decision-making on MRE projects;
- iv. To assess whether participation can aid the design and implementation of projects.

A mixed methods approach was employed to gather quantitative and qualitative information on the experiences of fishermen of consultation processes at three case study sites around the island of Ireland. The MRE projects at the case study sites were at varying stages of planning and development when the information was gathered.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides background information on the requirement for formal consultation and the regulatory regime for the development of MRE project in Ireland. Section 3 outlines the theoretical framework by providing a literature review on levels of participation. Section 4 describes the case study sites and the criteria for the selection of these sites. Section 5 presents information on the methodologies used and the results from the surveys and the data gathered in the interviews. This is followed by a discussion of the results in section 6. Section 7 concludes the paper with some recommendations.

2. Background on the formal consultation process

Among the aims of the consultation process is to facilitate the participation of stakeholders in decision-making. Formal public consultation is a legal requirement of both the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) (2001/42/EC) and the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) (85/337/EEC) Directives, which are part of the legislative regime for a wide range of defined public and private projects throughout Europe. This includes the majority of MRE projects. The consultation process can help to limit the impacts on fishermen by selecting areas for the development of MRE that are of low fishing importance (Blyth-Skyrme, 2010). Effective consultation was the mitigation option mentioned by Scottish fishermen (Alexander, Wilding et al., 2013b) and Irish fishermen (Reilly, O’Hagan et al., 2015) in two separate research studies. The Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) process is concerned with planning marine development and facilitating the co-existence between marine activities. The MSP process provides an opportunity to have a participative process for planning and for fishermen to be involved in decision-making on issues such as site development (Ehler and Douvere, 2007). One of the main benefits of MSP is that it can increase co-ordination and identify and resolve potential areas

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