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# Attaining a Social Licence to Operate in Europe's Offshore Wind Sector

## Introduction

The development of Europe's offshore wind sector will play a key role in facilitating the region's energy transition, whilst strengthening each nation's energy security and supporting progress towards European Union (EU) climate targets and objectives[1]. As of 2025, there are 139 offshore wind farm (OWF) projects in European seas (Wind Europe, 2025), affecting maritime areas which are utilised for marine livelihood activities. Finding ways to enable OWFs and marine livelihood activities to co-exist is a key challenge which, in turn, has implications for developers in attaining a social licence to operate. This paper unpacks this challenge and shares insights into how it may be overcome, drawing on a relevant case study example.

## Role of Offshore Wind Projects in Europe's Energy Transition

The global offshore wind sector is growing rapidly, with the capacity of fully operational OWFs increasing from 70.2 to 80.9 gigawatts in the 12 months from February 2024 to January 2025. The number of global OWF projects rose from 1,461 to 1,555 in the same time period[2], whilst the number of countries participating in the sector rose from 41 to 44 (RenewableUK, 2025). Europe continues to dominate the sector, with countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany and Denmark making notable contributions in terms of the number of projects and turbines connected (see Table 1). One of the EU's climate targets is to increase the share of renewable energy in the EU's overall energy consumption to 42.5% by 2030, with the broader objective of achieving climate neutrality by 2050 (European Parliament, 2023). Current OWF development will support progress towards achieving this target and broader objective.

**Table 1: Number of Offshore Wind Projects and Turbines Connected Across Europe**

| Country | Number of Projects | Number of Turbines Connected |
|---|---|---|
| United Kingdom | 47 | 2,861 |
| Germany | 33 | 1,639 |
| Denmark | 17 | 672 |
| Holland | 10 | 670 |
| Belgium | 11 | 399 |
| France | 5 | 217 |
| Sweden | 5 | 80 |
| Finland | 3 | 19 |
| Norway | 3 | 13 |
| Italy | 1 | 10 |
| Ireland | 1 | 7 |
| Portugal | 1 | 3 |
| Spain | 2 | 2 |

Source: Adapted from Wind Europe (2025)

Note: The number of projects includes those which are currently online, partially online or under construction.

[1] For those countries which are part of the EU.

[2] Inclusive of projects at all stages of development.

## Social Implications of Europe's Offshore Wind Projects

The construction, operation and decommissioning of Europe's OWFs may give rise to numerous social risks and impacts. Whilst this paper focuses on those concerning marine livelihoods, social risks and impacts may occur in relation to numerous other aspects[3]. They may be positive and negative, permanent and temporary in nature. They may occur onshore and offshore, and they are all important to consider in the context of social licence to operate.

With regards to marine livelihoods, the expansion of Europe's offshore wind sector pushes those who are engaged in activities such as commercial fishing, boat chartering[4] and tourism[5] to compete with OWF projects for maritime space. In the case of commercial fishing, there are numerous potential social risks and impacts to address, including the loss of or restrictions in access to fishing grounds, the displacement of fishing efforts, increased operating costs[6], the disturbance of target species and elevated safety risks. The ability to effectively manage such risks and impacts is a key focus area for OWF developers, being closely linked with their social licence to operate.

## Social Licence to Operate

The contemporary use of the term *social licence to operate* emerged in the mining industry in the late 1990s and has expanded into other sectors over time (Kabir *et al.*, 2025). Whilst widely used in academic and industry circles, the term has no settled meaning and remains open to interpretation (Breakey *et al.*, 2025). Generally speaking, however, it refers to the extent of approval or level of acceptance that a project, company or industry has amongst local communities and other external stakeholders[7]. Once attained, a social licence to operate must be maintained. It is dynamic and evolving as opposed to fixed and final in nature.

Similar to how there is no single definition of the term social licence to operate, there is no universal consensus on what may contribute to or undermine social acceptance or approval. Community trust has been identified as an integral component of an organisation's social licence to operate, however, which may be shaped by:

- the degree to which an organisation manages the adverse risks and impacts of its business activities; and
- the quality of engagement an organisation undertakes with local communities (Moffat and Zhang, 2014).

The benefits that a company or project voluntarily provides to local communities can also contribute to trust (and thus social acceptance or approval).

## Case Study From Europe's Offshore Wind Sector

The European case study example known to the authors illustrates the complexity of challenges that developers may face in seeking to attain a social licence to operate. This project was linked with many of the social risks and impacts that are typically affiliated with offshore wind, including risks to and impacts upon commercial fishing and other marine livelihoods. A loss of access to fishing grounds and increased operating costs were amongst the main concerns expressed by local fishers during the project's planning phase, contributing to fears about falling incomes and additional expenses. Beyond these fears and concerns, however, lay several unique and interlocking factors which made a social licence to operate even more difficult for the developer to attain (see Figure 1).

[3] Including but not limited to demographics, the economy, infrastructure and services, shipping and navigation, leisure and recreation, cultural heritage, the physical environment and biodiversity.

[4] Referring to boats which are hired out for various purposes, for example recreational fishing, water sports, science and research.

[5] Marine tourism activities may include wildlife watching, recreational fishing and pleasure cruises.

[6] Linked with the need to navigate around OWFs, which can result in longer travel distances and extended journey times (thus leading to higher fuel and labour costs, alongside increased vessel wear-and-tear).

[7] For example, civil society organisations, government institutions and the media.

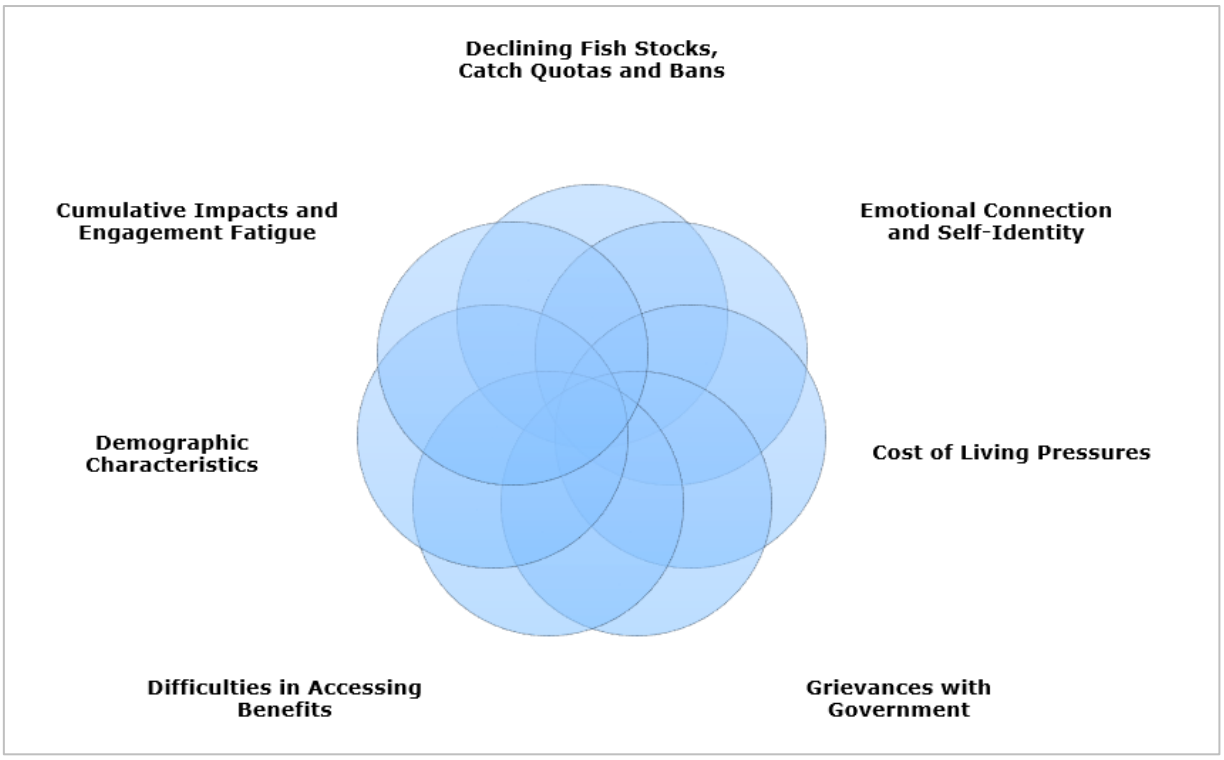


Figure 1: Interlocking Factors Faced by Offshore Wind Developer in Case Study

To elaborate on Figure 1:

- The project was being developed within an offshore environment that was characterised by **declining fish stocks**. Recent restrictions on fishing activities had been imposed in the form of **catch quotas**[8] and **fishing bans** accordingly, with negative outcomes for the incomes of local fishers.
- **Grievances with the government** were held by some local fishers over the perceived lack of support they had received to mitigate the economic effects of fishing restrictions, including in terms of financial compensation.
- Local fishers belonged to communities that were experiencing rising **cost of living pressures**. This trend was driven by national economic inflation and exacerbated the reduction in incomes that had already been experienced by local fishers as a result of fishing restrictions.
- Several other OWFs were being planned in the same maritime area as the project, triggering concerns over **cumulative impacts** on fishing and how these would be addressed. Numerous meetings had also been held with local fishers in connection with the various neighbouring OWFs, contributing to increasing **engagement fatigue**.
- During the project's planning phase, some local fishers expressed an **emotional connection** to the sea, noting that they had fished for their entire lives and did not wish to change professions. Fishing was part of their **self-identity**, thereby intensifying concerns over potential project impacts on their livelihood.
- Many local fishers were between the ages of 45 and 65. Whilst most had completed secondary school, few had completed tertiary education. In addition, their skills were concentrated in a small number of areas. These **demographic characteristics** limited the prospects of local fishers in accessing other livelihood activities.

[8] Limits on the amount of fish that can be caught.

- Local fishers anticipated that they would face **difficulties in accessing the benefits** generated by the project (e.g., employment and support vessel service opportunities) for several reasons, including language barriers, the characteristics of their vessels and the types of vessel licences that they held.

In addition to the above, a national regulatory framework for managing offshore wind-related impacts on commercial fishing was unavailable during the project's planning phase, including in terms of how to calculate compensation for economic losses experienced by fishers during OWF construction and operations. Government guidance on the topic, whilst drafted, was also subject to ongoing debate and yet to be finalised. Consequently, the developer had to develop strategies to manage the project's impacts on commercial fishing in the absence of clear legislation and set official guidelines, a challenge which was exacerbated by the fact that that no other OWF projects had been previously constructed within the country from which to draw experience from.

Recognising the link between the management of adverse risks and impacts and social licence to operate, the developer sought to mitigate the negative implications of the project on commercial fishing (e.g., falling incomes and additional expenses[9]) through the payment of financial compensation to eligible local fishers in the absence of finalised government guidelines. This was supplemented by the offering of small-scale skills development opportunities. At the time of writing, it is too soon to assess whether these interventions have succeeded in effectively mitigating the adverse impacts of the project on commercial fishing and have, in turn, built trust in the developer amongst local fishers (thus contributing to its social licence to operate). Those fishers who have received financial compensation from the developer appear to be relatively satisfied, but the uptake of the skills development opportunities has been limited thus far.

In the professional experiences of the authors, the abovementioned interventions should be supplemented by additional measures in order for the developer to continue to build trust amongst local fishers and the communities to which they belong. In this context, the establishment of dedicated funds to support fishing communities have proven to be effective in delivering voluntary social benefits and ultimately contributing to social licence to operate amongst developers of OWFs in other parts of Europe. The West of Morecambe Fisheries Fund that was set up by OWF developers in the United Kingdom in 2013, for example, financed community projects of direct benefits to the local commercial fishing industry (WOMF, 2025). Such projects included the provision of various types of targeted training (e.g., on health and safety) and inputs (e.g., refrigerated vehicles, processing equipment, storage tanks), alongside upgrades to existing fisheries facilities.

To maximise the potential benefits that can be derived from a fisheries fund, opportunities to establish such a fund in collaboration with the proponents of the neighbouring OWF projects should further be explored and, where feasible, taken advantage of. Moreover, the development of the fund should be based on participatory planning with local fishers and the communities to which they belong. This would not only contribute to the developer's social licence to operate but that of the offshore wind sector in the affected region as a whole.

**References**

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[9] Linked with a loss of access to fishing grounds and increased operating costs.

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