A qualitative, mixed methods approach to finding the role of agents for change in the development of marine renewable energy in island regions

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Introduction

One of the major barriers to renewable energy development is local opposition [1].

Literature on the subject finds reasons for resistance spanning from the not-in-my-back-yard (NIMBY) concept to psychological theories about attention, and novelty [2-3].

However one paper looking at the WaveHub in Cornwall, England, suggests that research using data from the general public may be skewed, because there may be a few influential individuals who can sway public opinion [4].

Purpose

To study the roles of agents for change during the development of marine renewables in order to find out where/ if their involvement is beneficial and how/ if it can be improved.

Figure 1. Sea stacks at Traigh Gheiraha, Isle of Lewis

Qualitative, mixed methods

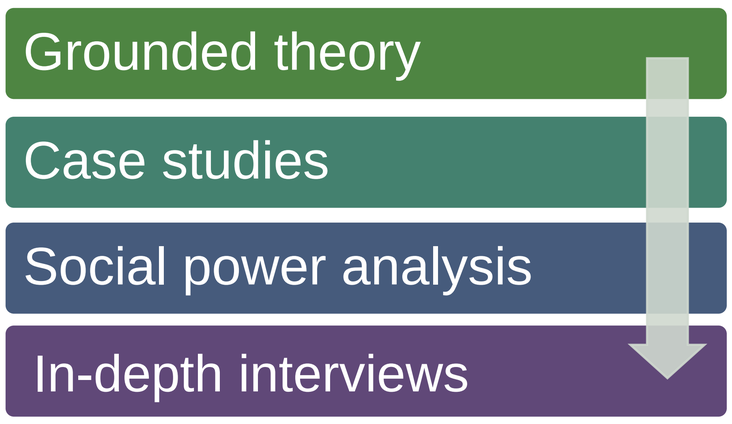
A qualitative, four tiered approach was taken.

Grounded theory – builds a concept up from data. Generally used when there is little or no existing literature for building hypotheses (such as this area).

Case studies – exploring the topic area in a relevant location. Orkney and Lewis were chosen for their available marine resources and the interest that wave and tidal developers have in them.

Social power analysis (SPA) – finds informal structures of power, where the power holders may not be decision-makers. The results of the SPA found the interviewees

Interviews – semi-structured and in-depth permitting exploration of topics as they came up. These were conducted twice with the same people, with a two year gap in between, allowing for temporal analysis.



Findings

Agents were found to be instrumental in the development of wave energy projects. Helping with everything from grant writing to marrying site location with developers.

All of the agents are prominent people within their communities and therefore may have enough influence to sway public opinion.

Most of the agents do not hold decision-making positions, but are influential enough to advise people in decision-making positions.

Figure 2. Local surfers at 'Slabs', Orkney.

Discussion/Conclusion

Using a mixed methods approach had allowed for collection of contextually rich data, and the exploration of emergent themes. The data showed that agents' for change involvement in wave energy development is beneficial and that projects where agents are involved follow a general pattern (see Figure 3).

The time when a wave energy project is at its most vulnerable was found to be when the most people were involved - e.g. the agent for change, developers, investors, governmental bodies etc. This is the *overlap* phase.

Overlap is where the agent is leaving the project and passing on their responsibility, it's also the time when the project is most likely to fall apart, incurring losses. More research needs to be completed on the overlap phase in order to reduce losses and increase the effectiveness of agents for change.

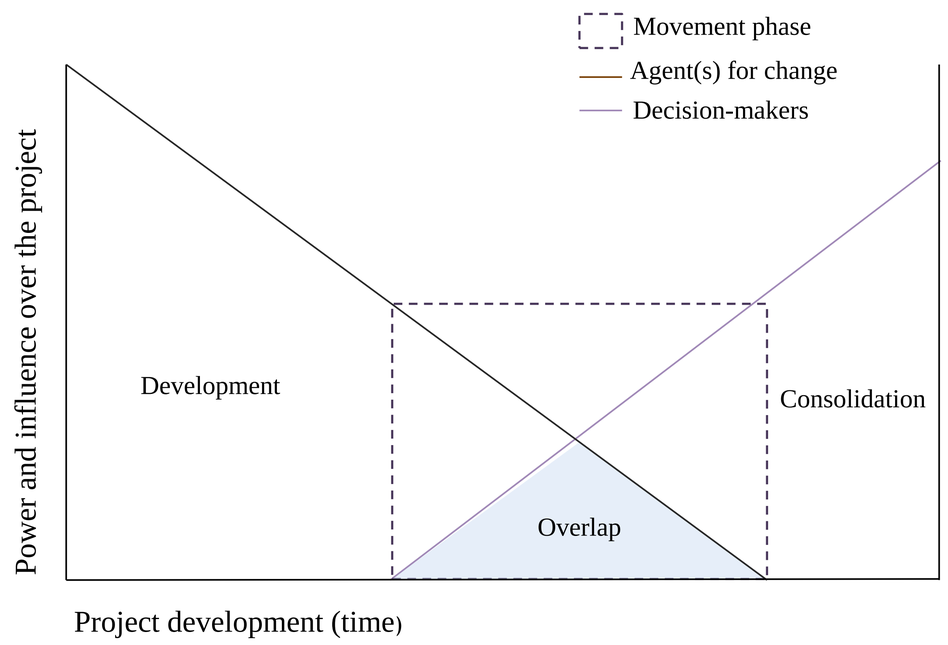


Figure 3. Phases that a project involving agents for change goes through. Please speak to the author for more information, or pick up a leaflet.

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