Energy Research & Social Science 134 (2026) 104625

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Energy Research & Social Science

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/erss

Original research article

Transactional or transformative? Offshore wind developer perspectives on community benefit mechanisms in the United States

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Wind power
Offshore wind infrastructure development
Developer perspectives
Community benefit mechanisms
Energy justice

ABSTRACT

Community benefit mechanisms are increasingly used in offshore wind energy to address concerns of fairness and distributive impacts associated with projects in the United States. However, little is known about how offshore wind energy developers implement these mechanisms, despite their central role in shaping outcomes. Using energy justice as a theoretical lens, this study examines what motivates developers to pursue community benefit mechanisms, proposed goals of mechanisms, and how the operationalization of mechanisms may align with advancing energy justice. Literature suggests that developers pursue these mechanisms to foster local acceptance, deliver economic benefits, and mitigate project impacts; however, research highlights that mechanisms may reflect a market-centered paradigm that limits their transformative potential. Building upon this work, this study assesses whether developer's interpretations of community benefit mechanisms support or undermine energy justice objectives and identifies implications for future policy. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 21 developers focused on motivations for pursuing community benefit mechanisms, perceived challenges, and community engagement. Findings indicate that developers have diverse motivations to pursue community benefit mechanisms and view them as tools to achieve multiple goals: building long-term community relationships, addressing opposition, and meeting regulatory requirements. These goals are largely shaped by a dominant neoliberal paradigm, leading developers to adopt an instrumental approach that prioritizes risk management and project efficiency over deeper community involvement. Overall, this study finds that developer-driven approaches to community benefit mechanisms risk undermining energy justice goals unless complemented by sustained relationship-building and regulatory frameworks that enhance community capacity for participation throughout the process.

1. Introduction

Decarbonizing the energy system has become a critical task for mitigating climate change [1]. Due to the urgency of this transition, emphasis on progress rather than perfection has begun to surface, as the speed of renewable energy deployment influences how quickly society can transition away from fossil fuels [2]. Researchers express that at times, this urgency, along with a critical misunderstanding of community perceptions of renewable energy development, has created an environment in which those who articulate concerns that may slow or impede development have been labeled as 'not-in-my-backyard' (NIMBY) dissenters [3,4] (See Table 1 for additional abbreviations used throughout this paper). To reimagine these perspectives, scholars have employed energy justice and critical social acceptance frameworks to examine community perspectives holistically, minimizing the possibility that communities are compromised in the name of progress and are instead centered within decision-making processes in renewable energy development [5,6].

Shifting focus from what it takes to overcome community acceptance obstacles, scholars have instead critically investigated the impacts of how, where, by whom, and for whom renewable energy decision-making and siting occur. Critical social acceptance scholars often critique the dependence on technological and socio-technical solutions, such as large renewable energy projects like OSW, as these solutions can

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2026.104625
Received 24 October 2025; Received in revised form 18 February 2026; Accepted 18 February 2026
Available online 28 February 2026

Table 1
Acronym meanings.

Abbreviation	Meaning
NIMBY	Not-in-my-backyard
OSW	Offshore wind
CBMs	Community benefit mechanisms
US	United States
BOEM	Bureau of Ocean Energy Management
CBA	Community Benefit Agreement
HCA	Host Community Agreement
GNA	Good Neighbor Agreements
PLA	Project Labor Agreements
TBA	Tribal Benefit Agreement

externalize social and environmental harms while perpetuating uneven development paradigms under the guise of necessary progress [7]. Energy justice scholars emphasize the importance of fair processes, transparency, and equitable burden distribution to ensure that renewable energy development does not replicate injustices associated with fossil fuels. Five interrelated principles of energy justice are associated with research examining renewable energy decision-making processes [8,9]. Below are considerations related to each principle, adapted from Jenkins et al. [10] and Heffron [9]:

1) *Procedural justice:* How are communities included in decision-making processes?
2) *Recognition justice:* Who is misrecognized or denied recognition in energy decision-making?
3) *Distributive justice:* Are the benefits and burdens of energy projects distributed fairly?
4) *Restorative justice:* How can society meaningfully acknowledge and address harm?
5) *Cosmopolitan justice:* Do energy project decisions consider the connections between systems, people, and other members of the Earth?

Offshore wind (OSW) power is a promising source of renewable energy with significant deployment in Europe and Asia, but with slow development in the United States (US). Deployment in the US accelerated during the Biden Administration, which took steps to permit projects totaling 15 gigawatts as of September 2024, enough to power over 5 million homes [11]. The new Administration has since reversed that progress, as President Trump issued an Executive Order to cease new OSW development [12]. He has continued to take action to curtail OSW development, including stop-work orders to OSW projects under construction. Due to this shifting political landscape, a wicked mixture of macro and microeconomic woes, along with frustrations relating to trust and transparency in the OSW process, the story of deployment in the US has been one of neither significant progress nor perfection [3,4,13–15].

Researchers recommend engaging host communities early in energy project development to provide opportunities for input [13,16]. Decision-makers can foster positive 'neighborly' [17] relations with communities that may be burdened by development through community benefit mechanisms (CBMs), which provide benefits such as direct financial payments, job creation, educational partnerships, public space restoration, and infrastructure improvements to these communities. In the US, OSW developers struck agreements with shoreside communities, commercial fishers, and Indigenous Peoples, who may be uniquely impacted by development in ocean environments [18]. As developers are key actors in the OSW development process and particularly within CBM execution, research undertaken to understand developer goals, motivations, and perceptions of process is valuable. To our knowledge, there is no US research focusing on developer perspectives on OSW CBMs, and limited research across the globe. We conducted semi-structured interviews of OSW developers to examine CBMs through an energy justice theoretical lens, analyzing how these mechanisms align with or diverge from core energy justice principles in offshore wind development through investigating the following questions: 1) What do OSW developers aim to achieve with CBMs? 2) What motivates developers to pursue CBMs? 3) How do developers consider community interests? 4) What benefits have developers included in CBMs, and how are these benefits determined?

2. Literature review

2.1. Offshore wind in the United States

While most land-based wind power development in the US occurs on private lands and is thus regulated locally and at the state level, OSW is generally regulated by the US Department of the Interior's Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM). The development of an OSW project is a dynamic multi-actor process that can take over 10 years. It is unique in that elements of the project spread over a large area, from miles offshore in the ocean where the turbines are, to miles inland within communities where cable infrastructure connects to the land-based electricity grid, which complicates defining 'people or communities impacted by a project' [19–21]. Importantly, when we use the word 'community,' we are referring to those who live, work, or are in any way connected to the geographic area that any aspect of an OSW project may affect. This paper will use the word 'community' often, and will be referenced by research interview participants, with some inconsistent meanings. Therefore, we find it important to clarify what we are referring to when we say 'community' in this context.

As Bacchiocchi et al. [22] point out, communities with strong ties to the ocean space, such as Indigenous Peoples and commercial fishermen, will be affected by OSW throughout the development process; access to fishing grounds and the use of specific practices (e.g., trawling) may be disrupted by OSW development. This pattern of infrastructure intruding Indigenous spaces and resources echoes historical experiences with other energy technologies in the US, such as pipelines, which have systematically violated Indigenous land rights and sovereignty [23]. These realities raise questions about whether marine energy development is compatible with treaty rights of Indigenous Peoples [22]. Additionally, local communities hosting portions of a project will experience disruptions related to construction, including road closures, sensory experiences, and visual impacts from cable infrastructure [21].

CBMs are a potential path forward for mitigating these effects. Under the Biden Administration, BOEM acknowledged these impacts and implemented new regulatory processes to incentivize developers to voluntarily execute CBMs [24]. Once finalized, these agreements are legally binding contracts for developers [19].

2.2. Community benefit mechanisms: What they are and what they represent

CBMs are agreements that OSW developers negotiate with community groups, including municipalities. These include Community Benefit Agreements (CBAs), Host Community Agreements (HCAs), Good Neighbor Agreements (GNAs), Project Labor Agreements (PLAs), Tribal Benefit Agreements (TBAs), and Fisheries Mitigation Funds. Despite key differences, they all signify a commitment to fostering cooperative relationships to address development impacts [19,25,26].

CBAs are signed by the developer and a community group, sometimes in exchange for elected officials agreeing not to oppose the project [26–28]. HCAs are signed with municipalities regarding project infrastructure such as cable landings [21,28]. PLAs are pre-hire agreements between a developer's contractor and labor unions, outlining employment terms and fostering relationships within local workforces [28]. Projects often involve multiple agreements, including CBAs, HCAs, and PLAs [19].

2.3. Community benefit mechanisms & community engagement in OSW

Crafting the best CBM practices has been challenging, given inconsistent findings that CBMs can either build or erode trust. Additionally, evidence shows these mechanisms struggle to influence pre-existing perceptions of trust between communities and OSW developers [29,30].

CBMs can signify steps towards recognition justice, in both processes and outcomes, by explicitly acknowledging those who may not typically be considered as 'hosting' energy development projects [21]. While CBMs might aim to build trust by ensuring fair distribution of financial and material benefits to impacted communities [25,31], they simultaneously risk eroding trust when CBM processes are perceived as controlled only by developers [32,33]. Case studies indicate that CBMs that lack community input may be perceived as bribes, showcasing that when procedural justice needs are not met, distributive justice will follow suit [34]. Overall, best practices of community engagement in renewable energy development seek to ensure that community members do not view developer engagement as an instrumental tool to ultimately secure project approval but are instead informed by procedural justice principles of commitment to collaboration and participation [5].

As renewable energy developers strive to distinguish themselves from fossil fuel energy extraction, it is crucial to confront the power imbalances and neocolonialism inherent within energy systems [22,35,36]. For example, CBMs could enable developers to acknowledge historical injustices to Indigenous communities by creating structured dialogues that center Indigenous perspectives and co-designing compensation frameworks that recognize both material and cultural harms [37]. Many renewable energy developers either began as fossil fuel-based companies or are still in a mixed-source energy development model [38]. Therefore, implementing benefit mechanisms to acknowledge and attempt to repair harms associated with climate change can be viewed with the lens and principles of restorative justice [39].

2.4. Renewable energy developers: Prevailing community engagement practices

There is a gap in the literature regarding perspectives of US OSW developers on community engagement, particularly in the context of CBMs, however, research focused on developer practices within renewable energy provides a foundation. Developers operate within a capitalist, economic-centered system where they are accountable to shareholders, yet local communities are increasingly becoming a focal point, as it is understood that opponents of energy development are organized and litigious [40]. Developers have begun to perceive project cancellations as fueled by opposition and are now positioning themselves to embrace CBMs for project acceptance [41]. These shifts often remain embedded within a neoliberal framework where community engagement is not valued for its democratic potential but for its instrumental utility, primarily as a means of achieving social license [5]. Recent research situates CBMs in land-based wind energy within a framework of developer motivations, such as increasing local acceptance of projects and supporting distributive fairness where local communities receive tangible gains from hosting infrastructure [42]. Additional evidence from onshore wind development suggests that developers' interest in tools like citizen co-investment is driven more by a desire to respond to local expectations and reduce opposition, rather than by ideological commitment to shared ownership [43]. In this sense, CBMs can reflect not a redistribution of power or wealth, but a strategic adjustment that maintains existing power structures within a project.

Developers have sought to address opposition by treating it as a reaction to the lack of scientifically driven information, known as the information deficit model [44]. In OSW, they typically engage communities with information-based interactions only after securing leases from BOEM. Some may view this as a reflection of a 'decide-announce-defend' model, aiming to avoid opposition until after development rights have been secured [41,45,46]. From the community's perspective, this can appear as a 'box-checking' approach, prioritizing utilitarian information sharing over genuine input gathering [14]. These dynamics reflect broader tensions between neoliberal governance structures which prioritize efficiency and risk avoidance, and the aspirations of energy justice which center redistribution and power-sharing. To align with energy justice principles, renewable energy developers must contend with and confront the paradigm that prioritizes profit, scale, and control if they intend to decouple energy development from political exclusion [47].

3. Methodology

3.1. Participant information

This research is part of a larger, multi-institutional and mixed methods project focused on OSW CBMs from a diverse set of perspectives, including potentially affected communities. This paper's sole focus is on developer perspectives, understanding that they play a particular role that has been under-investigated.

In March 2024, we initiated research to develop a census of US OSW projects and their corresponding CBMs. Sources included the federal government's Offshore Wind Market Report and Wind Energy Community Benefits Database [48,49]. Projects ranged from pre-permitting to those under construction or fully operational. We analyzed the projects individually since one developer may have multiple projects in various states and regions, influenced by local factors. Research participants were "offshore wind development professionals" connected to community engagement within each OSW project.

We identified OSW development professionals through LinkedIn searches and company websites. We also received information regarding three additional development professionals through snowball sampling [50]. After removal of duplicates and accounting for developers who were referred to us by colleagues, our research interview invitation letter was sent to 46 OSW development professionals.

Recruitment and interviews occurred from May 2024 to January 2025. Up to five attempts were made to contact an individual by email, resulting in 21 interviews (response rate of 46%).

OSW developers throughout the US participated in this research, and given the nature of these agreements, confidentiality was paramount. See Table 2 for additional information. Participants had worked in renewable energy development anywhere ranging from 2 to 40 years, with diverse backgrounds informing their work, such as marine affairs, communications, law, and engineering. CBMs associated with these projects included TBAs, CBAs, HCAs, GNAs, PLAs, and fisheries compensation programs.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured interviews provide opportunities to ask key follow-up questions and adjust the lines of inquiry based on the interview direction and the developer's experiences [51]. The interview guide's (Appendix A) questions explored the roles, motivations, and perceptions that OSW development professionals experienced while navigating CBMs. Each interview was virtual, hosted and recorded on Zoom lasting

Table 2
Number of developer interviewees by phase of development*.

Location	Phase of development	Number of interviews
East Coast	Fully-operational	3
	Under construction	5
	Fully-permitted	8
	Pre-permitting	3
	Cancelled	1
West Coast	Pre-permitting	3
	Unsuccessful bid	1

* Reflective of time of interviews.

between 1 and 1.5 h. The lead author participated in every interview. Transcripts were generated using OtterAI, and were then reviewed and compared with the audio recordings. Corrections to the transcripts were made as needed. Interviewees are identified as DEV# (a unique random number). Dedoose was used to inductively code the interviews (see Appendix B for codebook). Intercoder reliability was assessed using three full transcripts as well as 105 codes across seven excerpts from four transcripts; Cohen's Kappa was calculated at 0.86 [52]. Thematic analysis was conducted [53], in which seven core themes emerged.

4. Results

This section presents findings of the thematic analysis based on 21 interviews. Due to the diversity of stages of project development, discussions of community engagement and negotiations of CBMs varied from future-looking to post-hoc reflections. While these differences may influence what participants are willing to share, this diversity also reflects the OSW development process that companies navigate in the US. See Table 3 for the seven themes and subthemes.

1. Every community is a 'planet'

A principal theme was the perspective that each community is essentially *"[w]orking in its own planet" (DEV19),* i.e., so unique that it must be treated as such. This sentiment was discussed in the context of planning community engagement or elements of the CBM process, where developers frequently shared that they had *"[d]one hundreds of projects, … there's always something unique in every town"* (DEV3).

Due to the uniqueness of each community, many developers stated that they **prioritized hiring local liaisons** to build trust with the community. These positions were typically full-time, permanent positions focused on community engagement. Developers shared that social capital in a project's community was key: *"I knew a lot of folks in these towns; that's part of the reason why I was a good candidate for this role" (DEV2)*. Liaisons were local to the town before any potential development and often held public-facing positions focused on community engagement. Many developers expressed, "*We hire people from local communities…it's easier to build trust when you're working with people you know" (DEV1)*. These relationships were seen by developers as particularly critical during construction: *"When you're trying to lay cable block by block… you have to make sure you can walk down that street and say hi to everybody" (DEV21)*.

Some developers also expressed the technique of increasing accessibility by **operating out of a local office**: when *"you're co-located, you understand all the dynamics of the town" (DEV3)*.

2. Top-down benefits

Typically, after having successfully obtained a lease from BOEM, developers began the initial steps of development, including identifying possible host communities for land-based infrastructure. At this stage the focus was on reaching out to individuals who could support the project's success. The emergent theme was that politicians are initially considered synonymous with the community; in other words, most **developers employ a top-down approach to understanding community needs**. Developers expressed that they do this with the belief that these elected officials represent communities: *"They… hav[e] a good understanding of the communities that they're serving and their priorities" (DEV20)*.

Host communities that faced the effects of construction were prioritized: *"You want to pay particular emphasis to talking to the town officials who represent the areas that are going to be most affected" (DEV6)*. Likewise, local politicians seem to be the key factor in executing CBMs: *"If you're going to have some kind of fund, [local government] needs to be the vehicle" (DEV10)*. Some developers shared that politicians are so key to project success that these connections should be made early: *"Before the project is considering proceeding with permits, you want to make sure you're connecting with local elected officials" (DEV16)*.

Continuing within the top-down approach, most developers shared that **local politicians identify other priority stakeholders** for developers to connect with: *"It often starts with town leaders, right? [To then] find out who they consider the opinion leaders in the town…" (DEV4*). Furthermore, developers promoted this outreach as an opportunity for elected officials to connect with stakeholders: *"Who are the constituent groups you care about? Who do you need to keep happy to get reelected?"*

Table 3
Themes and subthemes.

Theme	Subtheme(s)	Research question associated with theme
1) Every community is a planet	1a) Hire local liaisons	How do developers consider community interests?
	1b) Have a local office	
2) Top-down benefits	2a) Developers employ a top-down approach to understanding community needs	How do developers consider community interests? What benefits have developers included in CBMs, and how are these benefits determined?
	2b) Developers seek support from local politicians to identify other priority stakeholders	
	2c) Developers see disconnects between politicians and communities	
3) Motivations to execute community benefit mechanisms are diverse and pluralistic	3a) Compensating or mitigating project effects	What do offshore wind developers aim to achieve with community benefit mechanisms? What motivates developers to pursue community benefit mechanisms?
	3b) The 'right thing to do'	
	3c) Developing long-term relationships	
	3d) Legal requirement	
	3e) Social license	
4) Bespoke benefits, with guardrails	4a) Benefit types connect back to project objectives	What benefits have developers included in communities benefit mechanisms, and how are these benefits determined? What do offshore wind developers aim to achieve with community benefit mechanisms? What motivates developers to pursue community benefit mechanisms?
	4b) Developers are following similar pillars of benefits	
5) Energy justice	5a) Recognition of historical burdens felt by Tribal nations	
	5b) Benefits should be commensurate with burdens	
6) Developers worry about a slippery slope		What do offshore wind developers aim to achieve with CBMs? How do developers consider community interests?
7) Developers feel that certain factors of community engagement are out of their control	7a) Misinformation and disinformation are barriers to community support	What do offshore wind developers aim to achieve with CBMs?
	7b) Experiences with past developers shape community perceptions of the industry	How do developers consider community interests?
	7c) There is a desire for guidance for engaging with communities	What do offshore wind developers aim to achieve with CBMs? What benefits have developers included in CBMs, and how are these benefits determined?

(DEV15). From a developer's perspective, this is also a way of creating goodwill with elected officials: *"It's typically the town mayor... that's an initial meeting…we follow the lead of that town leader [who says] 'you should meet with this person next. I'm up for reelection this fall. I don't want you announcing anything till after the election'" (DEV3)*.

Developers discussed **disconnections between politicians and the community**. Some developers referred community frustration back to the city: *"…[Communities] feel like they're left out about agreements, the money would go directly to the city, and they feel the money never trickles down, but it is up to the city" (DEV17)*. And when conflicts arose during benefit agreement processes, some developers preferred them to be resolved by city officials and the community: *"The city said it'll be between the city and [developer]…but there was an outcry from the community, and I stepped back because it was not my place to be involved" (DEV7)*. Novel ideas to meet this disconnection surfaced for some developers. For example, they supported the development of community advisory committees to participate in the process: *"They'll [local government] pick folks from the community that the local governing body decides on…we will work [it] out with them" because "[what] we found in some of our communities, money comes in and they never see it…" (DEV19)*. Thus, developers entering the community contend with expectations and norms around decision-making practices, ultimately lending to a top-down approach despite understandings of community frustrations.

3. Motivations to execute benefit agreements are diverse and pluralistic

Developers shared diverse motivations to execute these agreements, including within a single interview and sometimes within a single statement. Most developers expressed multiple motivations to execute CBMs, often expressing motivations that were at odds with one another. Developers were often motivated to execute CBMs based on the expectation of communities and industry best practices of **compensating or mitigating potential project effects**. One impact frequently referenced was the on-land construction phase of development, often associated with road closures and disruptions to lay cable for projects to connect to the electric grid. Developers shared, *"We're fully aware that this is going to be a temporary impact to your community. We are going to have to rip up some streets…how can we work with you to mitigate this as much as possible?" (DEV20)*. Developers also stated that they encourage communities to share their needs and concerns: *"Tell me what you need. Tell me the impact you foresee…" (DEV9)*. Interviewees also discussed port development associated with OSW projects: *"That's a real socioeconomic, health, and emotional burden. Those communities who are going to host our assembly, fabrication, and manufacturing need to see benefits to offset the impacts" (DEV15)*.

In line with the desire to mitigate project impacts, some developers noted that they perceived CBMs as **the right thing to do**. One developer remarked frankly, *"It's just a question of fairness" (DEV6)*. Some developers further discussed the instrumental value of CBMs: *"Not only being the right thing to do; it's what makes a successful project" (DEV3)*.

Developing long-term relationships with a community and building trust was another key motivation often expressed: *"When you're building a complex project, you have to have a good relationship with the host community" (DEV12)*. These relationships were sometimes put into the context of a project's lifetime: *"We anticipate being here for decades" (DEV2)*.

In some US states, developers are **required to enter into CBMs** as a condition of state OSW energy purchases [54]. *"It's required. These community benefits are requirements of the state" (DEV17)*, and *"I think you know we are required to do them [CBMs] under law" (DEV19)*.

Developers also identified CBMs as an instrumental method of overcoming opposition and **obtaining social license** [5]. Many developers remarked things like, *"There's this fear of being kicked out of town... you want to appear as a good actor…so people don't sue you" (DEV14)*. Some developers were transparent that social license was a central motivation: *"A lot of the conversations we have are about getting public acceptance… there's no hiding that one of the motivations is to help do that" (DEV12)*. Some interviewees believed CBMs should also benefit the developer: *"It's a two-way street. We're supposed to get a little bit of support [for] what we're trying to do…" (DEV7)*. These dimensions at times became particularly explicit when host communities negotiated benefit agreements: *"The town that signs the agreement agrees not to oppose the project and to support it" (DEV6)*. Obtaining support from these communities often offered developers decreased risk and uncertainty. One developer shared, *"These agreements can provide some certainty around local project risks…these documents can indicate the community is on board with what you're proposing" (DEV13)*.

4. Bespoke benefits, with guardrails

Developers typically viewed CBMs as a means to deliver place-specific, tailored responses to project impacts that also aligned with their own designed guardrails: *"It's up to the community to decide, but it's not a blank check…it focuses on a goal" (DEV8)*. Some developers expressed a desire to steer the negotiation process while still catering to community-stated desires: *"We try to lead a little bit to start, resiliency, climate change or community resiliency, cultural or historical preservation, or, supporting solar projects or energy efficiency or low-income ratepayer benefits…we also listen to what the community wants and try to find a mutually agreeable solution" (DEV1)*.

Many developers also looked to communities to set priorities: *"We make sure that [CBMs] are co-led with the community… we're not telling them what they need…" (DEV20)*. One developer remarked, *"We always say it's not up to us; it'll be up to the community. We don't want to be prescriptive. We want to allow the communities to tell us what they need" (DEV17)*.

A subtheme that emerges is that most **developers share similar pillars of benefits**. For example, one developer stated, *"We have requirements for funding: coastal resiliency, beautification, parks and recreation, public safety, ecological advancement, and renewable energy infrastructure" (DEV18)*. Similarly, another remarked: *"Resilience, workforce, supply chain, environmental research…those are themes for our community benefits" (DEV12)*.

The pillars are often related directly to the project or its objectives: *"Ours are commensurate with what we're doing. Coastal resiliency projects are important. Some of our projects [are] skirting parks or open space areas that need support. Cultural resilience, anything for climate change…" (DEV19)*. Developers use these pillars to allow for a degree of flexibility to the local community while also creating boundaries for what they are and aren't willing to support: *"We have pillars of giving [that] we try to stay within… We're not going to give money to a hospital…it's just not one of our priorities" (DEV17)*.

5. Energy justice

Throughout the interviews, developers often described CBMs and community engagement methods in ways that reflect energy justice principles. Some developers even noted that the status quo of energy development requires change: *"We're supporting local initiatives in a way that this community has not seen from companies... and that is not how industry has always operated…I think that these development companies just fundamentally understand that it's not going to be business as usual" (DEV10)*.

Developers also realized the importance of recognizing diverse communities because different community needs are not represented singularly: *"Fishermen have their needs. City has their needs, and they are different. The answers are going to be very different, depending on the affected community. Tribes are going to be very different. You cannot bunch them together" (DEV9)*.

Communities that lack the capacity to engage meaningfully are often overlooked within energy decision-making processes [22], and some developers expressed a desire to disrupt this pattern. One remarked: *"A*

lot of the people are just trying to slug it out on a day-by-day basis and have no idea what's going on… Those are the people that we really should be trying to involve and trying to help them to understand what we're trying to do…" (DEV7). Developers also stated that they conducted outreach to people who may not be able to voice their perspectives at community engagement events: *"We will always work with people that have expressed concerns, and we'll seek out people that haven't (DEV3)*.

In the context of recognition justice, developers acknowledged **historical tribal injustices** in energy development, with statements revealing a nascent understanding of systemic marginalization and recognition of the cultural and historical dynamics underlying project siting: *"They were here before us. It's their ancestral grounds that we're occupying, and we are intruding into in a way…" (DEV11)*, and *"The Tribes are the most sensitive because they've been historically the most taken advantage of since the founding of our country. And I give the Tribes a long runway to fight in the offshore wind space for things they were owed from the federal government 100 years ago. They're still owed a lot; land, lives, money, respect, credibility" (DEV15*). One developer expressed the steps they took to learn about Indigenous histories: *"I took a program to learn about the history and economics of [state]. I didn't know when I first moved out here about the Native American genocide that occurred here…and [being] conscious of in [state], this boom, bust economy that comes in" (DEV8)*.

Developers highlighted transparency and governance in how CBMs are communicated and structured, articulating principles of procedural justice*: "We want to make sure it's very transparent… we've set up our governance around CBAs, making sure that there is structure and processes around it. People understand what they're getting the money for…and they're receiving the benefit they have asked for" (DEV19)*. Critically, this transparency relates specifically to the processes by which community benefits are determined and distributed, rather than OSW project decision-making processes themselves.

With their inherent monetary nature, CBMs have the potential to **offset the burdens of OSW development by providing benefits** (distributive justice). *"You want to make it clear that you understand that there'll be some disruption caused by your project, and your goal is to provide a benefit to the town that is not equal to but bigger than the disruption you're going to cause" (DEV6),* and *"There's a burden that that they bear, especially during the construction phase…and we want to make sure that after we've done the project, everything is left better than we found it. And the people look back and say, 'Oh, that wasn't so bad'" (DEV3)*.

In the context of restorative justice, some developers recognized CBMs as a potential mechanism for addressing and repairing historical harm caused by fossil fuel-based energy extraction. While OSW is renewable, many developers are also involved in traditional, fossil fuel-based energy extraction and development. This can complicate those companies' community engagement and has required them to acknowledge their role in the climate crisis. One developer shared this example: *"Trust was the most important aspect that we needed to work on… because we are an oil and gas company, we have to work that much harder to convince them. It's not only that you guys are responsible for the burdens that communities like ours have been dealing with for numerous years. You need to foot the bill now and show us, not just talk about it" (DEV20)*. Some developers acknowledged the impact that these histories have on their engagement: *"There's a lot of environmental justice groups as well who, very rightfully so, [have a] negative view of [a developer that is] a fossil fuel company" (DEV17)*.

6. A slippery slope

Many developers expressed concerns about a slippery slope, where companies, through CBMs, would be expected to solve community problems that are outside their scope or, not central to their goals, or at unsustainable levels. While some developers believed that port development must acknowledge the historical impacts to communities, other developers struggled, and saw a double standard: *"…We're using the facility for the purpose that it was built for… [it's] a bit of a slippery slope kind of argument…why is offshore wind being asked to sign a [CBM] when no other lessee or user of the port is being asked to do the same thing?" (DEV1)*.

Developers were wary of setting an expectation that they can enter communities and solve every problem: *"We're not this panacea that's kind of going to come in and… wave a magic wand, and housing is going to be solved" (DEV8)*. When listening to community needs around potential benefit mechanisms, developers knew that the list of problems could be lengthy: *"And you find out quickly that the playground's been falling down for 20 years. And the police don't show up on this block… You hear everything about everything that's wrong, and you say, "we're just building this little wind farm, we can't fix all that…" (DEV4)*. One developer felt they were being asked to solve problems that should fall in the government's purview: *"I don't know that it's fair to ask offshore wind developers to solve environmental degradation and environmental injustice… where's the state government?" (DEV14)*.

7. Certain factors of community engagement are out of their control

Developers frequently described challenges while engaging with communities, both generally and within the CBM process. A recurring theme is that **developers perceived the challenges they face as being beyond their control**, thus preventing them from making a meaningful impact through community engagement.

The first subtheme is that **misinformation and disinformation** about OSW make community engagement difficult, as communities enter these interactions with beliefs that developers struggle to overcome: *"I think everybody knows there's been huge misinformation about offshore wind" (DEV19)*, and *"The biggest problem I have, the biggest challenge to my job is that misinformation is rampant, and much more easily digested…" (DEV2)*. The pervasiveness of misinformation leaves developers seeming to feel powerless, sharing things like, *"How do you rebut misinformation in a way that is effective and strong? Because of misinformation...it's ridiculously simple to get somebody to oppose offshore wind" (DEV15)* and *"With the whale misinformation and disinformation, and the dark money that is behind some of these opposition groups…we have been on our heels as an industry" (DEV12)*. Developers see host communities, in particular, being affected by misinformation. One remarked, *"There's an awful lot of misinformation about the harms of hosting an offshore wind farm, especially because all the cables are underneath the ground" (DEV6)*.

Many developers found community engagement challenging because **previous developers had entered the same community and left a negative impression**. Sometimes, this was about developers generally: *"A lot of these communities are used to, like, large developers coming in and promising the world, and then nothing happens" (DEV17)*. Other times, it was about a specific (unnamed) OSW developer: *"They just came in, messed up, and they've made it harder for everybody else…" (DEV8)*. This sometimes resulted in a developer completely disengaging from certain communities*: "We're finding that…developers have done a poor job of meeting with communities. In some cases, taking entire communities off the table because the well is so poisoned, no matter what we do, that ship has sailed" (DEV1)*. Some developers who attempt to observe engagement norms in their industry have critically expressed awareness of flawed engagement practices. One commented, *"Developers get a little caught up in check the box…because BOEM requires them to write stakeholder engagement plans, and then they're like, 'oh, look at how many people we had at this meeting,' or 'we've had, like, 120 conversations with these fishermen.' But you know…to what results?" (DEV5*).

The last subtheme is a desire for **guidance to support developers in community engagement.** While the novelty of CBMs has its advantages, many developers shared that the lack of best practices can make them feel untethered, with little agency in outcomes: *"It would be helpful to have some kind of more formula or guidance put to it, because it's been left to our team and our shareholders to figure out how to implement community benefits…if there was more of a structure to it, it might make the developers have less of the burden of kind of muddling through with the communities and*

figuring things out" (DEV18). For some developers, the nascency of the OSW industry and the newness of CBMs proved challenging: *"We're all figuring it out as we go. It's just the beginning stages. We're doing the best we can. There's no formula to make it happen…trying to make this effort more consistent or replicable, something more transparent…I think standardization would be kind of intriguing" (DEV12)*. Developers understood that communities faced these difficulties alongside them, which bore a burden: *"The first ones out of the gate always carry the most burden because of the novelty. We're building the plane as we fly it. There's a lot of communities that take the brunt of us figuring that out together" (DEV20)*.

5. Discussion

Our findings highlight a norm-setting process occurring within OSW development and CBMs. Developers followed a similar strategy (i.e., approaching elected leaders first and allowing them to structure community engagement around benefits) and portfolio of allowable benefits; this consistency follows patterns highlighted in Bedsworth & Hoff [54]. While others have found that developers attempt to negotiate according to community 'wishlists' [55], our results indicate a preference for fitting community benefits into pre-identified pillars. This top-down representative democracy approach coupled with predefined benefit categories may fail to fully advance justice principles, which emphasize opportunities for a wide range of community members to directly influence outcomes [56]. Additionally, developers operating in that paradigm miss opportunities to treat communities as their own unique planets with unique priorities, such as increasing access to healthcare facilities.

Communities may inform benefits, but CBMs – as implemented in the US OSW context – seem to mostly have been designed by OSW developers and elected officials. Our findings indicate that developers are implementing a top-down approach to the CBM process, where individuals in power have been identified as having local knowledge of the community and to represent community needs. While this top-down approach reflects the representative democratic model through which local knowledge and community needs are often mediated, the name 'community benefit mechanisms' suggests broader expectations of direct engagement. Developers noted significant disagreements between elected officials and the larger community, underscoring the need for further research to understand community expectations of CBMs and to include voices beyond elected officials. As shown in the above themes and quotes, this process begins with developers connecting with the local government to identify other key stakeholders who should be involved in the process.

Government-centric decision-making processes may contribute to a lack of recognition of community members who do not have sufficient political power to affect local government and who feel affected by a project. Furthermore, our results reveal some developers' emerging awareness of the historical contexts of Indigenous communities in energy development, yet this awareness has not yet translated to meaningful recognition in CBMs. Even approaches such as community advisory committees, whose members were chosen by politicians, may ultimately leave out affected parties. Participatory approaches that enable grassroots community actors to contribute to a project may lead to more meaningful engagement and consequently greater community support [57,58]. Additionally, host communities have expressed an interest in a general fund that would be administered by a trusted community organization [59]. Developers shared that CBMs allowed 'communities' to inform how benefits were decided and distributed directly. However, in many developers' own words, communities are represented by elected officials and thus, the meaning of 'community decided' is up for interpretation. These findings underscore how specific actions in the decision-making process of CBMs can lead to deteriorating procedural and recognition justice through a lack of meaningful methods to contribute to decision-making and by a lack of inclusivity and recognition of the community in CBM development decisions.

Our findings suggest that developers use CBMs as tools for community engagement. Rudolph et al. [21] outline that CBMs motivated by long-term commitments to transparency and community well-being tend to result in more favorable outcomes, including greater community support and long-term relationships. In contrast, CBMs motivated by strategic considerations, such as securing a social license, often risk resentment and opposition, especially if benefits are perceived as insufficient or misaligned with community needs. Importantly, our findings show some developers are simultaneously motivated by intrinsic and instrumental values, such as CBMs being the right thing to do, but also a road to social license. Developers cast a wide net regarding the role CBMs play in CE, leading to uncertainty about whether CBMs can offer such an extensive solution or are being used instrumentally. One quote illustrates this: *"… if you want to be cynical, [CBMs are] the cost of doing business, and if you want to be a little less cynical, this is the way forward to a just energy transition" (DEV14)*.

Our findings show that developers frequently considered potential drivers of opposition to their projects. Similar to Nilson et al. [41], developers in our interviews conceptualize community opposition through an information deficit model, where opposition influenced by misinformation and disinformation is countered by the sharing of fact-based information. Research indicates that trust, transparency, and an active role in the process are more closely linked to overcoming opposition than simply sharing factual information [60]. When developers perceive community opposition in this way, it limits their ability to examine their role in how communities perceive projects, reducing their ability to act with agency and autonomy in a process over which they wield significant control. Further aligned with Nilson et al. [41], our findings support the conclusion that developers may engage with communities from their own information deficit perspective.

Recognizing that communities bear a burden of uncertainty in the nascent US OSW context, developers expressed an interest in streamlined methods for community engagement and CBM processes. However, from an anticolonial perspective, desiring increasingly straightforward engagement tools may indicate that developers operate from a mindset that prioritizes control, reductionism, and technical solutions over long-term, relational, and community-based approaches [61,62]. When Norway developed a streamlined 'one-stop-shop' approach to community engagement, they faced community backlash, forcing them to return to a community-centered, individualized permitting process [63]. Nonetheless, this acknowledgement of burdens that communities bear in energy development, and the use of CBMs as an attempt to mitigate these burdens, can signify steps towards distributive justice.

Overall, we find that developers' approaches to CBMs are informed by the dominant neoliberal paradigm, resulting in an individualistic and instrumental approach that can undermine energy justice goals [36]. Throughout our interviews, developers expressed perspectives informed by this individualistic paradigm, which has negative implications for meeting cosmopolitan justice goals. As Cuppen & Pesch [64] argue, the neoliberal framing of social acceptance and its emphasis on reducing social conflict to reach consensus often leads to top-down strategies that overlook the plurality of public perspectives and instead attribute local opposition to "NIMBYism." We have identified similar lapses when instrumental approaches are applied to CBMs. First, prioritizing engagement with public officials' risks overlooking the diversity of interests within communities and can undermine distributive, recognition, and procedural justice. Second, the conflation of CBMs with community engagement practices may dilute opportunities for deeper and more inclusive participation, further weakening procedural justice. Third, framing public opposition as an information deficit problem can dismiss legitimate concerns as misinformed. These dynamics suggest that without more robust and justice-oriented approaches to social acceptance, CBMs may fail to realize their potential as tools for equitable energy transitions. These are important lessons for developers, policymakers, and communities when considering potential OSW

development. While recognizing that these findings are confined to OSW, they may translate to other forms of energy infrastructure such as liquefied natural gas facility development which take place in the coastal zone, onshore wind, solar and geothermal, particularly when development is undertaken on public lands where local control is typically lacking, similar to OSW. While navigating a complex regulatory landscape that incentivized CBMs with minimal implementation guidance, developers were constrained by corporate objectives and broader neoliberal frameworks, working with inexperienced communities and limited precedents beyond international examples, all while facing high-stakes expectations in a politically contentious environment.

6. Limitations and future research

This research must be viewed in a specific sociocultural context. Our interviews were conducted from May 2024 to mid-January 2025, with two interviews occurring after the 2024 Presidential Election but before Donald Trump's Inauguration, and one occurring after the Inauguration. In July 2024, a turbine blade failure occurred at the Vineyard Wind 1 project, resulting in significant economic and social repercussions for Vineyard Offshore. This incident reverberated in the industry and among communities, with images of debris washing ashore spreading in opposition strongholds. While discussed in our interviews, there is no evidence that this incident impacted the results of our thematic analysis.

The November 2024 Presidential election significantly affected US energy decarbonization, particularly OSW. On Inauguration Day, President Trump issued an Executive Order imposing a moratorium on OSW development. At this point, many early-stage projects have been abandoned or paused. Our findings reflect a period when such complications were less severe. Future research should consider how this political upheaval and uncertainty shape both community and developer perspectives within US OSW, particularly in the context of CBM processes.

7. Recommendations and conclusion

We find disconnections between recommendations based on energy social science research and the approaches undertaken by OSW developers. While developers have adopted some of the strategies for engaging with communities in specific decision-making processes to foster trust, they have either misunderstood, lacked access to, or ignored other key findings regarding community representation, trust in government officials, and factors driving opposition. More explicit collaboration and sharing of energy social science research results are necessary to build relationships between researchers and energy development professionals. Science communication could play a crucial role in ensuring that developers are aware of the implications of their actions, helping them avoid conceptualizing opposition in ways that perpetuate disconnections between what communities express to researchers and how developers perceive those communities.

Developing strong relationships with communities is crucial for fostering trust, collaboration, and advancing transparency. Our findings highlight that developers utilize both formal and informal benefits to cultivate relationships with communities; however, the communities receiving these benefits may not perceive the process in the same way. Therefore, developers would be advised to better understand how everyday members of communities view their entry, outreach, and development processes, especially concerning CBMs. Research shows that developers engaging in informal outreach and bi-directional communication promote trust and perceptions of transparency [13,65–67], whereas CBMs have not provided a clear and consistent path to achieve the same outcomes [21,31]. While some developers expressed a desire for additional regulatory measures to guide their practice, engaging directly with communities to develop place-based, individualized methods for moving forward with projects ultimately may be the most time- and cost-saving actions, and will also further community energy justice principles [68]. Indeed, a better strategy may be for developers to consistently build relationships through meaningful engagement practices before considering CBMs, rather than using the mechanisms as an instrument to foster those relationships, with social acceptance being the barometer of success.

Building relationships with diverse communities relies on developers' willingness, and community capacity. Regulatory and policy measures could be adopted to provide capacity funding to project communities. This could support communities in the general OSW planning process, as well as crafting, negotiating, and implementing CBMs.

BOEM and OSW developers have the opportunity to disrupt and transform an energy system in a manner that goes beyond simply transitioning from fossil fuels to renewable energy. There are opportunities to create a system that aligns development to the extent practicable with community needs and values and does not replicate the injustices stemming from past extractive fossil fuel-based developments. However, successfully avoiding replicating past injustices is as uncertain as achieving the decarbonization of the system itself. It remains to be seen whether an energy system that relies on the same economic system as in the past can potentially be a tool for justice. The path to decarbonization must be many things—swift, just, widespread, and resolute. These seemingly disparate requirements must coexist in a manner that centers communities; otherwise, the deployment of essential renewable energy will be neither successful nor equitable.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Lorren Ruscetta: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Emma Korein:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Emily Miller:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Julia Bingham:** Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Jeremy Firestone:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Shawn Hazboun:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Hilary Boudet:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgement

This material is based upon work supported by the US Department of Energy's Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy (EERE) [Award No. DE-EE0011078]. This report was prepared as an account of work sponsored by an agency of the United States Government. Neither the United States Government nor any agency thereof, nor any of their employees, makes any warranty, express or implied, or assumes any legal liability or responsibility for the accuracy, completeness, or usefulness of any information, apparatus, product, or process disclosed, or represents that its use would not infringe privately owned rights. Reference herein to any specific commercial product, process, or service by trade name, trademark, manufacturer, or otherwise does not necessarily constitute or imply its endorsement, recommendation, or favoring by the United States Government or any agency thereof. The views and opinions of authors expressed herein do not necessarily state or reflect those of the United States Government or any agency thereof.

Appendix A. Supplementary Data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2026.104625.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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