Are you ready for the blue transition? Increasing involvement and social acceptance for a sustainable transition at the Belgian Coast

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The North Sea is one of the most promising areas of our economy. Nowhere else in the world is the sea busier and more used than the Southern part of the North Sea. Nowhere else is so much wind and water used to generate renewable energy. Other sectors such as fishing, aquaculture and shipping are also prominent. Yet, the potential of our North Sea is underexplored. As a result, the rapidly evolving blue transition often encounters opposition from both citizens and other economic sectors active in and around the sea during the development phase of large-scale infrastructure or innovative projects.

The Blue BALANCE project will investigate how citizens and other stakeholders can be involved in the sustainable transition of the Belgian coastal region, with the aim to broaden the support base or "social license to operate" for the Blue Economy. Blue BALANCE does not only want to inform citizens, but also engage them in the future developments of our Belgian coastal region. Setting out a path for support of a sustainable transition is complex. A multidisciplinary approach is therefore crucial. A team of archaeologists, psychologists, marine innovation experts, communication experts, Digital Arts and Entertainment professionals and marine engineers will collaborate to achieve this ambitious goal.

First, psychologists and communication experts will conduct in-depth research among citizens to gain insights into the key factors affecting people's acceptance of a sustainable transition. What do people value in general, and more specifically on the coast? What do people think about others and how they experience the coast? Do people feel attached to our Belgian coast? Do they think that it used to be better or that it will improve in the future? Do Belgian citizens believe a sustainable transition is needed and are they willing to accept Blue Economy projects? Are they interested in participating in the development of such projects? Do they consider trust in the project developers as an important condition? Do they themselves adopt sustainable behaviour and support policies that protect our North Sea? Both residents and tourists of the Belgian coast will be surveyed to investigate potential differences between these two groups.

Second, archaeologists will investigate how we can connect our rich maritime past with contemporary innovations and challenges to build a compelling storyline. Our Belgian coast is a dynamic landscape that has been influenced for centuries by the interaction between man, our economic activities and nature. Cultural and natural heritage is widely scattered across our coastal landscape. This knowledge will be mapped out and will form the scientific basis to develop optimal compelling storylines for each blue innovation theme.

Based on the above, different (digital) communication tools will be designed and then tested in various locations along the coast. Research will show which are the most suitable to initiate dialogue and which compelling storylines will appeal the most to the general public to convey the scientific knowledge. By measuring the impact of these tools on individuals' pro-environmental attitudes and openness to change, we can determine whether they are effective in increasing people's support for sustainable activities and innovations.

Ultimately, Blue BALANCE wants to develop a toolbox that increases the chances of success and economic return for sustainable economic activities along the coast. The knowledge will also be compiled in a practical handbook so that it can serve as a protocol for other coast-related and offshore projects, supporting stakeholders from policy and industry in implementing their sustainable initiatives.

References

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Keywords

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