

Integration of Underwater Technology in Sustainable Development: Social and Environmental Perspectives

Willis Saputra Sukijan^{1*}, Ingrid Bela²

¹Hasanuddin University, Indonesia

²Bosowa University, Indonesia

Abstract: The development of subsea technology has opened up great opportunities for the exploration of marine resources, but its implementation often ignores the sustainable social and environmental dimensions. This article aims to examine how the integration of subsea technology can be aligned with the principles of sustainable development, especially from a social and environmental perspective. This study uses a *systematic literature* review approach by analyzing various studies related to the application of underwater technology, its impact on marine ecosystems, and its implications for the socio-economic life of coastal communities. The results show that while subsea technologies such as underwater monitoring systems, renewable energy pipelines, and marine robotics provide significant benefits in exploration and conservation efficiency, there are serious challenges related to technology access gaps, potential damage to deep-sea ecosystems, and marginalization of local communities in the decision-making process. This article recommends the need for a policy framework that integrates *the principles of triple bottom line* (economic, social, environmental) in each stage of subsea technology development, as well as the importance of the active involvement of coastal communities as key stakeholders. These findings are expected to serve as a reference for policymakers, academics, and maritime industry practitioners in designing inclusive and sustainable marine development strategies.

Keywords: Subsea Technology; Sustainable Development; Social Impact; Environmental Sustainability; Coastal Communities

1. Introduction

The ocean holds more than just natural resources, it is a living space for millions of coastal communities who depend on their ecosystems for their livelihoods. However, behind the seemingly calm surface, human activity in the depths of the ocean is now moving much more aggressively than it did a decade ago. Offshore oil and gas exploration, the installation of underwater communication cables, to the development of renewable energy such as ocean current turbines, all depend on one thing: subsea technology.

This technology is no longer just a technical tool. It has become the backbone of the modern marine industry. Underwater robotics (ROVs) are now capable of operating to depths of thousands of meters for pipeline inspection, automated monitoring systems can detect leaks in minutes, and acoustic sensor networks enable high-accuracy seabed mapping. These advances undeniably bring tremendous efficiency to the energy, telecommunications, and marine research industries [1].

What often goes unnoticed is the simple question of who is actually bearing the impact of this progress? Fishing communities around exploration areas are often not involved in the planning process, even though they are the ones who feel the most changes in fishing patterns due to underwater construction activities. On the other hand, deep-sea ecosystems that are only partially understood by humans are at risk of permanent disruption before they have had a chance to fully study. Ironically, many subsea projects are promoted in the name of "sustainable development", while the social and ecological aspects are not necessarily fully studied.

The literature on subsea technology has been dominated by technical-engineering studies: how to improve the efficiency of tools, reduce operational costs, or extend the life of infrastructure. Studies that put social and environmental dimensions as the main focus rather than just additional notes are still relatively rare, especially in the context of developing countries with long coastlines such as Indonesia. In fact, true sustainability cannot

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: willissukijan@gmail.com (W. S. Sukijan).

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be achieved with technical optimization alone; it demands a balance between industrial interests, ecosystem sustainability, and justice for communities that coexist with the sea.

Departing from these gaps, this article seeks to critically examine how the integration of underwater technology can and should be aligned with the principles of sustainable development. The focus of the study is directed at two dimensions that are often marginalized in subsea discourse: the social impact on coastal communities and the ecological consequences on deep-sea ecosystems. Through this review, it is hoped that a more complete understanding of how advances in marine technology can be designed not only to be economically efficient, but also socially just and environmentally responsible.

2. Discussion of the Main Problem

The fundamental problem in the development of subsea technology lies not in the technology itself, but in the speed of its application that goes far beyond the social readiness and ecological understanding of the surroundings. Offshore exploration projects, for example, generally go through a process of technical studies and economic feasibility studies that are mature in a matter of months, while social impact assessments on coastal communities are often done as an administrative formality to meet licensing requirements, rather than as a real participatory process.

The same thing happens in the environmental aspect. The deep sea where most of the subsea infrastructure operates is one of the least understood ecosystems on earth. Ironically, it is precisely in these areas with minimal data that large-scale construction activities take place the most. The installation of cables, pipes, and other underwater structures has the potential to disrupt the habitat of deep-sea organisms whose life cycles have not been fully mapped by science. In other words, development decisions are often made under conditions of high ecological uncertainty, but they are carried out under the pretext of efficiency and energy needs [2].

It is at this point that a contradiction arises that is rarely discussed openly: subsea technology is marketed as a solution to sustainable development, for example through ocean current energy or automated environmental monitoring, but the development process itself often ignores the principle of prudence (*precautionary principle*) which is one of the main pillars of sustainability [3].

3. Review and Criticism of Existing Approaches

A number of previous studies have tended to place the sustainability of subsea technology solely from the perspective of energy efficiency and carbon emission reduction. This approach is not wrong, but it is too narrow. Measures of sustainability that rely solely on macro environmental indicators (emissions, energy efficiency) risk ignoring the micro impacts that are directly felt by local communities, such as changes in traditional fishing routes due to the ban on sailing in construction zones, or the loss of access to fishing areas that have been used for generations [4].

Another criticism is directed at the community engagement model that has been applied. Many subsea projects conduct public consultation as a ceremonial stage that takes place after the final project design is prepared, rather than as part of the planning process itself. As a result, public input rarely really influences technical decisions, and all that remains is the impression of participation without the substance of actual participation, a phenomenon that in various public policy literature is often referred to as *tokenism* [5].

In terms of governance, regulatory frameworks in many developing countries, including Indonesia, have also not fully accommodated the complexity of the subsea. Marine regulations are often still oriented towards surface activities (fisheries, shipping), while the underwater space, which is now increasingly densely populated by infrastructure, does not yet have a specific legal framework that balances the interests of industry, conservation, and the rights of coastal communities [6].

4. The Author's Perspective or Argument

Based on the above review, the author is of the view that the real problem is not in the rejection of subsea technology, but in the way in which it is introduced and integrated into pre-existing socio-ecological life. Underwater technology has great potential to support sustainability as long as its development process does not place technical efficiency as the only benchmark of success [7].

The author believes that three fundamental shifts are needed. First, the involvement of coastal communities should begin at the initial planning stage, not as a formality at the end of the process. Local knowledge of current patterns, fishing seasons, and surrounding marine conditions can actually be valuable inputs that actually

increase the accuracy of technical studies, not just a social obligation that must be fulfilled [8].

Second, the principle of prudence needs to be given equal weight to economic considerations in decision-making for subsea projects, especially in deep-sea areas with minimal ecological data. The absence of evidence of damage should not be treated as evidence of the absence of risk.

Third, the marine regulatory framework needs to be expanded to explicitly regulate underwater space as an area of layered interests rather than just an empty area that is free to be exploited as long as it is technically possible. Without this kind of regulatory update, sustainability will only become jargon that adorns project reports with no real implications on the ground[9].

5. Conclusion

The integration of underwater technology into the sustainable development agenda cannot be reduced to a matter of technical efficiency alone. As described in the discussion above, the disparity between the speed of subsea innovation and the socio-ecological readiness around it has given birth to a number of real problems: the marginalization of coastal communities in the decision-making process, the risk of damage to deep-sea ecosystems that are not yet fully understood, and regulatory frameworks that are not yet able to keep up with the complexity of underwater activities.

Criticism of the old approach suggests that sustainability can no longer be measured solely by macro environmental indicators, but must also consider the social impacts on a local scale that often go unnoticed. To this end, the authors offer a shift in perspective: from simply "building efficiently" to "building fairly and responsibly", where coastal communities become partners in planning, rather than simply objects of project impacts.

Ultimately, the future of sustainable subsea technology depends on the willingness of government stakeholders, industry, and academia to recognize that technical progress without social and ecological balance is not complete progress. Further research going forward needs to be directed towards the development of more substantive models of community participation as well as empirical studies of the long-term impacts of subsea infrastructure on deep-sea ecosystems, so that the sustainability claims that have been echoed can be scientifically proven, not just development rhetoric.

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