



# ENABLING MARITIME SPATIAL PLANNING

*Enhancing Stakeholder Participation: lessons from  
MSP delivery to date*

STUDY RECAP



Since the adoption of the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive (2014/89/EU), EU Member States have been required to develop maritime spatial plans balancing competing interests across multiple sectors. The Directive explicitly requires Member States to involve stakeholders and the public in the planning process, in line with broader EU principles on public participation, notably the EU Public Participation Directive and the Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive. However, it leaves significant discretion to each country on how to organise and deliver that participation.



**ALTHOUGH PARTICIPATION IS EXPLICITLY REQUIRED, HOW DO WE ENSURE IT IS EFFECTIVE?**

**This study examines and compares the different approaches taken by EU Member States in involving stakeholders during the implementation of the MSP Directive and identifies gaps between how governments perceived their engagement processes and how stakeholders actually experienced them.**

Most **Member States** had strong ethics around stakeholder involvement, and three quarters created a formal participation or engagement plan. However, decision-making remained largely centralised, with ten Member States limiting core decision-making to governmental bodies only. Eight Member States used professionally facilitated consensus building, but in two cases outcomes were still determined by the strongest voices in the room.



On the **stakeholder** side, about half of them felt they could provide their views easily and were heard, while the other half were neutral or disagreed. More than half believed the engagement process only met the bare minimum of the MSP Directive's requirements, or failed to meet them entirely. Many felt consulted too late, lacked transparency on how their input was used, and noted underrepresentation of key sectors.

Overall, there was a significant mismatch between how Member States thought they had performed and how stakeholders actually experienced the process: alignment or partial alignment between the two perspectives only reached approximately 30%. This gap is partly explained by the "legitimacy paradox" where increased participation reduces trust when stakeholders think the process lacks legitimacy. The answer lies in the quality of the participatory process and inclusion of a wide range and balance of interests sharing in the decision making. When the process is experienced as just, it results in many benefits.





## WHY READ THIS STUDY NOW ?

The **European Ocean Pact** commits to strengthening the blue economy while supporting climate and biodiversity goals, **requiring the active involvement of a wide range of marine stakeholders to succeed**. Delivering on its ambitions will depend on decision-making processes that are legitimate, inclusive, and trusted by those they affect. The upcoming **Ocean Act**, building on a revision of the MSP Directive, will aim at modernising maritime spatial planning as a strategic tool to serve the Pact's priorities.

This study examines how EU Member States have approached stakeholder engagement during the implementation of the MSP process, comparing the perspectives of national authorities with those of stakeholders themselves. By identifying good practices alongside persistent gaps, it offers concrete insights to inform the revision of the MSP Directive and the design of more effective engagement frameworks under the Ocean Act.

**The study shows that meaningful stakeholder engagement is not merely a procedural requirement, it is a fundamental prerequisite for delivering legitimate, durable, and effective maritime spatial plans that can support the Ocean Pact's ambitions.**

## The way forward



**Shift from consultation to shared decision-making:** move from top-down consultation toward genuine co-creation of decisions with stakeholders.



**Professional facilitation and process design:** use independent, trained facilitators and structured engagement plans rather than ad hoc approaches.



**Early and inclusive involvement:** engage a diverse range of stakeholders from the very beginning, when their input can still make a difference.



**Transparency and feedback:** always explain clearly to stakeholders how their input has been used.



**Capacity building:** help MSP authorities better understand power dynamics and best practice in stakeholder engagement.



**Read the full study**

or access on <https://maritime-spatial-planning.ec.europa.eu/media/document/15560>