

**ESG COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN THE ENERGY SECTOR:
ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF ENGAGING INFLUENCERS
AND SOCIAL ACTORS. A SOCIOLOGY OF DEVELOPMENT
PERSPECTIVE**

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Abstract

The global energy transition requires not only technological progress but also a profound shift in how energy companies communicate their environmental and societal impacts. As Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) criteria become an industry standard, the methods of communicating these strategies are evolving. This article analyzes the effectiveness of various communication models used by energy companies, with a particular focus on the growing trend of utilizing influencers and social actors to support ESG initiatives. The study is qualitative and examines the advantages and disadvantages of this approach, using several illustrative examples. Building on the „researcher-manager” perspective, the author explores how energy companies can balance traditional reporting with modern actor-based communication. The findings suggest that while influencers can be powerful catalysts for social change, their role must be rooted in transparency and aligned with the company’s actual social performance.

Keywords: *ESG, SLO, CSR, communication, renewable energy sources*

1. Introduction

The objective of this study is to analyze communication processes within the Renewable Energy Sources (RES) sector through the lens of the sociology of development, with a specific focus on the mechanisms of personifying ESG standards. This article argues that the traditional, task-oriented, technocratic model of

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communication in the energy industry has reached its limits. Consequently, the key to securing a Social License to Operate (SLO) lies in introducing a „human face” into the discourse—specifically through social actors and influencers (Boutilier & Thomson, 2011).

Contemporary sociology of development has moved beyond perceiving progress solely through the prism of economic indicators. In the era of global transformation, development is analyzed as a multidimensional process where social and cultural factors play a role as vital as technological innovation (Suchacka, 2014). The energy sector is currently undergoing its most radical transformation since the first industrial revolution. This process is increasingly dependent on non-technical factors. From the perspective of modernization theory, we are moving from simple modernization to a phase of reflexive modernization (Freeman, 1984). Renewable energy investments are perceived by local communities as „manufactured risk”. As Ulrich Beck notes, we live in a „risk society”, in which the side effects of industrial development (such as climate change) are becoming a focal point of public debate (2004). In this context, renewable energy sources (RES) are not just a new technology, but an element in the renegotiation of the „social contract” regarding the security and future of the planet. However, as research shows, the global imperative of decarbonization, reinforced by political frameworks such as the European Green Deal, is forcing businesses to completely redefine their role in the social ecosystem (Tkachuk, 2024). The problem is that investments in RES – despite their objective climate benefits – are perceived by local communities as so-called „created risk”. A new wind farm permanently alters the landscape and disrupts local spatial identity, building a subjective sense of threat (Swofford & Slattery, 2010; Knudsen et al., 2015). This presents a serious challenge for social scientists: explaining why projects that are rational from a global perspective encounter fierce resistance at the micro level.

A crucial tool for analyzing conflicts surrounding energy investments is the theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1984). Habermas introduces a distinction between the „system” (state, market, corporations) and the „lifeworld” (everyday life, tradition, interpersonal relationships). The „system” operates with an instrumental logic focused on efficiency and profit, while the „lifeworld” is based on communicative action, striving for understanding and understanding meaning. In the energy sector, we see a phenomenon Habermas calls the „colonization of the lifeworld”. Corporations, operating within rigid procedural structures, falsely assume the effectiveness of so-called task-oriented communication. This model is based on the belief that the presentation of objective technical and economic data is sufficient to gain acceptance.

In their interactions with municipal residents, corporations employ a hermetic engineering language that, from the residents' perspective, is perceived as a manifestation of technocratic arrogance, a lack of empathy, and even a form of symbolic violence. It is worth emphasizing the need to shift from strategic action (aimed at imposing one's will on residents under the guise of consultation) to communicative action. The personification of ESG communication – the introduction

of „faces” (leaders, influencers) into the discourse – aims to „disenchant” the technocratic system and restore dialogue within the „lifeworld”. These mediators act as translators, translating abstract climate goals into the language of community values.

When analyzing the relationship between an energy company and a local community, it is impossible to ignore Pierre Bourdieu's concept of social and symbolic capital (1986). An investor entering a municipality possesses enormous economic capital but often possesses negative relational and symbolic capital. They are perceived as an anonymous figure, representing the interests of big capital solely. Capital asymmetry breeds conflict. When a manager with high-level hard skills tries to convince a farmer to build a wind farm using charts and tables, two different habituses clash. Dry, informational messages, devoid of a „human dimension”, diminish the impact of substantive arguments. Moreover, imposing a is a form of symbolic violence – residents feel that their local knowledge and connection to the land are being devalued by „urban experts” (De Roeck, 2019) The solution lies in strategically leveraging credibility transfer.

By engaging social actors (Model B) or influencers (Model C), the corporation „borrows” their symbolic capital and the trust they enjoy within their groups (Hovland et al., 1953). In this way, the „face” of the project becomes a guarantor of the company's ethical conduct (Goffman, 1959).

Theoretical ordering requires clarifying the logical progression between concepts that are often used interchangeably but represent different stages of corporate responsibility development:

1. CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility): Defined in the literature as a paradigm in which companies voluntarily consider social interests. However, in the mature sociology of CSR development, it is sometimes criticized for „tokenism” – treating social activities as a facade for the actual business (so-called peripheral activities) (Carroll, 1991, Dahlsrud, 2008),
2. ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance): This is currently a comprehensive and measurable system for organizational management. Unlike CSR, ESG is a strict operational and legal requirement (e.g., the CSRD directive) that determines a company's access to capital and ratings. From a sociological perspective, ESG is an attempt to institutionalize and „rationalize” responsibility (Tan et al. 2026)).
3. SLO (Social License to Operate): This is a key concept for the purpose of this paper. SLO is a dynamic, informal state of relationships and the local community's acceptance of an investment. In the energy sector, traditional administrative permits are insufficient; without a „social license”, a project can be blocked by protests, even if it complies with the law (Chen et al. 2025, Moffat & Zhang, 2014).

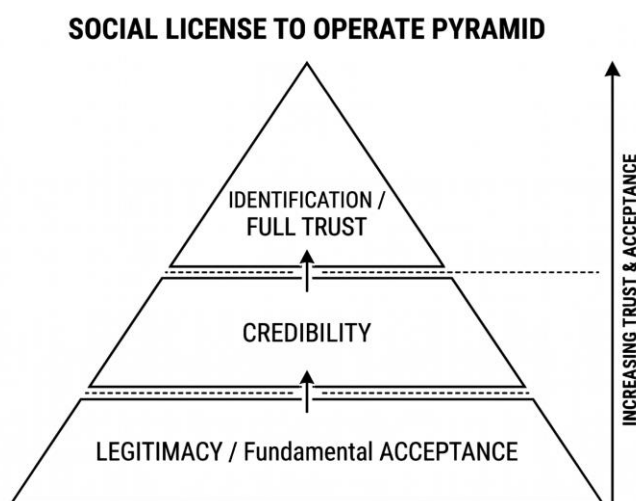
The relationship between key terms is hierarchical: reliable ESG reporting is the foundation, but only through authentic communication can SLO be achieved.

According to the SLO pyramid model (Boutilier & Thomson, 2011), acceptance is divided into three levels: legitimacy, credibility, and full trust.

- Legitimacy: based on compliance with the law and economic benefits (fragile level),
- Credibility: achieved through transparent dialogue and keeping promises,
- Full Trust (Psychological Ownership): the top of the pyramid, where the community identifies with the project.

It is this climbing up the SLO pyramid, carried out through the involvement of social actors and influencers, that is the central point of the analysis in the rest of the article (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. The Social License to Operate (SLO) Pyramid Model



Source: Own elaboration

To maintain the consistency of the analysis, the following table organizes key concepts, demonstrating their logical connections within the energy transformation process:

Table 1. A set of concepts related to the energy transformation process and its sociological context

Concept	Definition and role in the development process	Sociological context
RES	Technological foundation of transformation; decarbonization of the economy.	Change in the development paradigm: from resource exploitation to sustainability.
CSR	Historical paradigm of voluntary consideration of social interests.	„Philanthropic” stage of capitalism; building the company's symbolic capital.
ESG	Measurable management and non-financial reporting system (CSRD directive).	Institutionalization of responsibility; rationalization of environmental actions.
SLO	Dynamic, informal acceptance of investment by the local community.	Key element of public trust; bottom-up legitimacy.

Source: Own elaboration

The final theoretical pillar is the analysis of social resistance, referred to as the NIMBY syndrome. In the traditional technocratic view, residents' resistance (NIMBY) is perceived as a manifestation of irrationalism. However, the sociology of place proposes a different perspective: this resistance is often a reaction to a violation of territorial identity (Seamon, 2012). For residents, a place is not just a geographical space, but a weave of meanings, memories, and values (Castello, 2010). The introduction of wind turbines without dialogue is perceived as an invasion of the „common good”. The problem is exacerbated by the improper selection of messengers—anonymous managers with low competencies in inclusive communication only intensify this fear. This work posits that only through the personification of communication and a departure from technocratic language in favor of a narrative based on personal credibility is it possible to transform the NIMBY attitude into a model for building shared value (Coppens et al., 2018).

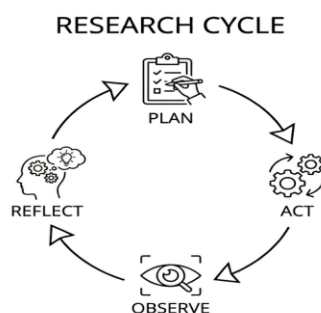
2. Research methodology

The analysis is based on a qualitative approach grounded in the Action Research paradigm (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The adopted research model goes beyond traditional, static methods of sociological analysis (Yin, 2018). The choice of the Action Research (AR) paradigm stems from the necessity to analyze processes within their natural, dynamic environment. The author, serving as a communications manager in an international investment firm within the RES sector (anonymized in accordance with confidentiality requirements), becomes the primary researcher embedded within the organization – a practitioner-researcher model (Yin, 2018). This allows for access to informal data and stakeholders' micro-reactions that are inaccessible to external observers.

The AR process in this study is spiral in nature and includes the following stages:

- Planning: designing a communication intervention, e.g., selecting a specific opinion leader for a campaign or changing technocratic language into a human-centric narrative;
- Action: the implementation phase and actual meetings with stakeholders in the municipal field;
- Observation: performing a thick description of emotional reactions and the evolution of opponents' arguments;
- Reflection: critical data analysis in confrontation with theories of trust and SLO.

Fig. 2. Action Research Spiral Cycle



Source: Own elaboration

Conducting research from the position of an organization member allows for the analysis of the „backstage” of the communication process – insight into decision-making mechanisms and corporate ethical dilemmas. To neutralize the risk of subjectivism, rigorous methodological triangulation was applied. The author's observations are systematically confronted with hard operational indicators (number of administrative protests), independent sentiment analysis in local media, and the

method of continuous comparison of behavioral patterns across different investment locations.

In accordance with Robert Yin's (2018) guidelines, the case study examines a contemporary phenomenon in its real-world context. This article moves away from quantitative questions in favor of process-oriented ones: how does the presence of a personalized „face” modify the perception of risk, and why are certain attributes of authority more effective in mitigating conflicts?

The case selection strategy includes extreme cases (successful investments vs. investment impasse) and critical cases (municipalities with particularly strong local identity). Identified attributes, such as credibility and locality, are treated as analytical categories through which case studies will be examined in the subsequent part of the work.

The main methodological assumption is the conviction that social trust is not a static value but a dynamic process that can be modeled through the humanization of the message. Only through the personification of communication can an attitude of resentment be transformed into a model for building shared value. The models presented in the following sections (A, B, C) constitute an original research proposal of a pilot nature.

The study was conducted in three different rural-urban municipalities in Poland, where investments in the renewable energy sector (wind farms and large-scale photovoltaic installations) were planned or underway. Case selection was purposive and based on a theoretical replication strategy – municipalities with a high level of local identity and varying degrees of initial social resistance (ranging from strong NIMBY tendencies to moderate neutrality) were selected.

The total study sample was N = 66 participants. Purposive sampling was used to maximize the representation of key stakeholder groups in the corporate-local community relationship. The sample distribution was as follows:

1. Local community representatives – 42 individuals
 - residents of municipalities where renewable energy investments (wind farms and photovoltaic installations) were planned or underway;
 - 28 individuals representing residents directly adjacent to the planned investments;
 - 14 individuals with above-average social standing in the local community (village heads, members of local organizations, volunteer fire brigade leaders, local entrepreneurs).
2. Representatives of public institutions – 12 individuals
 - local government employees responsible for spatial planning, environmental protection, and investor relations;
 - individuals participating in public consultation and negotiation processes regarding investment locations.
3. Communication actors and experts – 12 individuals
 - representatives of an energy company;
 - technical and ESG experts;

- individuals serving as local or industry opinion leaders and creators of educational content related to energy transition.

The inclusion criterion for participants was direct experience with planning, communicating, or socially assessing renewable energy investments. Individuals with only general knowledge of energy transition and no experience participating in a local communication process were excluded.

The data collection process was integrated with the Action Research methodology (stages: planning, action, observation, and reflection) and lasted from June 2025 to March 2026. A methodological triangulation of research techniques was employed. Data was collected using several complementary qualitative techniques. The following were conducted:

- 38 semi-structured individual interviews (25 residents, 7 officials, 6 investor representatives and experts), aimed at reconstructing their habitus and assessing the mechanism of credibility transfer.
- 5 focus group interviews with residents (28 participants in total), which allowed for the capture of emotional dynamics, identity-related anxieties, and changes in risk perception following the introduction of message personification.
- and participant observation during 14 consultation and information meetings organized around investment projects. The researcher-manager compiled structured observation journals during official consultation meetings, analyzing the micro-behavioral reactions of project opponents.
- Complementary analysis included project documentation, local media materials, online comments, and data on administrative procedures.

The material was analyzed using the logic of continuous data comparison. Coding involved three levels: open coding (identifying categories related to trust, risk, and sender credibility), axial coding (combining categories into communication mechanisms), and selective coding, leading to the construction of three models of ESG personification. Interpretive credibility was enhanced by triangulating data sources and comparing the researcher-practitioner's observations with independent existing materials.

The following methodological approach was applied in the process:

1. Qualitative Case Study Method (Yin, 2018): analysis of three different ESG personification models: The National Ambassador Model, The Local Opinion Leader Model, and The Expert-Influencer Model. Case selection was based on the principle of theoretical replication.
2. Triangulation of Data Sources: to minimize the risk of researcher-insider subjectivism, every observation was confronted with independent data streams: local media monitoring, social media sentiment analysis, and hard administrative data regarding the investment progress.
3. Thick Description (Glaser & Strauss, 1967): the analysis is not limited to dry facts but seeks to capture the cultural and emotional nuances accompanying RES-related conflicts, including fear of landscape loss and a sense of exclusion from the decision-making process.

The study covered two main areas of social interaction:

- Local communities in investment municipalities: residents of areas where wind farms and photovoltaic installations are planned. Their attitudes toward energy corporations were analyzed before and after the introduction of the project's „face” into communication.
- Digital media users: a group of recipients of educational content and materials promoting RES in the online space. Here, the subject of research was the role of subject-matter influencers in democratizing technological knowledge and defusing fears related to the energy transition.

The analyzed phenomenon is the process of obtaining a Social License to Operate, understood as ascending the levels of the acceptance pyramid: from legal legitimacy through credibility to full trust and the psychological identification of residents with the investment (Boutilier & Thomson, 2011).

3. Main results

3.1. Model A: National ambassador – strategic transfer of symbolic capital

The first of the analyzed models, which constitutes an original research proposal, is based on utilizing figures with high social status and established symbolic capital. The study focused on a case of cooperation between an energy group and a prominent athlete (Kamil Stoch, for example). From a sociological perspective, this model is not merely an image-building tactic but a process of credibility transfer (Hovland et al., 1953). The primary mechanism here is the utilization of the halo effect (Cialdini, 2001). Attributes assigned to the ambassador—such as work ethic, modesty, national pride, and mastery—are subliminally projected onto the previously anonymous corporate institution.

In the RES sector, where corporations often struggle with the image of „soulless giants”, the figure of the ambassador serves as an emotional buffer. The analysis showed that Model A is extremely effective at building bridging capital on the macro level (Porter & Kramer, 2011). It allows for the legitimization of RES technologies within the national discourse, making them an element of modern national identity. However, a sociological analysis of this model's limitations reveals the so-called „glass screen barrier”. A national ambassador, despite having enormous persuasive power in mass media, exhibits a deficit in real local disputes.

Group interview footage confirmed that while the commitment of a widely respected athlete was building bridging capital at the macro level, it was facing resistance in direct field contact. An excerpt from the transcript of FGI (Resident 3, Commune L): *"The fact that this jumper says in the advertisement that clean energy is the future, I understand and respect. He is the pride of the country. But he will not live here with us. The corporation gives him millions to cover our eyes, and they will put windmills under our windows and the land will lose its value. This is Warsaw propaganda, not a conversation with people."* The above statement illustrates the limit

of the usefulness of Model A – the high social status of the broadcaster is not automatically converted into local legitimacy if the community diagnoses the so-called authenticity gap. Residents who fear declining land values perceive the media figure as corporate propaganda, indicating a lack of local legitimacy for this model.

3.2 Model B: Local opinion leader – the mechanism of homophily and neighborhood authority

The second model, representing another original research proposal, shifts the focus of communication from the national level to the social micro-scale (Hovland et al., 1953). It is based on the engagement of individuals who hold natural authority within the local community, such as village heads (*sofrys*), respected farmers, or Volunteer Fire Department (OSP) leaders (Skorek, 2025). In this case, the effectiveness of ESG communication stems from homophily – the tendency of individuals to trust those with similar status, problems, and habitus (Goffman, 1959).

The local leader acts as a credibility filter. In a situation of acute informational uncertainty accompanying the construction of a wind farm, residents reject technocratic PDF reports in favor of the opinion of „someone from here”. This phenomenon is a classic example of utilizing bonding capital (Porter & Kramer, 2011). The leader does not operate in engineering language but rather in the language of community values and local benefits, thereby mitigating NIMBY syndrome by redefining the project from „alien” to „ours”.

Records from the participant observation prove that the introduction of broadcasters with a similar habitus (e.g. a TSO activist) into the discourse neutralized the sense of technocratic dominance of the investor. Observation log entry (Village Meeting, Commune W): *"For the first 30 minutes, the development manager presented tables and acoustic maps. The noise was growing in the room, there were aggressive cries about 'rape of the landscape'. The situation turned around when Mr. [X], the local commander of the Fire Brigade, spoke: 'Listen, you know that I was afraid myself. I sat down with them, checked the sensors. We negotiated that the company would repair the access road for fire trucks and give a subsidy for equipment. These are not some anonymous people from Warsaw, they are a specific corporation that gives us guarantees.'" The emotions in the room clearly subsided, factual questions about distance began."* This evidence illustrates how rooting the sender in the "lifeworld" and allowing constructive criticism allows them to cross the threshold of acceptance towards credibility in the SLO model.

However, a critical analysis of this model highlights the risk of erosion of authenticity. If the leader is perceived as being instrumentally utilized or „bought” by the corporation, their authority is immediately degraded, leading to violent polarization within the municipality. Successful SLO in this model thus requires the energy company to have the courage to „give voice” to leaders, even if their message is less formatted and includes critical voices. It is precisely this permissible, constructive criticism that builds the highest level of trust within the „lifeworld” (Habermas, 1984).

3.3. Model C: expert-influencer – democratization of knowledge and the role of „technology translator”

The third model, which constitutes an original research proposal, responds to the digital transformation of the public sphere and the demand for „Just-in-Time” education. Subject-matter influencers operating on platforms such as YouTube and LinkedIn serve as social technology translators. Their strength does not stem from their reach, but from their perceived independence. From a Habermasian perspective, this model most fully realizes the ideal of communicative action (1984). The subject-matter influencer democratizes knowledge about RES by breaking down the hermetic barrier of technical data. Through interactivity – including Q&A sessions and direct dialogue under posts – influencers can defuse false information and technological fears in real-time, before they transform into organized resistance. Unlike Model A, which is based on prestige, and Model B, which is based on neighborhood proximity, Model C builds the intellectual groundwork for acceptance. IDI's interviews with digital creators confirmed that their independence was a key filter to reduce the fear of "created risk". An excerpt from an interview with IDI (Expert-Influencer Technology): *"People in the comments under my videos about RES do not ask about the CSRD directive, because it is a dead letter for them. They ask: 'Mr. mechanic, will these shovels really bury in the forest after 20 years?'. I go to the recycling plant with my camera, film the process, explain it in human language, without corporate gibberish. Viewers write to me: 'Thanks, finally someone showed it without a joke, now I understand.'"*

These data prove that Model C effectively builds intellectual capital, being an indispensable tool for translating technocratic knowledge into the language of universal values. Influencers are perceived as passionate auditors who test technology for the common good. The analysis proves that this is a fundamental model in the pre-investment phase, when social knowledge of technology is at its lowest. Their role consists of taming manufactured risk through a substantive yet accessible discourse, which constitutes a necessary stage in ascending the SLO pyramid (Boutillier and Thomson, 2011).

Analyzing the mechanisms of credibility transfer in the context of the dynamics of the Social License to Operate, it is worth looking at this process from a psychological perspective. The fundamental process identified during research on the personification of ESG communication is the transfer of credibility. From the perspective of the sociology of development and Carl Hovland's Source Credibility Theory, this mechanism consists of projecting the sender's attributes onto the subject of the message—in this case, large-scale energy investments (Hovland et al., 1953). This process rests on three pillars: perceived competence, social attractiveness, and trustworthiness. In the energy sector, burdened by a historical lack of trust in large market players, a corporation rarely possesses the resources to generate authentic trust on its own (Porter & Kramer, 2011). It must, therefore, strategically borrow it from social actors who already possess this capital. This mechanism acts as an emotional buffer, significantly lowering the temperature of public discourse. A resident, seeing

a familiar and liked face within Model A or listening to a leader with a similar habitus in Model B, is less likely to react with primal resentment to the company's informational message. Trust transfer occurs here on a subliminal level: the sender's authority becomes a transmission passport for technical data that, in an impersonal ESG report, would be rejected as an element of corporate manipulation.

3.4. Empirical analysis of ESG communication personification models

The process analysis shows that introducing a „human face” to the ESG strategy effectively reduces cognitive dissonance among stakeholders. This dissonance arises at the intersection of the company's global declarations on climate care and the local perception of the investment as an „alien aggressor” that violates the place's identity. Personification models (A, B, C) shift the center of gravity from the question of *what* we communicate – understood as compliance data – to *who* and *how* the relationship is built. From a Habermasian perspective, this is a process of reversing the effects of the colonization of the lifeworld. When a specific, credible figure becomes the guarantor of the data in a report, its perception shifts from technocratic symbolic violence to a set of objective facts verified by someone the community respects. Personification allows for bypassing the filter of skepticism, which is a necessary condition for any substantive discussion about the benefits of RES.

The most significant result of applying models based on social actors is their impact on the dynamics and sustainability of the Social License to Operate. In the studied cases, this process proceeded in a cascade, corresponding to the successive levels of Thomson and Boutilier's (2011) SLO pyramid.

1. At the legitimacy stage, where Model A plays a key role, general brand recognition is built, and technology is familiarized on a macro scale. The national ambassador grants the corporation the status of a widely accepted actor in public life, building bridging capital. This is the foundation without which the company would remain in corporate isolation.
2. The credibility stage is the moment when Model C and the technology translation process become crucial. The subject-matter influencer, through the democratization of knowledge, builds the intellectual foundations for trust. If residents understand the mechanisms of RES operations through education delivered in a human voice, their fear of the unknown gives way to a rational assessment of the benefits.
3. The culmination of the process is the stage of full trust – the peak of the pyramid, understood as the psychological identification of the community with the project. This is unattainable without building bonding capital, which is the domain of Model B. Only neighborhood authority and the cognitive proximity of a local leader allow for transforming residents from opponents into project partners. The energy project ceases to be perceived as foreign and becomes an integral part of local success.

Research indicates that the sustainability of the obtained social license is directly dependent on mitigating the „authenticity gap”. This occurs when the image

of the company's human face drastically diverges from its actual operational practices. In the era of the CSRD directive, any attempt at personification that is not fully supported by operational facts is immediately identified as greenwashing (Directive (EU) 2022/2464, 2022).

The analysis shows that the highest SLO sustainability was achieved by projects in which the energy company had the courage to accept the autonomy of its social actors in Models B and C. From a sociological perspective, this is a model of „controlled loss of control”. The credibility of a local leader or influencer stems from their authenticity, which may also include asking difficult questions or offering constructive criticism to the investor. Paradoxically, it is precisely this permissible, constructive criticism that builds the highest level of message authenticity in the eyes of the local community, thereby guaranteeing the stability of the relationship throughout the investment's long-life cycle, estimated at 25–30 years.

The findings from action research confirm that in the modern RES sector, the product is no longer just electricity, but above all, the relationship and trust, which cannot be maintained without considering the attributes of subjectivity and continuous relational dialogue (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A comparative analysis of investment processes conducted by energy companies allows for the formulation of a clear thesis: shifting the communication sender from an impersonal system to a specific person is a decisive factor in the pace and sustainability of achieving SLO. In the initial phase of most of the projects studied, a task-oriented communication model dominated, in which the sender was an impersonal development department or press office. From a sociological perspective, such a sender represents only the instrumental logic of the system; when it collides with the lifeworld of the local community, it generates natural resistance and defensive attitudes. A breakthrough in the process of obtaining acceptance occurred at the moment of deliberate personification of the message. Replacing technocratic messages with a narrative led by selected social actors in Models A, B, and C shifted the centre of gravity from the substance of the dispute to the relational plane.

The main result of changing the sender is breaking the barrier of the investment's „alienness”. A traditional corporate expert, despite high hard competencies, has low credibility capital in the eyes of residents because they are perceived as a party of interest. Introducing an intermediary-sender, such as a subject-matter influencer in Model C, changes the architecture of the dialogue.

The studied cases demonstrated that changing the sender altered perceptions of risk:

- In Model B, the message coming from a neighbour or a village head was perceived as „locally verified”. Residents felt that the sender shared the same concerns with them, which neutralized the sense of threat to territorial identity.
- Conversely, in Model C, the sender served as an external social auditor. Their perceived independence allowed for the legitimization of facts that previously, when provided directly by the company, were rejected as propaganda.

This change enabled a transition from the level of legal legitimacy—where residents acknowledge the company's right to build but remain hostile toward it—to the level of social credibility, which constitutes the second step of the SLO pyramid.

Empirical evidence from the conducted Action Research indicates that changing the sender not only accelerates the investment process but also endows it with sustainability. In municipalities where communication relied on anonymous reports, the social license was fragile, and any minor technical incident could trigger a wave of protests (Yin, 2018). In contrast, in projects utilizing personification, the obtained acceptance was more crisis resistant. This results from the fact that personification enables the building of relational capital, which acts as an air cushion in conflict situations. In one of the analyzed cases, when an operational error occurred on the construction site, the intervention of a local opinion leader – that is, a sender whom the community trusted – prevented the escalation of the conflict to the level of an investment blockade. This sender, thanks to their symbolic capital, was able to negotiate a „credit of trust” for the company that it would never have received on its own.

Summing up this part of the results, it must be stated that, in the energy sector, the effectiveness of ESG communication depends on the credibility of its sender. Moving from a subject-oriented model focused on technology to a person-oriented model based on relationships and trust in credible actors is the only effective path toward a sustainable energy transition in harmony with society (Suchacka, 2015). The personification of communication is not merely the packaging of a message, but a profound change in the risk management paradigm, in which the authenticity and relational capital of the sender become more important assets than the technical parameters of the RES installation.

4. Discussion and conclusions – towards a new paradigm of ESG communication

The analysis of the three personification models (national ambassador, local leader, expert-influencer) in the energy sector allows for conclusions that extend beyond a simple assessment of marketing effectiveness. In the light of the sociology of development, the transformation of the communication model from impersonal to subjective is not so much an image-related choice as it is a systemic necessity in the process of reflexive modernization. The main conclusion drawn from the research is that, in the era of risk society, the „product” of an energy company is no longer just a megawatt-hour of energy, but primarily safety and relational predictability. Traditional ESG reporting, although essential from a regulatory perspective under the CSRD directive, remains a dead letter in the world of local communities until it undergoes translation by credible social actors. The change in the message sender, as demonstrated in chapter three, is, in essence, an attempt to restore communicative action in the Habermasian sense in which technocratic dominance previously prevailed.

However, a critical analysis of the collected material dictates caution against uncritical optimism toward personification. During the discussion, two main threats should be identified:

1. The celebrity trap (Model A): utilizing ambassadors with national status carries the risk of „empty transfer”. If real changes in the company's organizational culture do not follow the image of a universally respected person, a so-called authenticity gap is created (Directive (EU) 2022/2464, 2022). From a sociological perspective, this is a form of image neocolonialism, where the actor's symbolic capital is cynically used to legitimize actions that do not meet ESG standards in the operational sphere.
2. The risk of instrumentalizing leaders (Model B): the greatest threat to the stability of SLO is the perception of local leaders as the corporation's „influence agents”. As Goffman (1959) indicates, symbolic capital is an extremely fragile resource—a leader's credibility, once lost within their community, is practically impossible to regain. Energy companies must, therefore, develop an „ethical distance” model in which the social actor retains the right to criticism and independent evaluation.

The discussion on the results leads to the conclusion that the goal of modern ESG communication should be the transition from acceptance to the psychological ownership of the project by the community (Pope & Wall, 2025). Models based on personification, particularly Models B (Local Leader) and C (Expert-Influencer), can foster the sense that the RES investment is a common good rather than an alien body in the landscape. In this process, a key role is played by mitigating identity fears. Energy transformation, as perceived through the sociology of place, is an invasive process (Orłowska et al. 2024). Personification allows for the „domestication” of technology. When the sender is an influencer-enthusiast, RES technology ceases to be a threat and becomes a fascinating modernization tool in which the resident wants to participate. This is the highest degree of legitimacy, in which the barrier between „us” (the community) and „them” (the corporation) becomes blurred in favor of a common developmental goal.

The research conducted has led to the emergence of a target model for ESG communication for the energy sector, which can be called integrated trust management. This model constitutes an original research proposal and is based on three pillars:

- Operational foundation (ESG): hard data, audits, procedural transparency – this is „communication hygiene”, without which no actor will undertake the representation of the company.
- Relational architecture (Social Actors): the strategic selection of senders matched to the habitus of the recipients. The company cannot speak with one voice to everyone; it must use coordinated polyphony.
- Continuous dialogue (Action Research): communication is not a one-time act (a campaign), but a research process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The

company must constantly monitor sentiment and be ready to adjust its actions in response to signals from its „human faces”.

5. Summary and recommendations for practice

This study has demonstrated that the energy transformation in the RES sector is not merely a technological process, but primarily a profound renegotiation of the social contract between capital and the local community. The following recommendations aim to translate the patterns identified during the research into specific guidelines for management practice and ESG communication.

The main recommendation stemming from the analysis is the necessity to completely abandon the transactional communication model – based on the erroneous belief that financial benefits for the municipality automatically buy acceptance – in favor of relational communication. In this context, focus should be placed on the following actions:

- Implementation of the social „translator model”: Energy companies should move away from exclusively delegating engineers or lawyers to speak with residents. Practice demonstrates that technocratic language is a form of symbolic violence that deepens the colonization of the „lifeworld”. It is recommended to create interdisciplinary teams in which social mediators, capable of translating ESG standards into local cultural codes, play a key role.
- Institutionalization of local presence: The success of Model B indicates that credibility is built through physical and permanent presence. It is recommended to create local RES information centers in investment municipalities, staffed by individuals enjoying neighborhood authority. This allows for mitigating the NIMBY syndrome through ongoing, informal dialogue rather than solely through statutory administrative hearings.

In the area of utilizing third parties for ESG communication, which includes Models A and C, the primary recommendation is to maintain a high degree of sender autonomy. This can be achieved through:

- Mitigating the authenticity gap: the use of a national ambassador within Model A must be preceded by due ethical diligence. If a figure with high symbolic capital promotes a company that does not demonstrate operational progress in decarbonization, the risk of a rapid erosion of trust affects both parties. It is recommended that cooperation with influencers take the form of a substantive partnership rather than merely an advertising contract,
- Supporting independent social auditors: within Model C, companies should make their installations available for independent testing and reviews. Paradoxically, allowing critical but substantive reviewers to have a voice builds greater credibility than one-sided promotional

messaging. Realization of this recommendation requires company boards to accept the risk of a „controlled loss of control” over the message.

Obtaining a Social License to Operate is not a state granted once and for all, but a dynamic process (Boutilier & Thomson, 2011). A valuable conclusion is, therefore, the introduction of the Local Sentiment Index (LSI). Companies should integrate sentiment-monitoring tools into local media alongside traditional ESG reporting. This allows for the early identification of tensions before they escalate into protests blocking the investment. Concurrently, local communities should be included in decision-making processes – for example, through joint decision-making regarding the location of nature compensations or grant funds. Only then does the investment cease to be an „alien body” and become an element of local development identity and a prosumer society.

This article, despite its broad scope, opens new research fields that should be addressed by the sociology of development and management sciences:

1. Comparative analysis of different RES technologies: It is worth investigating whether the dynamics of obtaining SLO differ significantly between wind projects – characterized by high visibility and landscape interference – and photovoltaic or biogas plants. Each of these technologies generates different fears and requires different personification.
2. The role of artificial intelligence and algorithms in ESG communication: A potential direction for research is the analysis of how social media algorithms influence the polarization of opinions around energy investments and whether „digital influencers” can fulfill a similar role in credibility transfer as live social actors.
3. Long-term SLO sustainability in a thirty-year cycle: Most research focuses on the construction phase. There is an urgent need for a sociological analysis of the operation and decommissioning phases – how the relationship with the company evolves after two decades of neighborhood and how the role of social actors changes in the process of „technological aging” within the local landscape.
4. Neurosociology of climate communication: Studying affective reactions to different types of senders of climate risk messages could provide hard data to support the thesis that personifying the message is necessary.

In conclusion, it is recommended that the energy sector stop treating the social dimension and communication as a „soft cost” and start treating them as strategic intangible assets. In the era of reflexive modernization, without credible social actors and without authentic dialogue, the technocratic energy system will be unable to meet the challenges of decarbonization, encountering an increasingly impermeable barrier of social resistance.

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