

## For the overall good of society: decision-making processes for energy projects in Finland

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**Abstract:** Finnish decision making processes have evoked admiration abroad as they produce seemingly consensual decisions on highly contested energy projects, such as new nuclear power plants. This article explores an issue that has received little attention in the past, but will become a more pressing issue with increasing numbers of assessments in resource-rich or strategically well-located communities. In particular, the impact of planning itself is in focus here, and the article argues for a greater understanding of how planning can have adverse impacts on communities, especially in the case of repeated planning processes. In addition, the article discusses the implications of vague objectives of procedures as they can often produce frustration and a participation fatigue among residents, thus entailing the opposite of the intended effects of planning for large-scale projects. In combination with highly idealised procedural conduct, there remains little opportunity to make use of the new democratic spaces of participatory planning and assessment processes.

### Introduction

Since its introduction a few decades ago, environmental impact assessment (EIA) has become a standard tool in land use planning and decision-making processes. To date, it has been formalised in around one hundred countries, all featuring a similar set-up. Its relevance for society, this article argues, reaches far beyond an administrative exercise however. Being an “increasingly pervasive part [...] of regulatory law in general” (McGillivray & Holder 2007: 1) environmental impact assessment in its strategic and project dimensions has been termed an “intriguing policy phenomenon” (Cashmore *et al.* 2008: 1233).

Conceptually, environmental impact assessment is part of a “revolution in the

environmental field” (Elling 2008: 15) that has influenced and changed decision-making on a wider scale so that today we consider the “environment as a goal” (*ibid.*). Within the last two to three decades, this goal was altered towards precautionary measures, having mitigated large-scale point-source pollution in Europe and North America in the 1980s and 1990s. Furthermore, dealing with “the environment as a goal” today entails cultural dimensions, as social problems are often attributed to environmental decision-making.

Expectations regarding environmental impact assessment are great and it has often been promoted as the key component for sustainable development planning (e.g. Hanna 2009). It is meant to achieve public acceptance of often high-risk technologies

and industrial projects, to secure protection of the environment and yet promote economic growth at the same time. Indeed, it is assumed that environmental protection and economic development can be balanced and the EIA process has the aim of legitimising this (Petts 1999). Observing this change towards an integration of social and economic considerations, Morrison-Saunders and Fischer criticise the “downgrading of environmental considerations in assessment and decision-making processes” (2006: 20). The authors assume that possibilities to protect the environment effectively are severely reduced, with severe consequences for human livelihood.

A fundamental difficulty in the study of environmental impact assessment has been the measurement of effectiveness regarding its various aims, and despite the arguments advanced in its favour “we still do not understand fully whether EIA is fulfilling potential or wasting opportunity” (Petts 1999: 5). Petts further argues that an evaluation of decision-making activities that have their roots in highly technocentric assessment of environmental states “can produce uncomfortable results” (ibid.: 6), which stand in stark contrast to the managerial enthusiasm about successfully completed processes.

By looking at the publicly more tangible aspects of land use planning, i.e. environmental impact assessment procedures, this article discusses the widely recognised aim of these processes to enable public participation and by doing so, to achieve higher degrees of legitimacy in decision-making as well as to increase trust in decision making institutions. In my work on EIA processes, I am interested in how

the communicative, or participative, turn in planning and assessment procedures can be challenged regarding certain effects as well as effectiveness: effects in terms of the impact of procedures on local communities and effectiveness in terms of possibilities to involve citizens in a way that is meaningful to them and that shows that citizen input has had an influence on the outcome of the process. This generally follows Yiftachel’s (2001: 1) question, “What is the impact of urban and regional planning on social and political relations?” and assumes that planning entails mechanisms for social control as he stated in his account of the “dark side” of planning (Yiftachel, 1998), recognising the tendency towards an “unchallenged acceptance of planning’s benevolent power” (Yiftachel, 2001: 1) among practitioners as well as scholars. In Finland, the benevolent aspect in planning is strong, and is expressed in the frequent notion of energy development for the “overall good of society”.

## **The “overall good of society”**

This article is based on empirical data I collected during a four-year PhD project exploring the conceptual and institutional frameworks of current planning and assessment processes for the siting of nuclear and hydro projects in Finland (Strauss 2011). It comprises 30 in-depth interviews with environmental officials, regional planners, consultants and residents concerned with large-scale energy development projects. In addition, newspaper discussions have been followed closely, and hearings as well

as demonstrations have been attended. A central aim of my work was to identify the practice of planning, including impact assessment, and to reflect on these practices against the background of their conceptual aims. Taking the “overall good of society” (mentioned for instance in the Nuclear Energy Act 990/1987) as a central concept, in this article I will scrutinise the impact of planning processes on people’s actual well-being. This is a point that has received little attention among scholars and practitioners alike, but it touches on important questions residents of areas faced with the prospect of large-scale projects being developed regularly ponder, especially when they reflect on the nature of the public participation and its barriers.

Acknowledging the effort to make decision-making processes more accessible for the general public, I however highlight the need to recognise the adverse impacts of planning and assessment procedures themselves. I argue that the actual impact of impact assessments deserves scholarly attention especially in the context of large-scale energy projects, not least because planning processes are often reiterated, for instance when earlier project proposals had been dismissed. These cases of repeated or prolonged planning and assessment processes can often have a considerable negative effect on the local community, which is forced to engage with similar proposals repeatedly and ultimately experiences a participation fatigue. Furthermore, participants are usually confronted with the expectation to refrain from political argument and to engage with proponents and the planning process in a highly rational manner.

At the same time, community members are rarely offered the chance to discuss their own visions for community development. Within project assessments, the scope of debate is highly limited to local impacts and since the implementation of strategic assessment is lagging behind by far, opportunities to discuss questions of wider importance are rare. This situation is not confined by Finland, of course, and there are many examples of how this situation plays out elsewhere in the global North (e.g. for a discussion of northern Canada, see Nuttall 2010). In my own work in Finland, I have also observed how frustration occurs where planning is repeatedly conducted without involving residents in the production of a general vision for community development that lasts beyond the submission of the next industrial proposal. Where planning processes have been repeatedly conducted, this has implications for the successful application of a participatory, proceduralised form of decision-making in the future.

### **Aims of participatory planning and assessment processes**

The shift from technocratic management to a form of planning and decision-making that involves civil society but also ordinary, unorganised citizens more directly, has been termed the communicative, or participatory turn in governance (Healey 2003). Theorists such as Rawls (1997), Habermas ((1984, 1987), Fischer (2006, 2009) and Dryzek (2002) have been leading the academic discussion and reinforcing respective

policy and management practices towards a normative understanding of ‘rational’, or ‘reasonable’, discourse that results in societal consensus over contested issues. I argue that this understanding strongly reflects notions of contemporary decision-making processes in consensual, highly homogenous societies such as Finland.

Consensus results from rational discourse, advocates of the deliberative democracy concept assume, very much in line with Max Weber’s conceptualisation of bureaucracy (Weston, 2010). Other authors have argued that these concepts reveal a “certain naïveté [...] about the political potential and behavior of citizens” (Patterson 2000: 225) as they require rational or reasonable argument between opposing parties by asking participants to veil their history and personal interest in ideal speech situations. While it appears useful to accept some of the requirements for rational discourse over contested issues, such as the right of the other to express him- or herself, idealistic expectations towards consensual decision-making deny the political reality of contemporary western societies (Mouffe 2009) and strip administrative procedures of their potential to function as a legitimate forum for democratic engagement (McClymont 2011). Albeit the fact that the process is featured by good intentions, potential participants may not feel the need to engage accordingly, especially when they see chances that outcomes will be more favourable if they use instrumental means of manipulation (Hillier 2003). Hence, the very same planning and assessment procedures, as they are suggested by common EU regulation, may evoke a rather different set

of practices in more adversarial societies, for instance in central and southern Europe. In the Finnish context, they fail to create additional democratic space as they do not challenge existing power relations or the desirability of consensus. Especially the notion of decision-making for the “overall good of society” and the institutional arrangements that allow private businesses to define means and purposes of planning and assessment procedures prevents, rather than supports, new political debate over irreconcilable viewpoints. Rather, “[c]ommunicative action seeks to suture differences sufficiently that an agreement can emerge as to what the common good entails” (Purcell 2009: 152).

In Finnish self-depiction, rational or, “realist” argument and pragmatic decision-making (Sairinen and Lindholm 2004) is highly valued and rhetorically framed as pertaining ultimately the “overall good of society” (Nuclear Energy Act 990/1987). Heated political debate over contested issues is usually termed undue and prevented by politicians who remind their colleagues and constituencies to avoid an overpoliticisation of, in their view, technical and economic questions, such as the siting of new nuclear power plants. This strategy has proven to be highly efficient, considering that schedules of planning, assessment and decision-making are followed “without slippage” (Nuclear Energy Agency 2004). Finnish as well as foreign scholars often engage in this identity-making process that conceives of Finns as realist pragmatists, as the article by Sairinen and Lindholm (2004) is titled. Moisio (2006: 455), however, confirms that, especially in the Finnish case, “realism as a political strategy [is]

often used among political elites in their struggles to persuade audiences and vilify their opponents. Understood in this way, [...] “political realism” is nothing but a specific rhetorical strategy, a way of framing political arguments”.

Yardsticks for a decision-making procedure, including its participatory planning and assessment processes, are framed according to the realist-pragmatist paradigm. At the same time as technical and economic values are promoted, prevalent rationales appeal to the moral values of Finnish welfare society. According to this understanding, the individual and his or her vested interest possess less legitimacy to demand the right of consideration in the public discourse. In practice, however, disagreement can successfully be masked during a collaborative or communicative process, but it requires exclusion, Laclau and Mouffe argue (2001). Strong idealistic expectations towards citizens’ behaviour in planning and assessment procedures silence and exclude in advance as well as during the process those who prefer to engage with involved actors differently.

Whilst citizens silently or privately cope with what is advertised as consensus achieved during a sound collaborative/communicative process, they may rather have wished to agree on a compromise that reflects opposing viewpoints (McClymont 2011). As they are stripped of an opportunity to engage in an adversarial manner with institutions sailing under the flag of good procedural conduct, and this is often true in the Finnish case, citizens’ discomfort with planning and decision-making increases. The meaningfulness of participation in communicative processes may be seriously

challenged and the process as well as its outcome rejected. Moreover, implicit trust in authorities and the democratic system as a whole dwindles in accordance with frustrating experiences and a gradual feeling of dissatisfaction with the process. Influenced by the impression that a participatory process has little democratic potential, the targeted public may decide to play along or to abandon participation altogether. Thus divided into a group of supporters and opponents, the process can seriously affect community cohesion and thus, citizens’ well-being.

Some communities in northern Finland have a long history in assessment procedures, and many residents continuously prepare for future procedures. Finnish Lapland produces more electricity than it consumes (Regional Council of Lapland 2009), yet one of the potential host communities for a new nuclear power plant was located in the region (Fennovoima Oy 2008), which would then produce electricity solely for large industrial customers located south of Finnish Lapland. The Lappish community was depicted as being overly positive about the nuclear power planning both in Finnish and international media, and dissenting voices could find no way to be heard outside the community. Suffering from the social and cultural impacts of outmigration and high unemployment rates, communities in the Finnish North continually struggle in encouraging public debate on issues other than those that have purely economic dimensions. Since they are dependent on economic support, and since ‘rational’ discourse on the appropriate means to achieve the common (“overall”, national) good is prioritised in the process of negotiation, opposing groups start

from a weak position in case they wish to argue for their own good. Purcell (2009) emphasises that this disempowerment through communicative procedures is especially problematic in cases of historic injustice. In the Finnish North, large-scale energy projects have deprived local people of their livelihoods since the early times of industrialisation (which took place at a much later stage in the Finnish North than for instance in central Europe), while opportunities for alternative livelihoods are highly limited due to the specific features of the biophysical environment.

Thus, the history of places, people and procedures, both in the long term and in the short term need to be taken into account in planning and assessment of large-scale energy projects. Planning theory places the focus on the planner, and discusses applied concepts, processes and interactions. However, it pays attention “far less to the substantive nature and consequences of that activity [...]. It has thus tended to focus on the ‘how’ over the ‘what’, impeding the development of explanatory theories and critical insights” (Yiftachel, 2001: 5–6). Moreover, planning is usually understood as a progressive undertaking, and the positive connotation of the term “development” provides evidence of this. Public participation in planning is similarly taken for granted as a usual measure, and practitioners have widely ignored the limitations of participatory planning processes. Awareness is, however, growing as “an era of participation research is drawing to a close, particularly the bigger debates around identifying the limits of collaborative planning and revealing or reasserting the influence of the power

of the ‘dark-side’ in neo-liberal planning practice” (Brownhill & Parker 2010: 276).

## Vague purposes of public participation

Evaluations of planning and assessment practices struggle with vague definitions of the purposes of public participation in the first place (on the Finnish environmental impact assessment process, see Pölönen *et al.* 2010). The Finnish Act on Environmental Impact Assessment Procedure (468/1994) only briefly touches the topic:

*“The aim of this Act is to further the assessment of environmental impact and consistent consideration of this impact in planning and decisionmaking, and at the same time to increase the information available to citizens and their opportunities to participate.”*

In the legal text following this paragraph, two hearings are explicitly described, whereas further opportunities for citizen participation are not outlined, albeit them being (however vaguely) requested as shown in the quote above. This is also the case for regulatory guidelines on the land use planning process requiring a “participatory scheme”. In both cases – land use planning and impact assessment – the public has the opportunity to review participatory elements of the procedure in hearings. Complaints on the planning or assessment programme are to be submitted to the coordinating authority, who then requests the industrial proponent to take these into account during the implementation of the

process. Following the completion of the planning or assessment process, a list of complaints and how they have been met is published in the final report.

In interviews with planners, consultants and industrial proponents during my research, it was pointed out to me that firstly, during the drafting of the environmental impact assessment law, practices of planning procedures were adopted and secondly, that the specific design of the participatory scheme is very much left to consultants who are in charge of the process. The main consultant firms in Finland offer long term experience in siting procedures to their clients, i.e. the proponents of large-scale industrial projects, who again are experts in technological questions. However they often lack the experience to facilitate participatory events, although, to be fair, in some cases participatory events are facilitated well. The main problem, however, tends to be the attitude that proponents have towards local people in terms of whether or not they consider them as true participants in environmental impact assessment processes, or whether merely providing information about a project and engaging in some form of consultation is sufficient. It is often the case, however, that local people feel disgruntled that their knowledge is not taken into account in planning processes.

In addition to the obligatory public hearings during planning and assessment, which are conducted under supervision by the coordinating authority, the consultant in cooperation with the industrial proponent usually organises a specific set of measures. These include for instance a “steering” or “discussion” group to which representatives

of local organisations are invited, “town square events”, exhibitions, and information bulk mail. In new places, the industrial proponent opens local offices. As has been argued in more detail elsewhere (Strauss 2010, 2011) the participatory scheme in planning and assessment processes as practiced in Finland strengthens information exchange over technical aspects, impacts and concerns.

The analysis of programmes, reports and interviews with practitioners and participants has shown that a participatory scheme as such is rarely scrutinised *ex ante* its implementation in the planning and assessment process in terms of its usefulness to let citizens participate, whereas most of the attention is devoted to the scoping of impacts to be addressed (Strauss 2011). Interviewed managers and authorities insisted that practices have been developed and refined over the last twenty-five years, and that there should be little doubt about their appropriateness. Possible biases, arising from the central role of the consultant firm in both procedures and acting on behalf of the industrial proponent, were not denied but, in the words of one environmental official I interviewed, were regarded as “not a problem in Finland”.

## Conclusion

Summarising the above described context of planning and political paradigms in Finland, it is important to point out structural deficiencies which require greater attention. It has been argued that purposes of public participation are vague and open to industrial bias, manifesting itself in

specific institutional arrangements which receive little scrutiny. Accordingly, questions of inclusion and exclusion receive slight attention in the development of practices. Rather, procedures are geared towards “smooth”, i.e. conflict-free siting procedures. Although one has to be careful not to generalise too much, I would argue that this is in line with current Finnish ideology, where political decision-making processes of often national importance as well as long-term local and regional significance is deproblematized into the administration of technological innovation.

Due to a narrow understanding of “environmental impact”, participatory planning and assessment processes promote exchange between involved actors on biophysical impacts and technical options to mitigate them, exhibiting a strong scientific focus. Matters of personal well-being, political orientation and ethical argument are constrained within ideologies for the ostensible overall good and neither revealed as such, nor opened for debate. The histories of specific communities require more attention, especially in cases of large-scale energy projects, and even more so in cases where planning processes have been repeated over decades. Here, any further planning is embedded in a community that has experienced a variety of approaches, and participatory planning processes differ out of necessity.

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