

Working paper: Where does controversy come from? -The role of the formal participation process in citizens' sensemaking

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Introduction

Impact assessments tend to focus on economical and environmental impacts when evaluating a project, whereas citizens focus primarily on the impact on their everyday life. This creates tension that is not always resolved in the participation process. Planning literature often focus on the importance of the project and participation process in resolving these tensions. (Michels and de Grass, 2010) Therefore, the focus is often put on what citizens expect from a formal participation process and their roles in the formal arenas created for participation. (Tuler and Webler, 1999; Smith and McDonough, 2001). This approach has a tendency to presume, that a good participation process will eliminate conflict in the planning process. (Innes and Booher, 2004) Consequently, it can be difficult to explain, what sparks controversy when it occurs in planning processes containing thorough participation processes and moderate impacts on local communities.

This paper poses the statement that to explain controversy especially in low-impact cases, it is necessary to turn away from the formal participation process and investigate how citizens make sense of the process and the materiality of the project in their own arenas as well as in the formal arenas and come to define their actions accordingly. The claim is that citizens' attitudes towards projects are influenced by a broad range of actors originating from their own arenas as well as the formal arenas. Hence, it is not adequate to investigate the construction of meaning and action that takes place in formal arenas of participation. In addition, one must turn to the spaces where, as Jones and Gaventa (2002) put it; "*... citizens spend their everyday life*" (Jones and Gaventa, 2002, p. 22). Consequently, it is essential to broaden the scope of interest and view the planning process as a part of the citizens' world as opposed to the citizens being a part of the planning process. This will allow us to explain controversy even in low conflict cases. Here lies the scope of the paper.

To investigate how citizens create meaning in a planning process a sensemaking approach is applied. The approach is constructive and interactive in its ontological point of departure which means that there is no assumption of causality between certain actors in a planning process. Rather, meaning is something that is created through interaction between the surrounding environment, the individual and other individuals through communication. (Weick 1995) This dynamic approach is a key to understanding why controversy occurs in seemingly unlikely situations.

Methods

The sensemaking perspective applied in this paper has the basic assumption that events like e.g. infrastructure projects create disturbances to the citizen's flux of information which inspires sensemaking. This perspective is here coupled with an actor-network theory approach (ANT). This approach views it as a simplification to perceive this disturbance as being only one homogenous actor. Rather it is regarded as an actor-network consisting of many actors. The citizen is drawn into this network when he is involved in the participation process, but he is not merely a passive intermediary being translated by the planners. He himself is an actor and he therefore begins to create his own network of meaningful actors in order to make sense of the situation. In other words; he begins to translate. That is a process where actors are associated by the citizen in order to define an event. (Callon 1991) Hence, in order to

understand how citizens make sense when they are involved in low impact projects, we will need to uncover the range of different actors involved in their actor-network.

The data collection for this paper is inspired by the post-ANT tradition which perceives ANT as an epistemological basis for conducting empirical inductive studies. (Fariás, 2011) As opposed to more deductively inspired approaches, which are often based on pre-defined concepts, this method ventures to define the analytical concepts via the empirical findings.

Two different methods are used to uncover the actors in the citizen's network in two cases: Firstly, 26 interviews with citizens participating in two open house events in connection with a cable project are conducted to get an idea of which actors are deemed important by the citizens. Then, four observations of negotiations between landowners and negotiators from a planning authority are conducted and in-depth interviews are made with the four landowners. These are analyzed in order to uncover the dynamics between the different actors in the citizens' network and understand how they influence the action of the citizens.

The study is a single impact case study consistent of two cases concerning the same kind of infrastructure – power cables. The two cases are a part of the Danish government "Cable Action Plan 2009" that entails the entire 132-150 kV electrical grid being converted into underground cables (Energinet 2009). The two cases are different stretches of the plan and are as such rather similar, as they are both examples of the establishment of a power cable in a rural area.

Having a cable on your land entails some negative effects e.g. prohibition against trees and buildings on top of the cable. However, as far as infrastructure projects go, they are as such presumably low-impact cases and in Denmark there is rarely any controversy in regards to cable projects.

Results

The preliminary interviews reveal four different actors that influence the citizens' sensemaking processes: The effect of the cable project on the citizens' everyday practice, the effect of the cable on the local community, The citizens' preexisting knowledge and their considerations for the greater good. These were also found in the four in-depth observations and interviews along with several other actors.

In order to examine the role of an ongoing project in the citizens' sensemaking process, analyses were made of the actors present in the sensemaking networks of individual citizens. Only one analysis is included in this paper. It might be considered a proof of concept.

The landowner is generally dissatisfied that the cable is to be established on his land, but he has no hope that he will be able to influence the planning. He describes his first reaction to the cable project as follows: *"(...) I just gave up instantly and said – It will come no matter what. I might as well try to think positive about it. Otherwise I'll just go around being angry, and it's only me who suffers from that."*

His lack of trust in his potential influence originates from earlier experience with planning processes. He has at an earlier point been involved in a groundwater preservation project and has been subjected to restrictions on the use of his land which have compelled him to change his stock from dairy cattle to beef cattle. This has resulted in a different work routine for him e.g. he is now sending cattle for slaughter regularly instead of the daily milking. His experience with the process is characterized by lack of respect for him, and he describes a situation where the planners used the fact that they had an un-

limited time span as leverage against him. However, for him inadequate compensation is a key actor and not so much the change on his farm and everyday practices. He finds that the assessment of his compensation was unfair and that his requests in the process of assessing the compensation were disregarded. As a result the groundwater process has left him with low expectations for future planning processes.

He states that he expects to lose most of his land due to further groundwater planning, yet he still plans ahead for the farm. Consequently, the effect of the restrictions imposed by the cable on his future plans for the land becomes an important actor in his sensemaking process e.g. the effects on his newly planted forest, which would be partly cut down if the cable was to go through it. However, his biggest concern is that the cable will prevent him from selling parts of his land to developers, who wish to build houses on it. He therefore argues that the cable should be moved from this particular part of his land.

The main part of the actors in this landowner's sensemaking process falls under the category earlier experience or future plans. The impact on his everyday practice seems to have limited importance for his sensemaking regarding the cable project but it is not totally absent from his sensemaking. His concern relates to the timing of the construction phase. At the time of the meeting, his land is sown with grass and the economic impact from the construction is therefore limited, but the landowner has plans to seed it with wheat soon. This causes him to request that the construction starts as soon as possible.

Lastly, even though he is cut off from discussing his situation with his community, his neighbors also play a role in his sensemaking process and their experiences play a part in his sensemaking alongside his own experience.

The described actors in the landowner's sensemaking process all play different roles. The past groundwater process and the compensation given to him in the process are the two most dominant ones for this particular landowner. The question is now how these actors influence the landowner's attitude and actions towards the cable project.

As stated earlier, the landowner initially has little trust in his chance of having an impact on the planning. His negative experiences with earlier planning processes, have lead him to adopt a rather hesitant approach to the negotiation. Therefore, he is surprised when it turns out that some of his requests regarding the placement of the cable can be accommodated. This prompts him to change his actions in the process. He states after the meeting: *"Well, I was rather surprised that I could move the cable at all, and I think I might want to move it once more. He [the negotiator] huffs and puffs a bit about that, but I think I might try it."*

This change in his strategy of action is prompted by the negotiators actions and the dynamics of the situation they are both a part of. This indicates that actors that arise in the interaction between the parties in a process can have a rather powerful influence in the citizen's actions.

Figure 1 is an illustration of the many actors present in the citizen's sensemaking process. It shows that the current project does not have any direct effect on the attitude and actions of the citizens (gray color and broken lines indicate less important actors) however, it does play a role in activating other actors such as the negotiator and his actions and restrictions on the landowner's future projects (indicated by the sideways arrows). Other actors, which are activated by the preceding process, are likewise less important for the sensemaking. This is the case for the restrictions and changes to practice caused by the groundwater project. The compensation and the effect it has on his neighbors are however ra-

ther influential actors in the sensemaking process as they both have direct effects on his attitudes and action in the process.

Figure 1: Illustration of actors in the network of the described landowner



Discussion

As illustrated, a wide range of actors emerge when citizens try to make sense of an impending cable project in their immediate vicinity. In the terms of the sensemaking approach, the new cable project presented to the citizens can be viewed as a disturbance to the collective actions which forces the citizens to make a new plausible sense of the situation (Weick et. al 2005). The figure above illustrates which cues are being extracted in the effort to make a plausible story.

The current project facing them is not surprisingly extracted as a relevant actor, but what is also evident is that it is far from the only actor drawn into the sensemaking process. Other scholars have pointed to different actors relevant to the sensemaking process such as the materiality (see eg. Latour 2005), the social practice of the individual (Shove et al 2012), or past experience (see eg. Weick et.al 2005). These actors are also identified in this case. In addition to these, actors such as financial compensation, the effects on the local community and the participants' perception of "the greater good" play a significant role in the sensemaking process.

The role of the ongoing project

The central claim in this paper is that citizens involved in infrastructure planning processes are influenced by a variety of actors that originate from arenas outside the formal participation arena. This claim has been made probable by visualizing the rather broad range of actors influencing one citizen. Contrary to the traditional approach to public participation, the results show that the ongoing project is not the pivotal actor in the sensemaking process. This, however, does not mean that it is insignificant. For some citizens, it has a direct effect on the sensemaking process. For others, who also draw from other past experiences, the ongoing project fades into the background, as other experiences are given priority, but it then plays a significant role in activating relevant categories of actors. Weick (1995) states that; "...because the attention is directed backward from a specific point in time (a specific here and now), whatever is occurring at the moment will influence what is discovered when people glance backward" (Weick 1995 p. 27) In other words the current cable project will always guide the citizens in selecting which past experiences are relevant to bring into the sensemaking process. In addition to past experiences, the ongoing project activates several other actors. In this case it is the negotiator, and the changes imposed by the materiality of the cable.

The origins of controversy in low-impact cases with thorough participation processes

It is now made probable that the project itself and the participation processes accompanying it do not always play pivotal roles in the sensemaking process of the citizens. This conclusion supports the statement that explanations to conflict between planners and public should be found elsewhere or rather, could also be found elsewhere than in the formal participation process.

In the case of the citizen described above, controversy originates from the fact that the citizen prior to the cable process has participated in a planning process regarding groundwater preservation that has left him with a negative perception of planning processes and his opportunity to have an impact. In other cases controversy originates from substantial changes to citizens everyday practices (Shove et. al. 2012) and for others again a fair compensation is the key actor. The point is that reasons for controversy vary and spread far beyond the narrow perspective of the formal participation process.

How to meet this challenge in planning – implications for practice

The question now is; how are planners that are concerned with avoiding conflict supposed to handle this reality? And can controversy be avoided?

In this particular case, the negotiator plays a pivotal role, because the interaction between the citizen and the negotiator changes the citizen's perception of his opportunity to inflict changes to the project. Put in a sensemaking context, it shows that the sensemaking process is dynamic. The network of actors, that the citizen extracts in order to make sense of the disturbance that is the cable project, is not a stable structure, but merely offers a plausible understanding of what the cable project is. Therefore, the citizens are easily affected by new coming actors like the negotiator, who introduces an alternative meaning into the mix - a reality where the citizen, contrary to his experience, can have an effect of the project. Therefore, the negotiation can be viewed as an act of sensemaking via communication where the citizen's plausible story regarding the project is negotiated with the negotiator and thereby changed.

However, because it varies which actors affect the citizens and at what point in the process they do it, is difficult to predict which actors will be the dominant ones in the sensemaking process. It might be the negotiator, it might not. In other cases the citizens' past experiences are so powerful that neither the project itself nor the negotiator or the participation process play any significant role in the citizen's sensemaking. Therefore, the important thing for planners is to be aware that the sensemaking process is an arena with many actors, whose significance is hard to pinpoint. Avoiding controversy is then perhaps not altogether possible but being aware of the dynamic nature of the sensemaking process they are taking part in can be beneficial.

Conclusion

This paper gives very few answers as to how controversy could be avoided. What it does however, is to broaden the scope of interest, when scholars and planners alike attempt to explain why controversy occur, when none is expected. It points to the fact that planned projects and participation processes are only part of a larger network of actors which all contribute to the sensemaking of the citizens and that this network of actors in its nature is very susceptible to other emerging actors. Therefore, controversy is something that emerges from the interaction between many actors in a sensemaking process and as such the nature of it changes constantly.

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