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# Between Big Ideas and Daily Realities – The roles and perspectives of Danish municipal green space managers on public involvement in green space maintenance

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### ABSTRACT

Public involvement (PI) in green space maintenance activities has increased during the past decades. The various (potential) benefits of PI have been recognised. Denmark, however, has no established tradition for such activities, despite its well-established tradition of volunteering. Local authorities have traditionally been the sovereign entity within public green space management, reflecting a hierarchical mode of governance. Yet, an increased call for new forms of local democracy and for new governance modes has resulted in growing attention for PI practices. Hence more knowledge is needed, for example on ongoing changes in governance arrangements regarding municipal green space.

This paper thus aims to gain insight into (a) current governance arrangements with respect to municipal green space maintenance as well as temporal changes in these and (b) the consequences of the former for governmental actors and municipal managers in particular. An analytical framework based on governance theory and the Policy Arrangement Approach was developed to meet these aims. Data was collected by means of selected semi-structured interviews with green space managers from ten Danish municipalities.

Findings show that green space PI occurred in all ten municipalities and thus that governance arrangements had started to include non-government actors, signalling a possible shift to co-governance from more common hierarchical governance modes. Green space managers felt themselves often ill-prepared for new governance arrangements and PI, e.g. in terms of lack of training and expertise. They based themselves strongly on their own experiences and preferences. More responsibility had been allocated to citizens, but often only to a select group of those who were already organised and/or had good connections with local authorities (i.e. closed co-governance). Green space managers listed a number of benefits of PI, generally adhering to the prevailing discourse of more co-governance. However, they also noted a number of challenges, including discrepancies between current maintenance practices and more PI. These, as well as a wider understanding of changing governance arrangements in green space management and maintenance, need to be addressed in future research.

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### Introduction

#### *Public involvement in landscape planning, management and maintenance*

With UNCED's Local Agenda 21 (UNCED, 1992) as an important milestone, political attention for involving local residents in decision-making about their surroundings (including urban green spaces) has increased. Besides the immediate result of improving

the local environment (Jones, 2002a; Van Herzele and Denutte, 2003) research has pointed at different paybacks from well-designed involvement processes. These include better, more widely supported decisions and enhanced feelings of ownership, which could subsequently e.g. help limit vandalism and other abuse (Van Herzele and Denutte, 2003; Ohmer et al., 2009). Ownership is also linked to the issue of positive social interactions and sense of community (Speller and Ravenscroft, 2005; Ohmer et al., 2009). Another stated benefit is enhanced awareness of green space issues, which can impact public understanding of more comprehensive global environmental problems (Van Herzele and Denutte, 2003; Speller and Ravenscroft, 2005; Ohmer et al., 2009). Finally, accommodating public funding cuts with involvement of volunteers has been mentioned as a potential benefit (Jones, 2002a; Moskell et al., 2010).

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However research has also pointed at different challenges involve with processes of public involvement (PI). One is the issue of representativeness. Studies of collaborative urban forestry planning practices in Finland show that the participant number often is limited and that there is a risk that citizens with the loudest voice are the ones that get their say. Furthermore participatory approaches are more time-demanding than traditional planning processes, while citizens tend to get high expectations that have to be managed in order to avoid disappointment (Sipilä and Tyrväinen, 2005). These findings are in line with concerns expressed by civil servants in British local authorities (Lowndes et al., 2001). A European research project on public participation in urban woodland planning and management identified continuity as a possible challenge. Several of the project's case studies showed difficulties engaging people over a longer period as well as permanence in the relationships between different stakeholders (Janse and Konijnendijk, 2007). Moreover the challenge of balancing lay knowledge and scientific knowledge is mentioned in literature on ecological risk assessment (Glicken, 2000; Van Herzele, 2004; Van Herzele and van Woerkum, 2008).

PI in green space issues can take place at different hierarchical levels, from overall urban policy-making and planning (Bond and Thompson-Fawcett, 2007; Marot, 2007) to decision-making for specific green spaces (Johnson, 2005; Speller and Ravenscroft, 2005; Van Herzele et al., 2005a,b), while also occurring during different stages of processes. It has been argued that constructive involvement processes require involving citizens as early as possible; preferably during the initial development of ideas and in the planning phase, to assure support later in the project (Van Herzele et al., 2005a,b; Agger and Hoffmann, 2008).

Additionally, Van Herzele et al. (2005b) stressed that in many cases, follow-up and continuation of working relationships after the planning phase offer unexploited potential. People might want to continue participation for example by contributing to maintenance and upkeep of the green areas. Involvement in maintenance activities can provide additional (or alternative) benefits, for example in terms of promoting participants' physical, mental and social wellbeing (Townsend, 2006; Parr, 2007). Various studies have looked at PI in maintenance and upkeep activities within the context of rural landscapes, national parks, and nature conservation (Boon and Meilby, 2000; Grönholm, 2009; Lange and Hehl-Lange, 2011), but studies of involvement in municipal urban green space maintenance are limited. Among the few examples are research on Swedish municipal park maintenance with participation of users (Delshamar, 2005), on urban forestry volunteers in the US (Moskell et al., 2010), and on partnerships between local authorities and communities in long-term management of public open spaces in a number of European cities (Burton and Dempsey, 2010).

#### *Public involvement in green space maintenance in Denmark*

In Denmark, volunteering is an important component of the wider PI agenda. Approximately one third of all Danes are involved in some kind of organised volunteering activity (Center for frivilligt socialt arbejde, 2011). When it comes to activities relating to nature and environment however, only approximately four per cent of the population is active (Jørgensen, 2012b). Most of the relevant involvement activities relate to nature and landscape management outside urban areas, where involvement of volunteers has a long history. Anglers, bird watchers and nature conservationists have been organised in associations for approximately one hundred years and have played a considerable role in e.g. registration and promotion tasks. In the last decade these organisations have also become increasingly engaged in practical tasks (Hjortsø et al., 2006). An example of this is the Danish Society for Nature Conservation (DSNC) which involves people in the maintenance of different

nature areas through the project 'Give Nature a Hand' as well as annual litter picking events (Danmarks Naturfredningsforening, 2013). A report on volunteer work in nature conservation (Hjortsø et al., 2006) compared the Danish environmental and nature sector with the social sector, an area where volunteerism has become very common since the 1980s. Both within social work and in practical nature management focus is typically on the task that has to be solved, rather than on development of personal interests (as for example in the leisure sector). When it comes to voluntary social work a specific legislation imposes the Danish municipal councils to cooperate with voluntary social organisations and associations and to support their activities financially (Ankestyrelsen, 2010). In this connection 75% of the Danish municipalities have adopted a specific policy for voluntary work within the social area (Center for frivilligt socialt arbejde, 2011). This is in sharp contrast to the focus on voluntary work within urban green space maintenance, where only few municipalities have taken more strategic initiatives, such as the 'inspiration catalogue' for green space volunteering developed by the city of Copenhagen (Center for Park og Natur, 2010). This relatively low level of activity at a strategic level could very well be rooted in Danish traditions of the state being 'the sovereign' within this field (Arts et al., 2006). Public authorities are expected to manage public nature areas and green spaces with tax payers' money. However, public sector funding has been scrutinised and studies show declining budgets for municipal green space management (Randrup and Persson, 2009). Further, the latest local government reform of 2007 resulted in larger municipal units, larger distances from municipal authorities to citizens, and an increasing call for development of local democracy – including more direct involvement of the public (Tortzen, 2008). The city of Copenhagen, for example, set up its programme to facilitate involvement of citizens in maintenance of urban green spaces, with the main aim to get people into the parks and at the same time enhance local democracy (Center for Park og Natur, 2010). A survey among chief executives of Danish municipalities shows that the extent of involvement of volunteers increased in most municipalities from 2007 to 2012. Moreover, 49% of municipalities collaborate with volunteers within the technical and environmental sector (Jørgensen, 2012a).

#### *PI as part of new modes of governance*

In this paper, the trend of a greater focus on PI in Danish green space maintenance is placed in a governance context. Arnouts et al. (2012) stated that governance generally relates to the way in which a policy process is organised (or governed). Overall, however, governance is quite an elusive concept. Here we base ourselves partly on the work of Lawrence et al. (2013) who define governance specifically in a green space context as the structures, rules, partnerships and processes that shape decisions about urban green space. However, Lawrence et al. (2013) – just like Arnouts et al. (2012) – partly based their thinking on how to 'break down' and analyse governance on the work within the so-called Policy Arrangement Approach explained in the following section.

Green space governance, as other forms of environmental governance, has been changing from being purely state (i.e. municipality) dominated to involving a wider range of actors (e.g. Lawrence et al., 2013). Focusing on forests, Kleinschmit et al. (2009), (developed from Zürn, 1998) described a continuum in governance ranging from 'governance by government', via 'government with governance', to 'governance without government', with trends towards more multi-actor decision processes. Arnouts et al. (2012) built on the work of Kooiman (2003) on different modes of governance. The authors defined four different governance modes. Hierarchical governance refers to governing as the domain of government, with non-governmental actors in a subservient role (comparable with 'governance by government'). Self-governance focuses

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