



Integrating impact assessment and conflict management in urban planning: Experiences from Finland

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the interlinkages between recent developments in conflict management and impact assessment procedures in the context of urban planning in Finland. It sets out by introducing the fields of impact assessment and conflict mediation. It then proceeds to discuss the development of impact assessment practices and the status of conflict mediation in Finnish land use planning. The case of Korteniiitty infill development plan in Jyväskylä is used to demonstrate how the Finnish planning system operates in conflict situations – and how social impact assessment can contribute to managing planning conflicts. The authors ask how the processes of impact assessment contribute to conflict management. Based on the Finnish experience, it is argued that social impact assessment of land use plans can contribute to conflict management, especially in the absence of institutionalised conflict mediation processes. In addition, SIA may acquire features of conflict mediation, depending on extent and intensity of stakeholder participation in the process, and the quality of linkages it between knowledge production and decision-making. Simultaneously, conflict mediation practices and theoretical insights can inform the application of SIA to help it address land use conflicts more consciously.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Features of land use conflicts

Politics and conflict lie at the heart of land use planning. Cullingworth and Nadin (2002) have even suggested that planning might usefully be defined as the process by which governments resolve disputes about land uses. Conflict arises fundamentally because of competing demands for a limited resource (for example the use of land); because of the uneven distribution of costs and benefits that result from the development; and because of environmental impacts that arise when the use of land changes (Jones et al., 2005: 4). Competing demands may also be grounded in incompatible roles or incompatible values (Bartos and Wehr, 2002: 12–49).

Compared to other public disputes (e.g. social policy conflicts or industrial relations), land use disputes are typically multi-party disputes where the parties may have less common ground as to how their disagreements ought to be resolved. Land use and environmental disputes require greater attention to scientific and technical considerations, and they may involve longer-term (even intergenerational) and irreversible impacts. Land use disputes also

impinge on property rights, which are very inflammable material for conflicts, involving both interest-based and identity stakes. Overall, land use disputes cut across three broad classes of public disputes: 1) disputes over the allocation of finite resources; 2) over policy priorities, and; 3) over standards of environmental quality or human health and safety. This means that land use disputes can take any one of these three dimensions. (The consensus building institute, 2000: 3.)

The explicit function of land-use planning is to ensure that the wide variety of interests at stake are taken into account when planning decisions are made, and that the development and use of land is in the general 'public interest'. "In reality, there are many different interests that might be served – including those of different levels and departments of government; developers and landowners; local residents and other members of the public that are affected by planning decisions; and other agencies, organizations and pressure groups that have an interest in planning issues and outcomes – and all these interests may have very different views on how they consider land should be developed or used" (Jones et al., 2005: 4).

Competing, incompatible goals pursued by the various actors and interest groups lead to contested land use planning and policy decisions. The impacts of those decisions on wealth, health, safety and environmental quality are at the centre of the conflict. Consequently, knowledge production on the impacts, and the communication of that knowledge, are important elements in the planning process. The role of knowledge regarding the impacts is further highlighted by the

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attention on science and technical detail in environmental and land use conflicts.

In this article, we ask how impact assessment of land use plans could be used as a tool for conflict management, and how this possibility relates to the more general discussions and developments of mediation practices in the field. We have a special interest in the role that social impact assessment could play in managing land use conflicts. We begin with a discussion on the intersection between impact assessment (IA) and conflict management and then proceed to look at the Finnish case, including the status of IA and other aspects conducive to mediation in the Finnish planning system. The case of Korteniitty, a housing development plan in Jyväskylä is used to illustrate both the Finnish planning system and the role of social impact assessment in conflictual planning situations.

We understand that the approaches of impact assessment and conflict mediation represent different traditions and rationalities. Impact assessment is more rationalistic, even bureaucratic, while conflict mediation focuses more directly on decisions and relationships between stakeholders. This means that the concrete linkages between these approaches have been rare. Despite the differences, we think that the possibilities and possible benefits of making the linkages are worth a closer examination.

2. Impact assessment and conflict management

2.1. The role of conflicts in SEA and EIA

Impact assessment of land use plans is usually addressed under the wider concept of strategic environmental assessment (SEA) which concerns assessment of policies, plans and programmes (PPP). Since the IA of land use plans is probably the easiest to implement of all types of SEA, it is not a surprise that land use planning is the sector to which SEA is most commonly applied in many countries (Jones et al., 2005: 7; Wood, 2002). In California, where SEA has been established for over 30 years, most SEAs have related to land use plans (Jones et al., 2005; Bass and Herson, 1999). In practice, SEA has been applied especially to spatial natural resource planning, planning of conservation areas, and regional planning. It is not as widely used in urban planning – even if institutionalised experiences of IA integration into urban planning do exist, for example in California and Finland (Sairinen, 2004). Today, many EU countries are developing more established practices in this field. Usually, the SEA focuses on environmental impacts, excluding social or cultural aspects. In some countries, the emphasis on wider concept of sustainable development has led to the promotion of more integrated assessment procedures which covers the whole range of impacts (Jones et al., 2005; Sairinen, 2004).

Conflict analysis does not occupy an important role in the field of impact assessment. A reading of the SEA literature reveals that the idea of using the elements of negotiations and participation within SEA as tools for conflict management is practically non-existent. Some references to the topic do exist, however.

When building a typology of the various forms of SEA in land use planning, Maria Rosário Partidário (2003) has named one possible approach “Strategic Sustainability Assessment”. Partidário’s definition provides interesting insights for the purposes of our article. Partidário sees the analysis of possible conflicts as an integral part of strategic sustainability assessment. In her definition, conflicts mark the strategic impacts of a plan or policy:

“the preliminary identification of environmental objectives (and preferably indeed sustainability objectives) before starting the land use plan formulation, in accordance with the objectives of the planning strategy, the analysis of the possible conflicts (and therefore strategic impacts) between the various sustainability objectives (which should include physical and ecological, social, economic,

political, institutional, territorial), and then the incorporation of these results into plan formulation, identification and discussion, in public forums, of alternative ways of achieving these objectives through planning solutions, which then are converted into (blueprint or strategic) zoning for plan development and implementation.” (Partidário, 2003).

Einar Leknes (2001) has analysed the role of EIA in conflict situations. He has stated that the character of the planning or policy issue at hand determines what role EIA may play in managing conflictual decision-making situations. Based on his case studies, Leknes has identified three different situations:

- Decisions in issues subject to regulation with a professional content are based on institutionalised routines. Actual decision making takes place through a dedicated administrative routine process separated from the EIA process. Here EIA cannot have big role as a conflict mediator.
- Consensus-oriented and closed negotiations based on scientific / professional reports. Here EIA is constitutive of the decisions in issues with conflicting or diffuse goals with a professional content. It is both the “knowledge generating” and the participation aspects in the EIA concept that provides for the success of EIA in decision making when related to these types of issues.
- In political issues with conflicting or diffuse goals, strategic and open negotiations constitute the decision-making process. Scientific/professional reports (EIA) are used in negotiations, but the negotiation participants in political issues will focus on all kind of arguments that can strengthen their positioning order for them to achieve the desired outcome. Arguments based on EIA will only be used if they serve the participant’s aim.

The typology by Leknes is useful when analysing the role of EIA-information and – knowledge in conflict situations. According to Leknes, both regulative routine administration and heightened political conflict limit the influence of EIA in the process. Leknes’ typology resembles Douglas Torgerson’s (1986) distinction between the different faces of policy analysis, ranging from purely expert-driven to purely politically motivated modes. As Leknes, Torgerson sees varying roles for knowledge production depending on the type of policy context. At one end of the spectrum, no inquiry is needed because everything is already known by experts. Here, the space for politics (and conflict) shrinks to a minimum. At the other end of the spectrum, political struggle prevails. Here, policy analysis, such as impact assessments, loses its autonomy as it is totally corrupted by political motives.¹

Leknes’ second type of policy context is the most interesting for our discussion. Here, processes of consensus building and negotiation provide a more fertile ground for impact assessments. Interestingly, Leknes refers to both the knowledge generation and participatory aspects of EIA, suggesting that EIA is not only an analytical exercise. This brings impact assessment a step closer to conflict mediation. To say, however, that EIA has a role to play in consensus building processes does mean that EIA can be equated with consensus building. EIA, just as many other forms of policy analysis, produces knowledge about contested and conflictual issues, but conflict as such is not in the focus of analysis. Knowledge about the conflict may well be tacit, as analysts need to think of ways to deliver the EIA in the midst of conflicting interest groups. Thus, EIA produces *knowledge in conflict*, but does not generate *knowledge of conflict*. Its participatory elements add to the impact assessment and they do address conflictual issues, but they do not amount to conflict mediation or consensus building.

¹ This issue occupies a central place in planning and policy studies where the relationship between knowledge and power is a perennial question for both theory and empirical analysis (See, e.g. Forester, 1989; Flyvbjerg, 1998).

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