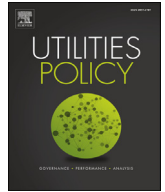


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Just a talking shop? – Informal participatory spatial planning for implementing state wind energy targets in Germany

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ABSTRACT

Many authors call for participatory approaches to spatial planning in dealing with land use conflicts on wind energy. In one region of Saxony, planning officials established an informal working group on wind energy to complement statutory spatial planning. In a qualitative case study, we found that the conflicting discursive frames in the participation process proved to be stable and were modified only marginally. The outcomes of the working group can be explained by the character of the initial frames and other contextual factors. Regarding planning practice, we suggest discussing contested planning issues in a wider context.

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1. Introduction

The increased use of wind energy is an important pillar of the German *Energiewende*, the Energy Transition. Although wind turbines require relatively small stretches of land, they frequently cause conflicts with other concerns such as nature conservation, landscape quality, tourism, and public health due to their height and visibility as well as their light and sound emissions, rotating wings and technical appearance (Hirsh and Sovacool, 2013). This calls for spatial coordination through planning. In many European countries, spatial planning plays a crucial role in siting and approving wind power developments (Cowell, 2007). In Germany, wind energy is often among the most conflictual issues in comprehensive spatial planning processes. Many authors advocate participatory approaches to planning in order to achieve higher levels of acceptance for wind energy developments (e.g. Swofford and Slattery, 2010; Wolsink, 2010). However, only few researchers such as Aitken et al. (2008) and Hindmarsh and Matthews (2008) have studied collaborative processes for wind energy planning in detail and scrutinized the effects and limitations of such endeavours (however, regarding Germany some empirical evidence as well as practical recommendations were offered by: BHU, 2014;

Liebrenz, 2013; Müller, 2014; Renn et al., 2014).

In this paper we present a German case in which actors responsible for statutory spatial planning at the regional level established an informal working group for wind energy in the Upper Elbe Valley/East Ore Mountains (UEV/EOM) region of Saxony. This group included representatives of anti-wind protest groups, wind energy developers, and officials from the regional planning bureau, as well as district and state government representatives. The working group functioned as a forum for exchanging views and for early discussion of the technical criteria for drafting the legally binding plan.

Keeping in mind that deliberative, participatory approaches are often lauded as factors that help ensure local acceptance of wind energy developments (cf. Wolsink, 2007), we pursue the following research questions: How can the informal working group approach be characterised in the light of previous studies on participation? What effects – if any – did this specific participatory, informal approach have on the attitudes of participants? More particularly, we are interested in discursive frames – the structure or content of existing discursive frames, and whether they changed in the course of the process. But we also explore the influence of existing frames on the results of deliberations, also considering other factors that might be relevant. And finally: What practical recommendations for spatial planning on wind energy can be derived from the analysis? To answer these questions, we conducted a qualitative case study on the conceptual basis of discursive institutionalism and discursive frames.

We begin by reviewing some of the existing literature on

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participation in the context of spatial planning for wind energy developments, and introduce our theoretical approach. We then describe the context of our case, the empirical material, and the analytical methods applied. In the results section we examine what discursive frames existed in our case before the working group for wind energy had been established, how this group operated and what repercussions, if any, it had on discursive frames. Finally, we discuss the key findings and outline the lessons to be drawn from the study – with regard to both planning practice and further research.

2. State of the art and theoretical approach

2.1. Participation in the context of spatial planning for wind energy developments

Given the often strong local opposition to the nationally fostered increase in the use of wind energy (Liljenfeldt, 2014), the literature on attitudes towards wind energy and on participation in spatial planning for wind energy has burgeoned. There is a variety of ideas about what participation is and what could and should be achieved through participation (for an overview, cf. Walk, 2008), depending particularly on the underlying normative idea of democracy and attitude towards wind energy. For the purpose of this study participation can be defined – combining Jami and Walsh (2014) and Meadowcroft (2004) – as the contribution of citizens, communities or stakeholders to the decision-making process on public plans and policies. While some authors interpret participation as the neutral right of people to become involved beyond their right to vote (Wright, 2012), others analyse power relations within participation processes (Rosol, 2014). As many authors see participation as a requirement for achieving or increasing local acceptance of wind energy developments (e.g. Bidwell, 2013; McLaren Loring, 2007), this aspect is in focus of this study.

Local opposition has often been explained by the Not-In-My-Backyard or NIMBY concept. “This is when people are in favour of a phenomenon (i.e. wind farms) in principle but oppose it when it is proposed near to them, or in a way which would affect them or their lifestyles” (Aitken et al., 2008, 778; cf. also Devine-Wright, 2009). However, it became obvious that this explanation can be too simplistic, giving reason to see participation as a possibility to improve acceptance (Wolsink, 2007). Generally, participation may be helpful in two ways. Firstly, by taking up local knowledge and preferences, which from the perspective of participants improves the results of decision-making. This can even include distributive outcomes. Secondly, the participation process as such may change the assessment of outcomes, for example through a better understanding and developing trust in a decision-making process, which is then perceived as transparent.

It is clear that the possible effects of participation are closely related to the forms, formats and techniques of participation employed: who is involved, what in, how, and at what stage of the decision-making process? There is a wide range of approaches in which the intensity of interaction and influence of those participating in decision-making vary (Alexander, 2008). Jami and Walsh (2014) stress that participation can mean to inform, consult, involve, collaborate, or empower. As participation techniques they list referendums, hearings, surveys, negotiated rule-making, consensus conferences, citizen juries/panels, citizen advisory committees, and focus groups.

The effectiveness of participation in spatial planning for wind energy developments depends on certain preconditions being met (e.g. Jami and Walsh, 2014; Schweizer et al., in press). As indicated, the form of participation needs to be in line with the purpose. According to Ellis et al. (2007, 532 f.), for example, only providing

information is not sufficient, as this would be based on a wrong and simplistic understanding of local opposition. Schweizer et al. (2015) underline that participants should have real influence and that the mandate for the participants should be clear. Additionally, Jami and Walsh (2014) point to the need for the right representation of participants, time management, adequate resources, and conflict management.

2.2. Discursive frames

There is a number of different approaches to the study of discourses, e.g. argumentative discourse analysis (Hajer, 2003), critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013), the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse (Keller, 2011), and poststructuralist discourse theory (Torfing, 2005). In this paper, we examine the discursive frames of stakeholders and planners from the perspective of discursive institutionalism. This analytical approach was introduced by Vivienne A. Schmidt as an attempt to complement other “new institutionalisms” (Hall and Taylor, 1996, 1). Discursive institutionalists “address explicitly the representation of ideas (how agents say what they are thinking or doing) and the discursive interactions through which actors generate and communicate ideas (to whom they say it) within given institutional contexts (where and when they say it)” (Schmidt, 2008, 306). This is important for us because in our case study we intend to combine an institutional analysis of spatial planning at the regional level including processes and interactions with a semantic analysis of discursive frames (cf. Schmidt, 2012, 85). However, in the present study the dynamics of discursive frames take centre stage while the institutional framework conditions remain more or less stable.

The notion of discursive frames invokes the ideas of Rein and Schön (1994) on frame-critical policy analysis as well as the concepts of discourse theorists such as Laclau and Mouffe (1985). Frames have been conceptualised in many different ways, among others as primarily mental, cognitive phenomena that structure experience and as relational systems of meaning or discourses (Vogel, 2012). We employ the frame metaphor as a heuristic device (Swaffield, 1998) to elucidate the structural dimension of discourses. For a discursive frame to come into being, some elements have to be articulated as belonging to an interior as opposed to other elements which form an antagonistic outside (Leibenath and Otto, 2014). Frames are about selection and salience, thereby obfuscating description and normative prescription: “To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient [...], in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993, 52). It is important to note that an analysis of discursive frames is concerned with structural relations between linguistic and non-linguistic elements and their dynamics, but not with hermeneutic categories such as values, beliefs, or interests. However, discursive frames can be interpreted in such directions.

Discursive frames relating to wind energy developments and spatial planning have been investigated in countries as diverse as Germany (Leibenath and Otto, 2013; Otto and Leibenath, 2014), Latvia (Veidemane and Nikodemus, 2014), the United Kingdom (Mason and Milbourne, 2014), and the USA (Hirsh and Sovacool, 2013).

2.3. Participation and frame change

The work of Rein and Schön (1994) on frame reflection and deliberative democracy offers a way of integrating the literatures on participation and discursive frames, especially the aspect of frame change. Their concept highlights the role of discussion and

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