



A profile of the Polish rural NIMBYist

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the key results of work which was carried out in rural areas and small towns in Poland in the years 2013–16, and was concerned with the so-called NIMBY syndrome. The latter is associated with socio-spatial conflicts and takes in a certain group of interlinked events and behaviours relating to plans or decisions as regards the locating of new unwanted or undesirable developments. NIMBY-type buildings or items of infrastructure are regarded by local communities as potentially harmful, even if their installation and operation is needed by society as a whole (hence the original phrase “yes, but Not In My Back Yard”). The work described here has sought to consider the profile of the Polish rural NIMBYist, and the conditioning and specific nature of the NIMBY syndrome in terms of its social dimension.

1. Introduction

Local communities are opposed to the appearance in their vicinity of new developments that they see as burdensome and capable of reducing quality of life. At the same time, however, these may actually be buildings or installations sufficiently needed by society that they should certainly come into existence, only somewhere else. Such opposition to a given location of a given new investment or development, notwithstanding overall approval of this type of venture as such, has for some time now been characterised by the abbreviation and term NIMBY (see Dear, 1992; Van der Horst, 2007; Hermansson, 2007). NIMBY stands for “Not In My Back Yard”, and has given rise to derived forms like *NIMBYism* and *NIMBYist*, though with all three making their appearance in the literature as early as in the 1980s, as the media were devoting their attention to issues of local-community protests against decisions to have landfill sites for hazardous wastes located in the vicinity (cf. Livezey, 1980). Since that time, the NIMBY issue has mainly been taken up by sociologists, though also naturally by urban planners and planners in general. There are numerous publications devoted to public protests against NIMBY objects, structures and developments of various kinds, including notably wind-farms (i.a. Wolsink, 2000, 2006; Bell et al., 2005; Van der Horst, 2007), the aforesaid landfills for hazardous wastes (Rahardyan et al., 2004; Caplan et al., 2007), prisons (Martin, 2000), centres caring for the homeless (Takahashi and Dear, 1997), biogas plants (Upreti, 2004), factory farms (Mann and Koegl, 2003) and many others.

Inhabitants' negative attitudes towards developments perceived to be burdensome are a normal phenomenon in democratic societies (see Pepermans and Loots, 2013). Equally, in Poland's communist era (prior

to the political and economic changes ushered in from 1989), such voices and protests were suppressed, with those making decisions at the time not taking heed of public opinion, in the circumstances of a society in which civil rights did not operate.

The systemic change and breakthrough occurring in Poland allowed conflicts long suppressed to come into the open (Pawłowska, 2010). Likewise, the subject matter of public protests against undesired or undesirable new developments – that had long since made its appearance in the academic literature in democratic countries – was only then taken up by Polish researchers. In fact, geographers of the Polish Academy of Sciences had devoted a very small number of studies to the issue in the 1980s, albeit with an approach to the conflicts that saw them as collisions in spatial planning between alternative conflict-generating functions, such as the industrial versus the residential or the tourist-related. They therefore tended to sidestep the role of individuals as key players in conflicts (Grocholska, 1980, 1986; Kołodziejski, 1982a, 1982b).

As has already been noted, it was from the 1990s onwards that NIMBY phenomenon as a particular type of conflict surrounding the choice of location for infrastructure began to be a subject for the work of Polish scientists representing various scientific disciplines (including sociology, urban planning, geography or economics – see: Matczak, 1996, 2000; Michałowska, 2008a, 2008b; Łucki and Misiak, 2010; Frączek, 2010; Dmochowska-Dudek, 2010, 2011, 2013; and Bednarek-Szczepańska and Dmochowska-Dudek, 2015). However, work has been done only rarely so far, and has first and foremost been concerned with cities, as well as with single selected examples (case studies) relating to conflicts.

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Among relevant studies taking in rural areas is the output of Michałowska (2008a, 2008b), concerning the phenomenon in the case of the voivodship (province-region) of Łódź, which is to say both its urban and rural areas. Michałowska's analyses showed how masts serving mobile phone networks, followed by roads were the most frequent generators of NIMBY-type conflicts in this region. Conflicts there mainly arose out of a conviction in the local community that people had been left under-informed, and hence bypassed by the decisionmaking process.

The generation of NIMBY-type conflicts over the location of infrastructure in rural parts of Poland is known only poorly so far. The few studies published have only been based on questionnaire research, more in-depth interviews or spatio-statistical analyses to a limited degree, tending to be rather piecemeal in nature, with the result that it has proved difficult to arrive at any more general conclusions, or even to begin to seek out regularities to the Polish version of the NIMBY phenomenon. It was for the above reasons that, in 2013, a Poland-wide study of NIMBY conflicts in rural areas and small towns¹ began, with this aiming to present specific features of the phenomenon in Poland. In this analysis of the NIMBY phenomenon from the above point of view, use was made of the concept of 'social participation', i.e. inhabitants' involvement in activity seeking to influence the decisionmaking process surrounding the placing of an undesirable new development.

This article presents key results of the project implemented and pursued in this field, with the aim being to assess the participation of country-dwellers in actions against "unwanted" developments across Poland, as well as to gain familiarity with what that is determined by. A profile of the Polish rural NIMBYist was devised for this purpose.

1.1. The conditions of NIMBY conflicts: theoretical considerations

NIMBY conflicts are a multidimensional phenomenon dependent on conditions of a social, demographic, economic, political, legal and historical nature. They manifest themselves in a series of events playing out on the local scale, and initiated by a local community as it seeks to block an undesired or undesirable new development from coming into existence. The series or chain of events in question embraces features of both conflict and cooperation, albeit with the former dominating in both the structural understanding (cf. Mucha, 2014), i.e. in terms of a growing awareness as to the incompatible interests of a group of inhabitants and the investor; and the behavioural – manifesting itself in the actual action that parties to the conflict take. However, each example of the NIMBY phenomenon has its specific set of causes, course and consequences, both for life in the local community, and for the space those people inhabit.

Notwithstanding a classical (traditional) conceptualisation of a NIMBY group as intolerant, short-sighted, "free-loading" and selfish (McClymont and O'Hare, 2008), with NIMBYism thus being seen negatively – and hence considered from the point of view of how it might be combated or overcome (Dear, 1992); it is true to say that most researchers into the phenomenon concur that it is complex in nature, to the extent that negative elements represent just some of the many possible aspects (Van der Horst, 2007; Burningham et al., 2006). Work refers to the functional theory of social conflicts, whereby Lewis Coser (2009) further developed the considerations of Georg Simmel, bringing to light positive features of conflicts in general. As Young (2012) notes, while the locating of burdensome new developments is justified in terms of the common good, the arguments of opponents also invoke the common good, albeit understood differently (Young, 2012). McClymont and O'Hare (2008) note how NIMBY groups become active, in a positive sense, in defending, promoting and shaping their places of residence.

On the basis of research carried out in different countries, Hager (2015) claims that local NIMBY-type conflicts often activate political,

technological or social innovation. They initiate change in the decisionmaking structure, favour the democratisation of institutions, broaden the competences of civil society, encourage the emergence of new political groupings and lead to the introduction of more environment-friendly regulations and technologies. Burningham (2000) points to consequences of these types of conflict that go well beyond the local level. In the United States, small-scale local protests went on to give rise to an influential social movement acting in the name of environmental justice. In the United Kingdom likewise, protests against the locating of roads led to the development of a widely-known and well-developed environmental movement.

Equally, opinions surfacing in recent years question whether the NIMBY idea can really be a subject for scientific research at all, given the lack of either solid theoretical foundations or conceptual models (see *i.a.* Petrova, 2016; Wolsink, 2006; Burningham, 2000). However, as van der Horst noted, those who "call for academics to abandon 'the language of NIMBY' have had limited success to date. Considering its continued popularity in the public domain, academics may alternatively opt to lend support to efforts to de-stigmatise it" (2007, p. 2706).

To date, research into NIMBY conflicts has mainly revolved around the presentation of mechanisms underlying the phenomenon. Seemingly of great importance among the various types of conditions is the process of arriving at an understanding of the threats arising from a planned development that have a significant impact vis-à-vis some specific opposing attitude. However, the study of feelings of threat – most often achieved by way of interviews or questionnaires – has the downside that it is concerned solely with the said feelings as they are declared. It remains hard for researchers to identify the extent to which fears owned up to are real motives behind opposition to a new developments.

For example, when NIMBYists advance most powerfully the argument that they are caring for the environment, rather than their own life comfort, this ensures they are seen in a better light. This kind of approach has been observed widely in different countries. Is all this caring for the environment really then just a tactical manoeuvre, based around a desire to make a favourable impression, or is this in fact the first step towards some deeper reflection regarding environmental issues? That remains an open question (Mihaylov and Perkins, 2015).

A great deal of research has now been done on the ways in which the threat considered to be posed by an unwanted or undesirable new development is perceived – in particular as regards windfarms (e.g. Devine-Wright, 2005; Kempton et al., 2005; Pasqualetti, 2000; Krohn and Damborg, 1999). The threats identified most frequently in this respect concern a degradation of valuable aesthetic features, noise, declines in the value of real estate and a negative influence on nature (Petrova, 2016). Where different types of installation processing wastes are concerned, the greatest fears of residents in an area are seen to revolve around emissions of pollutants and their negative effects on health; as well as the burden imposed by the insects and rodents such new installations are deemed likely to attract (Rahardyan et al., 2004). Knock-on effects in turn concern property values, once again (Groothuis and Miller, 1994). When it comes to biogas, inhabitants' fears focus mainly on a deterioration of the situation as regards emissions of pollutants harmful to health, as well as odours, increased traffic, and threats posed to the natural environment (Upreti, 2004).

Perceptions of threats arising out of decisions to locate an "unwanted" new development can also link up with attachment to a given place of residence. The significance of such relationships with a place as set against the NIMBY phenomenon was considered by Devine-Wright (2009), who drew on a "disruption of place" concept interpreted, not only as a physical change in the place of residence as such, but also as a feeling of threat in respect of the possible impacts of future change. The assumption was that people very much attached to the places in which they live will be interested in what happens – or is going to happen – in their vicinity, and will be very much inclined to take action to prevent unfavourable change. It is equally reasonable to anticipate that those whose links with a given place are weaker will be less motivated to

¹ Given the objectives of the project implemented, considerations were confined to small towns of 25,000 inhabitants or fewer.

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