



Network approach to constructing theory of participation in spatial planning

Nataša Lovrić*, Marko Lovrić

European Forest Institute, Finland



ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Spatial planning
Participation
Social network analysis
Grounded theory
Croatia

ABSTRACT

Although importance of participation in public decision making is widely recognized in policy sciences, there is no consensus on what its preferred role and meaning would be. In the practice of European spatial planning, its outcome - impacts are peripheral, and there is no distinct theoretical explanation underpinning why this is so, and how the situation may be altered. The primary aim of the study is to tackle this issue; by developing initial step towards a theoretical explanation of participation in spatial planning. The inductive analysis is based on such process for the Nature Park Medvednica, a protected area in Croatia affected with strong urbanization. The research design is based on grounded theory, an approach for developing theoretical explanations of a given phenomenon by gathering qualitative data rooted in practical case(s), where the explanation is decontextualized and thus universal enough that it can be used in other cases (i.e. generalized). However, there is a high level of inconsistency on how exactly grounded theory should be applied, which diminishes the validity of its claims. The secondary aim of the study is to provide structure to how grounded theory could be applied; by developing a series of methodological steps rooted in social network analysis, and thus enhancing its replicability. Primary data is drawn from 56 interviews, covering a 30-year process of spatial planning.

On a practical level, the results demonstrate that the role of participation in spatial planning for Nature Park Medvednica does not substantially differ from other comparable cases, where it starts late in the process and has mostly a symbolic role. On a theoretical level, a series of highly general, decontextualized codes have been developed, such as classification of actors, forms of participation and of system that suppresses its prominence. The research also identifies some policy solutions on how to alter the situation; for an individual process of spatial planning, disempowered groups can substantially affect the outcome only through public political engagement, which in turn is affected by 'calculation' of personal costs and benefits of participation. On a more general level, the change of the role of participation in spatial planning of a given local setting can occur through the following modes: (I) change of power relations between (construction) interest groups and the administration that leads the process, and (II) change in how the 'value' of a spatial plan is perceived by the administration that leads the process - from a system that promotes professional expertise and human-centered values to a system which endorses participation of the 'lay', de-values formal expertise, and perceives that nature has a value on its own, independent from human needs.

1. Introduction

Public participation has entrenched over hierarchical public policy practitioner – client relation that dominated the positivistic policy sciences and practice (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). However, participation is a viable approach, if not a necessity, for dealing with 'wicked' problems (Rittel and Webber, 1973) of public policy (Fischer, 1993; Cooper et al., 2006). For Habermas (1975), implementation of top-down 'scientific practices' of policy science socially delegitimizes the political process as it supports elite decision-making and creates outcomes that would not be generated through a public deliberation. This

notion is further elaborated by Foucault (2002), by whom professional expertise (of policy science and practice) has an emphasized function of social control; legitimizing itself on a claim to be value-neutral, it sets about natural description of the situation and preferable solutions which essentially delineate the political domain itself. Nevertheless, the claim of value-neutral stance is false, and thus professional expertise serves specific power interests and its practice is an antagonist to the democratization of society. Public participation may mean different things to different people, and there is no shared understanding on what are its preferred roles in the procedures and outcomes of public policy (Renn et al., 1993; Fiorino, 1990; Beierle, 1999; Rowe and

* Corresponding author at: Yliopistokatu 6, 80100, Joensuu, Finland.

E-mail address: natasa.lovric@efi.int (N. Lovrić).

Frewer, 2000; Innes and Booher, 2004; Bryson et al., 2012). Spatial planning in the European Union (EU) is no different from other policy domains, as participation permeates many segments of its legislation (e.g. Aarhus Convention, Bristol Accord, European Landscape Convention, and Directives 2003/05, 85/337/EEC and 96/61/EC). However, there is evidence that the role of participation in spatial planning practice strongly deviates from its legislative requirements (i.e. it has very weak impact on decisions and only begins close to the end of the process). In addition, aside from describing the current state of affairs, there is no thorough theoretical underpinning of how policy interventions, with respect to micro and macro social conditions, can alter the role of participation (e.g. Connelly, 2006; Conrad et al., 2011; Fülöp, 2013). With these issues in mind, the following research question emerges; “How different factors shape the participation practices in spatial planning?”

The ‘participatory approach’ at the heart of it represents assessing alternative solutions through criteria that developed from divergent needs and values in a discursive confrontation of relevant actors (Habermas, 1975). As it emerges from a strong post-positivistic history of thought (see Fischer, 1993 for overview), it may be considered appropriate to study participation in spatial planning through interpretative approaches with inductive theorizing. Framing the study in positivistic epistemological stance with deductive theorizing might lead to outlining of the social actors, their wants and needs into pre-defined categories that support current social structure, and thus bring about policy solutions that fail to generate consent of relevant actors. A prominent inductive approach is the grounded theory (GT; Glaser and Strauss, 1967), which in shortest form can be defined as “the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research” (p.2). Although its authors provide explanation of how the GT process should look like (Glaser, 1978; Strauss, 1987), it may be argued that there are as many versions of grounded theory analysis as there are theorists (Dey, 1999). Faced with this challenge, it may be difficult for a research community to accept an understanding of a participatory process if the methodological steps that are undertaken have low level of replicability. Following the principles of grounded theory, this study offers a methodological step-by-step procedure on how to inductively analyse qualitative data in order to generate theoretical understanding of the phenomenon under study. The replicability issue is tackled by framing the methodological steps into formal (quantitative) routines of Social Network Analysis (SNA; Wasserman and Faust, 1994), where the SNA procedures are matched to corresponding GT coding procedures so that they assist the researcher in finding patterns in qualitative data.

2. Spatial planning of nature park medvednica

Nature Park (NP) Medvednica is a mountain area situated on the north edges of Croatia’s capital Zagreb, where the city is slowly expanding within the Park. Nature park (corresponding to IUCN category V) is a national category of protection where sustainable usage of natural resources is allowed in its outer parts. NP Medvednica is protected because of its forest habitats, which are also protected under the Natura 2000 network. The spatial planning process for NP Medvednica had three phases: (I) 1981–1989 within former Yugoslavia, (II) 2002–2005 within independent Republic of Croatia in a post-war period and (III) 2012–2014 during the EU-accession period.

The Park was established in 1981 on 22,860 ha, and at the same time preparation of its spatial plan began. The park was divided into four zones: Zone I (strict protection - 11% of the Park’s area) where no activities are allowed, Zone II (active protection - 49%) where sustainable forestry is allowed, Zone III (usage zone - 14%) where touristic infrastructure, agriculture and settlements are present and Zone IV (buffer zone - 26%), which is practically a suburb of Zagreb. The first interaction with stakeholders began in 1988 and encompassed 44 stakeholders engaged through surveys, public hearings and consultation meetings. The spatial planning team also held additional consultations

with 26 different experts, covering different fields of expertise such as commuting and traffic, environmental protection and tourism. Each public hearing had a ‘pre-hearing’, a form of consultative meeting during which all interested parties had the opportunity to discuss matters and prepare for the official hearing. The General State Administration of Socialist Republic of Croatia (within Yugoslavia) was focused on municipalities and as a result, the public hearings were held separately for each municipality. The organization of municipal policy-making was such that a strong emphasis was placed on direct participation of citizens through Municipal associations (Cavrić and Nedović-Budić, 2007). In 1989, the process ceased. Although no formal explanation was provided, there is an informal consensus that the reason behind it was the pressure imposed by hunting associations, as this activity of local population would diminish if there were a spatial plan in place for NP Medvednica (PFO 1–2; City Zg 1–9; Min. Spat 1–3; Inst. Tourism 1–2; NP Medved 1–2; OIKON, Hunt – see Appendix A).

The second process of spatial planning lasted from 2002 to 2005. As the Republic of Croatia is administratively organized through counties (regional government), the spatial planning issue was allocated to the City of Zagreb which has a status of a county (although two more counties are represented in the Park’s area - Krapina-Zagorje County and Zagreb County). The City of Zagreb consulted with 21 stakeholders and 5 external experts. Unlike the previous process, this time the consultations were performed only with different segments of national and regional administration. A draft version of the spatial plan was presented to the public on September the 28th, 2005. The second round of stakeholder engagement was focused on public hearings, which were held from 7th of September until 7th of October 2005, and most of the discussion was devoted to the topic of the Park’s borders. As majority of stakeholders (such as concerned citizens, mountaineering and environmental NGOs, hunters and representatives of local population) could engage through public hearings, several thousands of people participated in them. The main reason for such strong response of people to the public hearings was large media attention that the spatial planning for NP Medvednica had received. The main message carried by the media was that there is no construction allowed in the Park, and that all which was already constructed will become illegal. However, this message was contrary to the zoning system for NP Medvednica, as construction was allowed in Zone IV and with some limitations in Zone III (Draft Spatial Plan of areas with special characteristics of NP Medvednica 2005 and Draft Bill of Amendments to the Law on Proclaiming the Western Part of Nature Park Medvednica, 2005 Ministry of Construction and Physical Planning (2005); Oikon; City Zg 2–7; Min. Spat 1–3; IGH; Min. Cult; NGO, SINP). The hearings resulted with 733 received complaints on the draft plan, out of which 81 were accepted. Vast majority of the complaints that were accepted stated that due to a high level of urbanization, certain areas were excluded from the Park. However, spatial planning stopped at this point, and subsequently in 2008, it was decided that only the Park’s area should be decreased by 4 888 ha. This decrease roughly corresponds to the area of Zone IV which was meant to serve as a buffer to Zagreb’s sprawl upwards the mountain, and has effectively decreased the Park’s population from 33,400 to 7400. The formal explanation of the decision came from public pressure stating that this solution represents a viable compromise between urbanization and nature protection (Croatian Parliament, 2008).

The third process of spatial planning began in 2012, with the same experts from the City of Zagreb leading the process as in the second attempt. The third round of public hearings was held between February and March 2014, taking place in all three counties covered by the Park. The hearings were not marked with any strong conflicts, and they mostly focused on presenting current developments of the Plan. Out of the 635 received complaints, 223 were accepted. However, the spatial planning team decided not to accept these complaints to the plan being under consideration; rather, they stated that if another plan is subsequently prepared, that those complaints would be addressed there. As

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