



Local perceptions of opportunities for engagement and procedural justice in electricity transmission grid projects in Norway and the UK



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ABSTRACT

Transmission lines are critical infrastructures, but frequently contested especially at the local level, by local communities. The role of public engagement in processes pertaining to specific transmission line projects is an under-researched, yet important topic that this paper seeks to discuss by investigating how inhabitants perceive these processes and to what extent they find the processes just and fair. This paper addresses the participatory aspects of the planning process, as perceived by the local inhabitants in four Norway and UK cases, by using a qualitative comparative case study design. We further analyse this issue through frameworks of public engagement and procedural justice. In both countries public engagement is largely characterized by perceptions of insufficient information, and insufficient influence on the process. In sum, the findings indicate that the informants generally perceive the opportunities for involvement as insufficient and unjust. The findings are quite similar across all cases and both countries. Local inhabitants represent diverse groups who often have different levels of knowledge, time and engagement to bring to the planning process. Their requests for improved processes thus underline the serious public engagement challenges that applicants and decision-makers face.

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1. Introduction

A politically induced strategy towards a low-carbon energy system has gained force during recent years in Europe, in which more renewable energy production is considered to be a key measure. A prominent example is the EU Directive on the promotion of renewable energy (European Union, 2009). Studies of public acceptance suggest that the public in most countries accept and even support the move towards more renewable energy, such as wind, hydro and solar energy and associated grid connections (Aas et al. 2014; Bell et al., 2005, 2013). Simultaneously, concrete projects are often met with significant public opposition when proposed (Bell et al., 2013). This “gap” between the general support of renewables and strong opposition against specific projects has gained much attention from researchers as well as from decision-makers and the energy industry (ibid.). The gap can be understood as a dilemma. The general acceptance and support in the public is rooted in perceptions of renewable energy as a key to mitigate harmful and costly climate

change. Local opposition arise when concrete proposals are presented due to concerns for biodiversity, landscape quality, health and quality of life, among others, in affected communities (Batel and Devine-Wright, 2014). For decision-makers the development of energy infrastructure projects creates rather complex situations where various, often conflicting interests and actors have legitimate political positions, at the national as well as at the local levels (Geezelius and Refsgaard, 2007). The weighing of different interests and values is likely to raise challenges to concrete prioritizations. The actual participation and involvement of different stakeholders becomes crucial in this regard.

Social science literature has investigated challenges related to local opposition to energy projects including the importance of the planning and siting process (Sovacool and Ratan, 2012; Cain and Nelson, 2013). Long-lasting local conflicts suggest that the traditional top-down approach to grid development is becoming increasingly insufficient, and call for increased and improved public involvement. Controversies over the construction of low carbon technologies such as wind farms – as well as over the construction of transmission lines (e.g., Cowell, 2010; Pidgeon and Demski, 2012; Ruud et al., 2011) suggest that better understanding and improvements in these processes are crucial. Unlike energy generating

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facilities, transmission lines can represent a special challenge for local acceptance and support, since they provide modest local benefits such as new jobs, income opportunities and local and regional tax income.

Some research literature has considered the deployment and conflicts over energy infrastructure in relation to general values and attitudes among the local inhabitants, other have investigated institutional differences, such as national traditions; planning systems; financial support mechanisms and ownership structures; and landscape protection organizations (Toke et al., 2008). We would argue that complimentary research addressing a better understanding of the local planning processes, and how these are perceived by various stakeholders, is crucial in order to better understand recent conflicts over energy infrastructure.

There is, however, a relatively limited body of research on acceptance and opposition related to grid development (c.f. Devine-Wright and Batel, 2013; Aas et al., 2014). Some studies have indicated that measures for early involvement and engagement are highly appreciated by the public (Cotton and Devine-Wright, 2011; Schweizer-Ries, 2010). Moreover, in a recent comparative survey from Norway, Sweden and the UK, a general finding was that the public perceived grid planning processes to be heavily dominated by experts and decision-makers at the national level, with only limited influence from local inhabitants and NGOs (Aas et al., 2014). In a similar vein, a nationally representative survey of UK adults demonstrated that local residents were perceived to have little influence on decision-making, in contrast to the influence exerted by electricity supply companies, the TSO, the national regulator and government ministries (Devine-Wright et al., 2010). Furthermore, case studies of grid development projects have also revealed how national authorities can be curtailing inputs from local citizens with regard to the decision-making process (c.f. Cotton and Devine-Wright, 2013).

However, in sum, few studies to date have provided more detailed analyses of local inhabitants' perceptions of planning and consultation for grid development project. Hence, the aim of the present paper is to study how representatives of the local public experience and engage in processes pertaining to specific transmission line projects. The paper investigates how local inhabitants perceive the participatory aspects of the planning process in four concrete cases in Norway and the UK.

The following research questions are addressed:

1. How do local inhabitants assess the opportunities for engagement in the concrete hV transmission grid development projects?
2. To what extent are the planning processes of grid development projects considered just and fair?

A qualitative research approach has been employed, gathering data from four transmission line planning processes – two in each country. Norway and the UK have organized the processes of planning and licensing of electricity grids somewhat differently, yet there are similarities (Brekke and Sataøen, 2012), which is further explained below. This background provides a possibility to investigate the nature and impact of comparable mechanisms for public engagement across different cases, as well as across national and institutional contexts (c.f. Toke et al., 2008).

2. Theoretical perspectives on public participation and justice

For some time there has been a trend of increased public involvement in the affairs and decisions of policy-setting bodies across sectors and policy domains (Rowe and Frewer,

2005; O'Faircheallaigh, 2010). Increased public engagement is perceived to correspond with a democratic approach to science and technology governance that enhance transparency and trust in policy-making processes (UNECE, 2014). Still, objectives for involving the public in policy processes may be several and are not necessarily rooted in democratic principles. Fiorino (1990) distinguishes between three rationales for participation or involvement of the local public, namely instrumental, substantive and normative/democratic rationales. In the instrumental rational, participation is a means to reach a specific aim, for instance the most cost-effective solution. For the two latter rationales participation per se is the goal, respectively to gain new knowledge or insights (substantive) or as a necessity to secure democracy or as being a political right of the citizens (normative/democratic) (Fiorino, 1990). To recognise and consider these different rationales for public participation is important, since participatory measures may be initiated by organisations holding different rationales. If left implicit, this can create tensions (Höppner, 2009).

Previous research have found that planning and decision-making overly focused on formal decisional competencies, and without opportunities for meaningful deliberation often fuel conflicts (Wolsink, 2013). Moreover, participation has often been limited to the final stages of technical projects, with few opportunities for early stage dialogue and involvement of stakeholders (Lengwiler, 2008). Such limitations to traditional expert-driven planning processes are being recognized among decision makers and reflected in recent policy documents for transmission grid planning (e.g., Statnett, 2013).

Wüstenhagen et al. (2007) relate community acceptance of renewable energy technologies to 'procedural justice', 'distributive justice' and 'trust'. This approach to justice and trust describes well the identified public participation challenges and local perspectives on energy development projects (King et al., 1998; Gross, 2007; Cain and Nelson, 2013). 'Distributive justice' concerns fairness in the outcome, that is the distribution of costs and benefits (for more details about distributive justice see for instance Skitka et al., 2003; Gross, 2007), whereas 'procedural justice' refers to general principles of citizen control, democracy and fairness in the process within which decisions are reached (Smith and McDonough, 2001). In a just process, participants should be informed while participation should be broad, and decision-making power shared (Laird, 1993; Leventhal et al., 1980, cited in Smith and McDonough, 2001). Moreover, Gross (2007) has pointed to the interdependencies between process and outcome. Her findings suggests that fairness are influenced by both perceptions of process and outcome and that a fair process can enhance acceptance of the outcome (Gross, 2007).

The perception of fairness will ultimately be a result of the perceived involvement of the public, and hence, the public engagement mechanisms conducted in the process. Methods of engagement are multiple and varied.¹ These methods will also vary according to different jurisdictions, and must also balance different principles like justice and expedience – which can also be the object of political debates (Diamond, 2011). Hence, complex political and decision-making structures induce challenges for the actual design of engagement mechanisms. However, an important aspect to be more prominently stressed in this regard is the need for better understanding public beliefs and acceptance, and more actively use this knowledge to inform policy making and planning (Aas et al., 2014). More particularly, Keegan and Torres (2014) point to the need for more research on the design and management of community benefit arrangements among host communities for transmission lines.

¹ Rowe and Frewer (2005) lists more than 100 in their review of public engagement mechanisms, but underlines that there are undoubtedly more.

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