

Performing participation? The Norwegian planning & building act and its understanding of citizen participation

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Since 1985, the Norwegian Planning and Building Act has encouraged and required citizen participation at an early stage of the planning process. The argument lies in the advantage of opinions and concerns being identified as early as possible, avoiding the process coming to a standstill because vital points of view were presented too late in the process. Over the years, a neo-liberal planning practice has emerged, particularly in zoning planning, allowing private business actors into the early phases of the process – earlier than used to be the case. This does not mean that the ambitions with regard to the inclusion of citizens have been reduced. Rather the opposite. In the new P&B Act, from 2008 participation is emphasized even further, and now with a particular focus on including social groups that needs special attention. At the same time, the new P &B. Act also strengthened its focus on efficiency, and thereby institutionalize the the tension between democracy and efficiency (Holsen, 2000). Studies of planning practices in Norwegian municipalities find all forms of negotiations, mediation activities and consultations in planning processes. However, the most common practice is the minimum requirements in the law, which is announcing start-up of the planning process, and public hearing of the planning proposal. The studies also demonstrate that the attention is often directed towards other public agencies and businesses, and less towards citizen participation. Municipal planners find it difficult to involve citizens, due to lack of time, resources and awareness. Recent studies of privately initiated zoning plans, particularly in urban areas, documents less emphasis

on citizen participation and more on having consultation with developers at early stages of the process (Falleth et al 2010, Hanssen and Falleth 2014). Citizen participation seems to be given much less resources. Participation is, in other words, more oriented towards stakeholders than toward citizens. There is, however, less knowledge of how different actors; politicians, planners and different stakeholders, conceive of what is good and sufficient participation and what can be done to improve possible shortcomings. The essential questions in this are to what degree specific sections in the P.& B. Act can be said to have an impact on the participation practice, and whether law adjustments are seen as a possible remedy for shortcomings.

This paper will address four interlinked issues. 1) How has citizen participation been understood and interpreted in the Norwegian Planning and Building Act? 2) How does literature based on recent studies of the practices of participation document how citizen participation is performed? 3) Are there any dissonances between the interpretation of participation in the P & B Act and practices? 4) Do the opinion of what is good and sufficient practices of participation differ between types of actors?

The discussion of the questions will be based upon data and analyses conducted as part of an ongoing, major evaluation of the Norwegian Planning and Building Act (the research project EVAPLAN 2008). Firstly, we will carry out a comprehensive literary review on previous research on participation with reference to the P&B Act. This review will be supplemented with data from case studies of planning in eight Norwegian municipalities, that are currently being carried out.

Literature:

Falleth, Eva, Gro Sandkjær Hanssen and Inger-Lise Saglie (2010) “Challenges to Democracy in Market-oriented Urban Planning in Norway”, *European Planning Studies*, 18(5), pp.737-754.

Hanssen, Gro Sandkjaer and Eva Irene Falleth (2014) ‘Market-oriented Urban Planning – Constraining Citizen Participation’, *Local Government Studies*, 40 (3), 403-428, DOI: 10.1080/03003930.2013.834254