

The Municipal and the Territory; The Municipal Ecologist Perspective on Environmental Issues in Land Use Planning

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Introduction

My PhD-studies is a part of a multidisciplinary research project, «The Municipal and the Territory», on the need to redefine planning to cope with the challenge of sustainability (Asplund & Orrskog 1996). The project is administrated by a core group of researchers at the Department of Infrastructure and Planning at the Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm. Researchers from other disciplines and institutions are associated for complementary studies through the project.

The focus of the project is on strategic land-use planning at the municipal level. The municipal competence will be empirically investigated and discussed. The competence concept in the project is interpreted in two ways: "professional competence" and "political competence". By professional competence we mean the competence developed within the administration of the municipality. Such competence is made up of knowledge and professional skills, steering instruments, organisation, decision-making processes, ways of co-operation among officials and between officials and politicians, etc. Political competence refers to the competence to involve the inhabitants as well as local economic actors in the transformation of the society towards sustainability.

We have chosen to penetrate the problem of planning as social practice through qualitative studies and cases rather the quantitative. It means that we use different theoretical frameworks as interview techniques, literature overviews to find out what is special, difficult and worth developing in planning, environmental work etc. The main theme of the project - to understand

and reformulate the essence of land-use planning to cope with the quest for sustainability – will be further developed based on thematic studies. These thematic studies investigate different perspectives of the planning process, the different actors and their competence and ways of interpretation the concept of sustainability. Four thematic studies are dealing with the process within the municipal administration. Two other studies will focus on different local actors.

My study is one of the four thematic studies investigating the process within the municipal administration. Its aim is to analyse the ecological competence of the municipal planning administrations. I will present some preliminary results at the AESOP PhD workshop. My paper presenting the PhD project has following title.

A social constructionist approach to communicative planning theories: The municipal ecologist perspective on environmental issues in land use planning

The research is based on an in-depth interview-study of municipal ecologists. The interviews are semi-structured interviews with the aim to get a description of the interviewees life-worlds. The description is interpreted to get a picture of the meaning of the described phenomena. This method gives opportunities to reflect alternative conceptions (Kvale 1996). My aim is to examine municipal ecology as a profession and identify perspectives on planning and environmental issues. What are the characteristics of the ecologists approach to planning and sustainable development? What are the significant conditions for an integration of ecological competence into the planning process?

Although a number of planning theorists argue that the literature in the field of planning is diffuse, there are two conventional schools (Forester 1989). The first one treats planning as a technical, problem-solving activity with defined goals – social engineering. The other one borrows perspective from different theories, and treats planning as a means of processing information and feedback – communicative planning. Throughout the nineties, the field of planning theory has become dominated by the communicative paradigm into planning practice (Fischler 1998). I have used four essays on the subject of communicative planning theories (Flyvbjerg 1998, Forester 1989, Healey 1997, Sager 1996) combined with a social constructionist

approach in my analysis. My reason for this is that communicative planning theories do not clearly focus on the links between language, discourse, knowledge-power and change, links which are central to social constructionism. Language is one of the fundamental principles of social constructionism (Burr 1995). Language, in turn, is structured into different discourses, with every discourse claiming to know what real truth is. In that way, knowledge produces power. Language, discourse and knowledge-power are closely linked to each other and to the concept of change. Several communicative planning theorists develop the above mentioned concepts to a certain extent, but they seldom link the concepts, and they do not develop concepts of change clearly (Dovlen 1999). The social constructionist approach, in turn, provides several openings for change. These openings are used in my analysis of the results of the interviews with municipal ecologists.

There are several reasons for investigating a municipal ecologist perspective on planning. The municipal ecologist can be an important actor when environmental issues are integrated into the planning process. Municipal ecologists possess relevant knowledge and can give voice to the environmental discourse. They are employed for their professional skills in handling environmental issues and their ability to analyse the field. Municipal ecologists are also often responsible for putting into practice the environmental intentions of The Natural Resources Management Act and The Planning and Building Act (Asplund 1997). Both global and local environmental issues, as they are described in several international documents, call for action and change (WCED 1987, UNCED 1992). In this context, planning is often mentioned as an instrument for achieving desired results.

Literature

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