

# Challenges in Public Participation and Collaboration: A Case Study in Finnish Environmental Decision-making

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**Keywords:** Multistakeholder Collaboration, Knowledge Sharing, Communication, Public Participation Process, Impact Assessment Process, Collaborative Governance.

**Abstract:** This position paper introduces ongoing research efforts that addresses the ability of different kinds of organizations and multiple individuals to cope together with complex environmental planning and policy-making problems in the Finnish context. The research question “What kind of challenges are there in the collaborative processes of environmental decision-making and how can they be tackled?” is approached from the perspectives of the framework of public participation process and the theory of collaborative governance. We use these theories as analytical tools to evaluate how the elements and phases of collaboration processes are conducted in practice and to identify problems that exist in the collaborative processes. This phenomenon is studied through a single case study of environmental planning case from a medium-sized city located in Finland.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

How collaborative processes should be implemented is widely discussed in the literature (e.g. Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Brinkerhoff & Azfar, 2006; Godenhjelm & Johanson, 2018). For example, the framework of public participation process (Bryson et al. 2013) and the theory of collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash 2008) describe the characteristics of participative actions and what should be considered when developing and conducting these kinds of processes. However, more research is needed about the actual empirical practice of collaboration (Sotarauta, 2010).

In this paper, we aim to shed light on the actual practice of collaboration through a case study and answer the research question: “What kind of challenges are there in the collaborative processes of environmental decision-making and how can they be tackled?” We approach this from the perspectives of the framework of public participation process and the theory of collaborative governance. We use these theories as analytical tools to evaluate how the elements and phases of collaboration processes are conducted in practice and to identify problems that exist in the collaborative processes. We aim to broaden the current understanding of how to

implement successful collaborative processes by identifying problems in the processes and by offering preliminary ideas about the means to avoid these problems to emerge.

This position paper introduces ongoing research efforts included in the ambitious research project CORE: Collaborative remedies for fragmented societies — Facilitating the collaborative turn in environmental decision-making (CORE 2018).

## 2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 2.1 Spatial Planning and Participation

In Finland, stakeholder involvement to the master planning process is required by law. The law obligates municipalities to involve and hear all who are affected by the plan during the master planning process to ensure planning being based on timely information and knowledge, and that the plans are serving the needs and aims of the municipality in best possible manner. The plans are required to be kept updated and changed when needed, and all changes require informing those affected by the changes. Master planning process affects and includes

involving several different stakeholder groups, from citizens to local public administration, partners, media, and decision-makers. However, it is not specified in the law how the stakeholders should be involved or heard, which leaves room for different interpretations and implementation. (ELY, 2017).

Traditionally, stakeholders and especially citizens, are involved in the early stages of the master planning process, where in the beginning of the process municipalities make a law-required participation and assessment scheme (OAS), which describes stakeholder involvement, interaction and impact assessment in the process. The stakeholder groups are expected to comment and suggest changes to the OAS in case the planned procedures are considered insufficient, which leads to a requirement of making supplements to the OAS. Next to commenting the OAS, the stakeholders can make planning initiatives and proposals, participate in hearings about preparation materials of the master plan, and in later phases make a reminder to the municipality when disagreeing with the plan or at the end of the process, appeal to administrative court. (ELY, 2017).

## 2.2 Public Participation Process

The value of public participation is broadly recognized for various purposes, however, how to successfully apply public participation processes to decision-making is a challenge that should not be overlooked; at its best, public participation may lead for example to strengthened democracy, increased trust, knowledge flows and joint knowledge creation. On the other hand, unsuccessful public participation is known to cause resentment, mistrust and conflicts, that might hinder current and also future collaborative actions. (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Ansell & Gash, 2008; Gaventa & Barrett, 2012).

Bryson et al (2013) reviewed systematically more than 250 articles and books related to the phenomena and designed guidelines for public participation process combined with their own experiences (Bryson et al, 2013). The design guidelines are a synthesis for creating, managing and evaluating public participation activities in order to accomplish desired outcomes. They form a process, that I) assesses the context and problem, and designs the participation process based on context-specifically identified purposes, II) manages the resources available and stakeholder participation throughout the process by utilizing effective leadership, establishing rules and structures, analyze-based appropriate stakeholder involvement, engaging diversity, and managing power dynamics, and III) evaluates and redesigns the process

continuously to develop by using evaluation measure. The twelve tasks, or outlines, if one will, are categorized into above-mentioned three classes covering the assessment and design, the managing and resourcing, and the evaluating of the project. These outlines are not step by step tasks, instead tasks like for example identifying purpose or managing power dynamics need to be evaluated and iterated through the process to be able to achieve the joined target. The framework balances between design science literature and evidence-based research findings giving the outcome that successful public participation requires designing iteratively, in response to specific purposes and contexts (Bryson et al, 2013). This process aims to respond in practical manner to the complexities and tackle the process design issues acknowledged in designing public participation processes. (Bryson et al, 2013).

## 2.3 Collaborative Governance

The concept of collaborative governance is rather fuzzy, as the current definitions can be considered to some extent vague and open for interpretations. Therefore, the understanding of collaborative governance varies, as do the implementations. However, in the scholarly discourse the definition of collaborative governance appears unanimous. (Batory & Svensson, 2019). Despite of different emphasizes on the definitions, there can be recognized some key themes, that give outlines to the concept of collaborative governance (not in specific order): 1) distribution of power, 2) balance of roles, 3) communication, and 4) working jointly towards solutions through learning.

The distribution of power consists of the need of strong leadership for the process to facilitate and guide it through and to empower stakeholder groups, but also, that everyone affected by the decisions made should be involved to the decision-making process. With power should also come responsibility, which engages the stakeholders by creating ownership and gives the experience of meaningfulness for the participation to the stakeholder groups and builds up trust. The power is distributed in practice through partnerships and/or networking. In the relationships between different stakeholder groups is important the balance of the roles, meaning each stakeholder group being heard equally in the decision-making and avoiding the dominance of some groups over others. Networking brings together local tacit knowledge and science, and by open discussion can be created knowledge flows and emerge new knowledge. Open communication, with knowledge flows and

knowledge co-creation, provides opportunities for finding solutions, that would not have been possible without collaboration. Collaborative process should also include reflection to enhance the collaboration through and during the process, which enables social learning and increases the capability of solving ever more complex issues. (Emerson et al, 2012; Hotte, Kozak & Wyatt 2019; Berkes, 2009; Leino, 2019; Ansell & Gash, 2008).

However, having a functioning collaborative governance process is not something to take for granted, but there lay several challenges. The distribution of power engages the stakeholders, which is favorable for trust-building, commitment and learning, but increased feeling of ownership amongst several stakeholder groups may lead into conflicts, as well as to imbalance of roles. Also, only a seeming process with no impact or power in the stakeholders' aspects brought up, may lead to mistrust and conflicts. Strong, but empowering leadership is needed to manage possible conflicts and negotiations during the process, but especially communication is in an important role to establish and run the process successfully. Open communication, especially face to face, throughout the process and when jointly sharing expectations, creating aims and internal rules for the collaboration amongst the stakeholders, can be increased trust but also engage the stakeholders, and lower the risk of conflicts. At its best, in the long run increased trust, mutual contracts and improved knowledge flows lead to lesser conflicts and higher legitimacy of the decisions made, but even moreover, jointly creating solutions that were not possible to be created without the collaboration. (Emerson et al, 2012; Hotte, Kozak & Wyatt 2019; Berkes, 2009; Leino, 2019; Ansell & Gash, 2008).

### 3 RESEARCH METHOD

#### 3.1 Case Lahti

In this paper the collaborative process in environmental decision making is examined by applying case study methodology. The case is a medium-sized city in Finland and its municipal master plan process.

The complexity of spatial planning formulates of being a strategic tool, which however consists of non-strategic instruments such as handling property rights, protecting the environment from change and displaying legal validity and political authority. This has led spatial planning being considered heavy and restrictive. In Lahti the traditionally restrictive master

planning process has been turned innovatively into a resource and opportunities, by practicing strategic incrementalism in spatial planning and participative strategic leadership in managing the city. (Mäntysalo et al, 2019). The city has planned and performed a continuous master plan process, which is tightly connected with the city councils working period of four years and the city's own strategy work (Figure 1). In its strategy, Lahti has defined the citizens as the makers of the city and committed in citizen participation and involvement in decision-making to reach the development goals set for the city by 2030, which includes also the spatial planning of the city (Tuomisaari, 2019). The case concentrates on the third ongoing master plan process and especially to its impact assessment process.

Impact assessment takes place on the third year of the master planning process, and it has been previously led by a group of specialists, and representatives of the city from different fields have joined the impact assessment process in two workshops and via an online platform. (Palomäki, 2018). However, on the third ongoing master planning process next to the specialists and city representatives, there was invited representatives of third sector organizations, who were chosen based on a close interest towards the themes. (Interviews with Lahden suunta representatives, 2020; Interviews with impact assessment participants, 2019).



Figure 1: Process chart of the four-year process of Lahden suunta (Created based on the text and graph in Lahden suunta OAS, 2019, p. 4, translated from Finnish).

#### 3.2 Empirical Data

Empirical data (see Table 1) of the case includes observation data from two impact assessment seminars, interview data of seven participants; 4 participants representing stakeholders and experts, 2 employees of Lahti (Lahti master planner and Lahti interaction designer) and former Lahti master planner. We also study documents provided by city of Lahti; such as the master plan drafts commentary (15

statements and 80 opinions) and responses from city of Lahti. The data was analyzed using content analysis. Content analysis can be used to analyze both qualitative and quantitative data, although it is more known method in qualitative research. In this case study we used both qualitative and quantitative data to gain range and depth to form a holistic understanding on the case (Fielding and Fielding, 1986). Each data was analyzed deductively (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018) by using the design guidelines by Bryson et al (2013) and the key themes of collaborative governance, and summarized into table in Chapter 4.1.

Table 1: Empirical data.

Data gathering method	Gathering process	Data	Analysis process
Observation	Two impact assessment seminars 06/2019 and 09/2019 Participate observation by two researchers	Field notes Interpretations regarding the situation made by the researchers	Content Analysis
Interviews	7 interviews 09-11/2019 and 04/2020 by three researcher	Transcribed interviews	Content analysis Triangulation by multiple researchers
Circulation and commentary procedure regarding the masterplan	City's official commentary system open to all citizens and specially targeted requests for comments	Statement data and City's response data	Content Analysis

## 4 RESULTS

### 4.1 Findings through Design Guidelines for Public Participation Process, Case Lahti

We use the twelve tasks by Bryson et al (2013) to analyze the empirical data from the Lahti case (see Table 2). We observe through these lenses of public participation process guidelines how city of Lahti has designed and implemented the impact assessment process and the tools thereof. We have used the three classes I) assesses and design for context and purpose,

II) enlist resources and manage the participation, and III) evaluate and redesign continuously to approach the findings below. Based on the three classes the findings reveal that in I) assessing and designing context and purpose the process is mandatory, but Lahti could/should focus on designing the context and purpose more thoroughly to and with the stakeholders and experts to reach significant outcome. In II) enlisting resources and managing the participation the infrastructure (platforms, data gathering, surveys, facilitating etc) is on solid foundation but Lahti has not yet achieved the best balance, solutions and communication. When viewing III) the evaluations and redesigning, it is obvious that the debriefing and feedback must be enhanced.

Table 2: Findings.

Design outlines	Case findings
<b>I Design to address contexts and problems</b> The public participation process is needed for example mandated or not, bottom -up or perhaps combination Fits the general and specific context Is based on clear understanding of the challenge or problem	The publication participation process in impact assessment of master plan is mandated. It fits the general and specific context and the challenge is that impact assessment of the master plan needs to be done.
<b>I Identify purposes and design to achieve them clarify and regularly revisit the purposes and desired outcomes of the participation process and design and redesign accordingly</b>	The purpose is clear to the architect and seems to be clearer to most of the participants from Lahti City, but not clear to stakeholders and or the experts. The facilitators role needs to be clarified. A joint meeting for the experts, main working group from the City before the seminars would be advisable. The "order" from the city of Lahti was vague.
<b>II Analyze and appropriately involve stakeholders</b> Ensure that the design and implementation of public participation processes are informed by stakeholder analysis and involve (in a minimum) key stakeholders in appropriate ways across the steps/phases of participation process. Note that specific stakeholders may be involved in different ways at different steps or phases of the process	Lahti used old participation data for the impact assessment and discussed the in some research group the about the new participants. The number of new participants was restricted and they were handpicked from a large third and fourth sector group. It would have been beneficial to note that some stakeholders could have been involved different way or at least that they should have received more background data to be able to participate more usefully

Table 2: Findings. (cont.)

Design outlines	Case findings
<p><b>II</b> Establish the legitimacy of the process Establish with both internal and external stakeholders the legitimacy of the process as a form of engagement and a source of trusted interaction among participants</p>	<p>The impact assessment process was considered as itself a good thing, but that it needs developing. The legitimacy was understood by the stakeholders, however the perception of how significant the impact was, varied among the stakeholders and experts involved.</p>
<p><b>II</b> Foster effective leadership Ensure that the participation process leadership roles of sponsoring, championing and facilitating are adequately fulfilled</p>	<p>This seems to be clear for the main work group, but there needs more specific communication to the participants about the leadership roles. The different roles of the organizers could be clearer to participants, for example the role of the facilitator was clear to all, but the practical realization in the seminars was in minor part, merely time management tasks. Also, the ownership of the process was not clear to all the participants</p>
<p><b>II</b> Seek resources for and through participation Secure adequate resources and design and manage participation processes so that they generate additional resources – in order to produce a favorable benefit-cost ratio for the participation process</p>	<p>Yes, the infrastructure for this process (the Lahden Suunta Case) exists already and in this impact assessment the participants contributed to new information and also to new understanding in both sides of the participants that is the organizers and the stakeholders.</p>
<p><b>II</b> Create appropriate rules and structures to guide the process Create rules and a project team to guide operation decision making, the overall work to be done and who gets to be involved in decision making in what ways</p>	<p>This was clear in the work group, but could have been communicated more openly and clearly to the participants</p>
<p><b>II</b> Use inclusive processes to engage diversity productively Employ inclusive processes that invite diverse participation and engage differences productively</p>	<p>This was done to some extent. The initial work group with the research group discussed and debated about the participants. A list of participants was done, however the attending rate of the added participants was low. How to encourage participants to attend would be something to consider next time.</p>
<p><b>II</b> Manage power dynamics to provide opportunities for meaningful participation, exchange and influence on decision outcomes</p>	<p>The overall impression from the interviews was that the impact assessment seminars were meaningful and that participants could express their opinions and views. The seminars were characterized as easy-going, friendly and confidential.</p>
<p><b>II</b> Use information, communication and other</p>	<p>The communication to participants varied depending</p>

<p>technologies to achieve the purposes of engagement Participation processes should be designed to make use of information, communication, and other technologies that fit with the context and the purposes of the process</p>	<p>on their interest group (City employees, stakeholders, experts). This unequal preparation was a challenge and lead to difficulties in the workshops as some participants were more knowledgeable for the seminars than others. There were plenty of materials in the seminars “World café” tables, but no time and chance to adapt or even glance the material through before attending the discussions. Hence the value of these materials was low. Lahti had also planned to use a web-based “Maptionnaire” survey for the participants, but due to internet attack against Lahti City and the work groups workload this did not take place.</p>
<p><b>III</b> Develop participation evaluation measures and evaluation process that supports the desired outcomes How to evaluate the public participation effort</p>	<p>There was no survey for the participants after the seminars. The communication after first seminar was adequate, but the invitation or reminder for the second seminar was inadequate as it arrived in the afternoon of the day prior to the second seminar. After the second seminar the participants (including experts and stakeholders) have not received any communication from the work group. To summarize it seems that no evaluation measures or evaluation process plans have been made by the working group in the Lahti city.</p>
<p><b>III</b> Align participation goals, purposes, approaches, promises, methods, techniques, technologies, steps and resources Participation process should seek alignment across the elements of the process. Otherwise the chances of miscommunication, misunderstanding and serious conflict increase</p>	<p>The impact assessment process is primarily aligning with goals, purposes etc. It needs some modifications and adjustments and conceptualizing to be even better.</p>

## 4.2 The Concept of Collaborative Governance in the Case Lahti

Considering the impact assessment process through the lens of collaborative governance is complex, as impact assessment is a mandatory phase by the law in the master planning process. However, in the Case Lahti could be seen several aspects of collaborative governance, both in common benefits and challenges. The distribution of power in the case was somewhat

clear, the master planning work group ran the process, picked and invited the participants, and organized the seminars. The participants experienced the atmosphere open, friendly and confidential for discussion, so the leadership could be considered facilitative and empowering for the stakeholders. As a downside, all the participants were not handed the same amount of information beforehand, which put the participants in unequal position and affected the balance between the roles, as well as the efficiency and effectiveness of the process. Whereas the roles and the process were clear to the master planning work group, there was some obscurity amongst the participants of the roles in the process, and of the process itself. Also, the purpose of the impact assessment and the aims of the seminars were not clear to all. Despite the fact, that the communication was experienced open at the seminars, there would be needed some improvement in communication by the leaders regarding the participation process itself, setting rules for how the process runs and communicating them to stakeholders. Creating clear frames for the collaborative actions and sharing information equally amongst all participants, improves the equality and balance between different roles and stakeholders, and prevents experiences of the process being seeming or injustice.

Table 3: Findings of collaborative governance.

Distribution of power	Balance of roles	Communication	Working jointly towards solutions by learning
Somewhat clear, the leadership is facilitative and empowering, experiences of seemingly process	The roles were not fully clear to all, and sharing different amounts of information and lacking communication set imbalance between roles	Experienced open, but was lacking in term of informing about the aims and purpose, roles and phases of the processes	Aims, purposes and the processes were not clear to all, which indicates not working towards jointly set goals. Also, there was so evaluation, assessment or reflection for the participants

One of the most important tools and at the same time outcomes of the collaborative governance process is social learning. Social learning enables building up the social and economic capacity, where the stakeholders are increasingly capable to solve more and more complex issues. However, the learning process needs to be facilitated by open communication, sharing information and knowledge flow, but also by setting joint aims and reflecting the actions towards them. At the same time, involving the stakeholders in setting the goals, working jointly towards them and then reflecting, engages the stakeholders to the process and creates shared

ownership, which feeds sharing power and taking responsibility further. Currently, the participants were not asked feedback of the seminars nor asked to reflect their participation in the seminars or the process, which can be seen hindering learning and developing the collaborative process further, but also preventing to optimize the impact assessment process itself.

### 4.3 Summary of the Findings

We used two perspectives to study the Case Lahti i.e. Public Participation process framework and collaborative governance studies to try to understand and identify the challenges in the collaborative impact assessment process of Lahti. The findings were very similar from both angles and we have concluded them in Table 4.

Table 4: Summary of the findings.

Challenge	Manifestation	Proposed solution
Knowledge sharing	Unequal distribution of materials, accessibility of materials, communication problems; late, insufficient or hasty	Increase awareness and implement a knowledge sharing supporting culture including technical systems such as map apps and platforms
Roles, distribution of power and value (organizers and participants)	Roles and distribution of power was not clear to all participants and lead to some challenges	Open communication, clear and well-defined responsibilities, authority and impacts for all
Overview of the process	Reshuffle in working group, what part of the process is impact assessment, how it continues, what is needed from the participants	Schemes for knowledge sharing, especially tacit knowledge, communication and planning
Learning lessons	No feedback or evaluations	Implement a procedure for debriefing and feedback and communicate

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

Stakeholder engagement through participatory approaches is claimed to be the remedy when tackling contemporary complex environmental challenges (Reed et al, 2018) - when succeeded, the results may exceed any outcome the actors would have able to reach alone (Emerson et al, 2012), but on a downside

a failure might have far-reaching consequences. (Reed et al, 2018; Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Ansell & Gash, 2008). The initiating actor for collaboration does not always foresee the outcome, and there is no way to guarantee the collaboration to succeed (Reed et al, 2018; Gaventa & Barrett, 2012). Therefore, the participative actions need to be purposeful with well-defined aims and cautious planning, and rather involving the stakeholders with a full intention of meaning and true distribution of power. However, it is up to the actors within the participation process to formulate their joint rules, roles and ways of working, as well as setting goals for collaboration, and through open communication and reflection adjust the process to ensure working jointly and purposefully towards the aims. (Bryson et al 2013; Irvin & Stansbury, 2004).

Communication and knowledge sharing can be considered critical points in creating a powerful and functional collaborative participation process. “Communications usually fails, except by accident” (Wiio, O, 1978) is a “communication law” created by the Finnish academic Osmo Wiio on 1970s. Inequality in communication and information sharing can easily lead to even severe challenges in the process, fortunately this can be tackled by acknowledging the level of difficulties in communication, increasing awareness of communication and implementing a knowledge sharing supporting culture.

Even though the process is iterative and adaptive by nature, to gain a functional, ongoing and active collaboration the process needs to be conceptualized. Open communication, knowledge sharing culture, constant planning, feedback and debriefing are core factors that need to be taken account in a conceptualized process. A conceptualized process can then be utilized as a template in various contexts and for different purposes.

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