

The Democratic Transformation of Nature Conservation and Public Planning

Hansen, Hans Peter; Clausen, Laura Tolnov

Publication date:
2004

Document Version
Også kaldet Forlagets PDF

Citation for published version (APA):
Hansen, H. P., & Clausen, L. T. (2004). *The Democratic Transformation of Nature Conservation and Public Planning*. Paper præsenteret ved Global Conference of Environmental Justice & Global Citizenship, Copenhagen, Danmark.

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The Democratic Transformation of Nature Conservation and Public Planning

Paper to "3rd Global Conference: Environmental Justice and Global Citizenship"
The 12th – 14th February 2004

By

M. tech. soc. and Ph.D. student Hans Peter Hansen

Department of Environment, Technology and Social Studies, University of Roskilde

E-mail hpeter@ruc.dk Phone: +45 4674 2124 and +45 2576 7369

&

Cand. Mag. Degree in European Ethnology and Ph.D. student Laura Tolnov Clausen

Department of Environment, Technology and Social Studies, University of Roskilde

E-mail: lauratc@ruc.dk Phone: +45 46743128 and +45 2623 0589

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The Democratic Transformation of Nature Conservation and Public Planning

Abstract

This paper focuses on the interface between planning and democracy by putting both into a historical and theoretical context. By using public planning within the field of nature conservation in Denmark as an example, the paper points out the need for new orientations regarding civic participation and the importance of developing new methods to involve citizens in public planning. The paper argues for the need to develop a new kind of rationality within public planning in order to create an institutional capacity to handle real and genuine citizen participation. Finally, the paper suggests action research as a possible way of developing real methods of participation and for building bridges between public planners and citizens.

Democracy and planning

Participation has been on the agenda as long as sustainable development has been an international political issue. However, when it comes to the concrete national and regional policies and day-to-day planning, it seems quite difficult to put participation into practice. Since the fall of 2002, participation has had a special role on the Danish agenda for nature conservation, because the Danish minister of Environment, Hans Christian Smith, has made the involvement and the participation of the citizens a central issue in the development of national parks in Denmark.¹ The political need for explicitly stressing the importance of citizen participation is not new in a Danish context, neither within public planning in general nor within nature conservation in particular. However, in Denmark - as in many other countries - talk about participation has remained on a rhetorical and symbolic level. We still need to see some good examples on practicing real participation as described by Sherry Arnstein in her ladder of citizen participation. [Arnstein, 1969]

Until now, citizen participation in Denmark, as in several other countries, has been seen as a matter of giving the citizens a chance to criticize plans that have already been worked out and when it has already been decided to implement them. Not even in Denmark - a country who prefers to see itself as one of the most democratic countries in the world - has there been a tradition for a true involvement of the citizen, their needs, their ideas, and their knowledge in the local or regional planning process. However - even if it seems to be just a hopeless straw - the actual focus on the involvement of the citizen in the context of national parks in Denmark, maybe the first real chance to develop a democratic tradition of planning, the starting point being nature conservation. At least, for the first time, there is an opportunity to identify the barriers and the possibilities for the development of a more democratic form of public planning on quite a large scale. However, in order to develop such a planning process we need to understand the history and the values of planning, as well as the interface between democracy and planning. Inspired by our own observations and work relating to civic participation and the development of national parks in Denmark, we will describe the historical context of public planning as a classical conflict between public planning and

¹ The emphasize of the involvement and participation of citizens in the development of Danish national parks has been expressed by the Danish minister of Environment by several occasions. Last time was on the September 14 (th) 2003 at a public meeting about a national park on Mols.

liberal democracy. A conflict which is the reason for the increasing pressure on and criticism of public planning in general and planning within the field of nature conservation in particular.

In this paper we will argue that focusing on the involvement of the citizen in the public planning sphere is not only a matter of critique of how the planners work, but is also a critique of the conditions that constitute modern planning. These terms are related to the way public planners and authorities' think 'rationality'. A way of thinking which pursues both rational and radical planning without questioning its own conditions. However, we argue that it is these conditions that prevent a transformation towards a more participatory and deliberative planning process. We will in other words argue that the idealization of a more democratic public planning process will appear more rhetorical than practical and genuine as long as the way of thinking 'rationally' among politicians, public planners and administrators in the civil service system, does not change towards a more genuine participatory planning system in the public planning institutions.

Modern public planning

A way to categorize planning is to divide different perceptions of planning into *modern* or *post modern* paradigms. Looking at planning from a social and historical point of view makes it easier to understand what planning is about in the social context, because it helps to understand which values are determinants for different planning models and planning traditions. Unlike planning within the modern paradigm, which had its roots in the Age of Enlightenment and the belief in rationality and objectivity [Pedersen: 1996], planning within the post-modern paradigm does not believe in rationality and objectivity and therefore tries to break with the belief of the modern. Until today this mediation has been a determinant of how most Western societies prefer to see themselves, but still when we deal with planning, we also deal with a field where the numbers of technical terms are almost endless.

"Almost every writer that deals with planning, has his own definition of the term..."
[Hansen, 1985: 17] [Our translation]

A way to handle the term 'planning' is to look at it from a primarily technocratic angle focusing on methods and strategies, emphasizing quantifiable proportions. Another way to understand the concept of planning is to look at those aspects, which are not immediately possible to quantify, such as cultural norms and informal social structures. If the first way of looking at planning is usually oriented towards planning on the micro level, the second way usually focuses on those elements which are the determinants as to how plans are worked out and implemented. Common for both ways of looking at planning from a social point of view is that it is the objectives which are focused upon, and that people with those objectives have an expectation of a *common good*.

From an over all judgment most definitions of the term 'planning' concern *today's attempt to organize the future*. [Ibid.] However, if we use such a short definition it will include all actions people plan to do. From the social point of view, it is therefore desirable to have a tighter definition. Such a definition could be – with inspiration from Barclay M. Hudson – one that focuses on the expectation of a common good: *A provident public formulation of objectives and strategies in order to reach the common good for society*.

Even though we try to define what public planning in general is about we have to acknowledge the existence of several models and perceptions of planning. Each model has its own terminology which covers different premises and distinctions between different degrees of centralization. Hudson therefore defines five different planning archetypes. He names these *synoptic planning*, *incremental planning*, *advocacy planning*, *transactive planning* and *radical planning*. The three first types involve a high degree of centralization and some quite solid conditions. The two last mentioned involve, to some extent, a higher degree of decentralization and adaptability to social and cultural contexts. Without going into detail about Hudson's planning archetypes one can in a modern/post modern perspective say that the five models represent a specter from a modern perception of planning towards a post-modern perception of planning starting with synoptic planning at the one end and radical planning at the other. It is obvious that no archetypes occur alone and we will therefore always have to deal with mixed types of planning. [Kaufman, 1979]

Rational planning

Academics dealing with planning at a theoretical level agree that the most conspicuous type of planning in the western world is what Hudson refers to as *synoptic planning* or what we would prefer to call *rational planning*. Many academics also agree that this type of planning has been dominant since industrialization began, and that today's ways of using rational planning, still carry the inheritance of this period. In other words, the way we are thinking planning in the western world today, is heavily influenced by the way we were thinking planning more than 200 years ago.

*“The need for rationality has always had a significant role in the society, but it was first with the appearance of the industrialization, the ideas where purified and really sat the agenda for the development. One can also say that the growing industrialization created a need for a “consequent” and “logical” science of behavior, and that the School of rationality **had** to be dominant. It became dominant and has been it since.”* [Gaardmand, 1991:15] [Our translation]

Hudson characterizes rational planning as a way of planning which work out plans and make decisions against the background of objective data and the use of easily understandable standard methods. Because of this rather technocratic way of planning and its implicit use of standard methods in heavily complicated social systems, the scale of the actual plans often becomes so large and so complex that they end up being implemented only to a limited extent. While some types of planning try to minimize the gap between decisions and implementation, rational planning often leads to the production of even more plans!

state, the need to reject the laissez-faire perception of the State in order to protect the freedom of the individual, has been called “*Planning for freedom*” by the Hungarian sociologists, Karl Mannheim. [Ibid:12] The regulation of society by intervention from the state became a legitimate tool to ensure social stability and thereby also the financial order. The debate in the beginning of the 20th century as to whether planning should be used to ensure the survival of democracy in the industrialized countries was thereby replaced by a discussion about *good planning*.

“As the need for planning became obvious, less significant was it for the politicians and social scientists, which were oriented towards practical problems, if planning from a theoretical point of view was consistent with democracy and freedom. The crucial thing was that planning seemed to be efficient...” [Ibid:14] [Our translation]

Accordingly, with the basic mission of rational planning – to protect the economic development of the society – the next big task for the postwar planning in Denmark was to find solutions to one of the new big threats against production: the uncontrollable growth of the welfare society, caused by the policy of maintaining a mixed economy. To avoid this threat, several initiatives were taken between the 1950's and the 1980's to slow down the growth of the public sector. Again a paradox occurred; simultaneous with a tighter and more centralist regulation of public expenditure, especially at the local governmental level, there was an increasing recognition of the need to create local and public participation in planning.

“The growth of public planning was to a great extent dependent on that the population were able to see the use of it and therefore were actively participating in the local development of the public planning. Too tight a centralized regulation can choke local creativity and responsibility, but people at decentralized levels have to know that they are not able to depart from the main policy of the government”. [Ibid: 101] [Our translation]

One of the most significant consequences we meet today of the historical development of Danish central administrative planning is an increase of the financial controls of the local governmental levels. The central administrative level has been strengthened – especially by the Ministry of Finance – on the expenditure of politicians on the local levels. Additionally, to increase control over public expenditure during the 1970's, a radical *sectorization* of the central administrative planning and regulation has been going on.

The historical context

The point of looking at the development of the rational planning is to make it possible to identify those elements that limit the society from finding and choose alternative solutions to relevant social problems. It is possible to conclude that today's solutions to social problems are related to the traditions of technical and physical planning as were developed during industrialization.

The reasons why the technocratic way of planning has maintained its predominant position are twofold. One reason is that public planning has, to a large extent, been handled by people with a technical education such as architects and engineers. For instance it was first at the beginning of the 1960's that the need for other types of professionals in public planning was accepted in Denmark. Nevertheless, many of these non-technically skilled professionals continued the technocratic way of thinking about planning, not least within the public economy. The second reason why Western

societies have maintained their technocratic way of thinking planning, is probably due to the overriding belief is that this way of thinking has a implicit scientific and definitive rationality. Even though most planners probably are aware of the true irrationality of the technocratic planning, and problems with scientific objectivity and political neutrality, this awareness is seldom mentioned to the public.

“When public plans are brought out into the openness, they are presented as a result of scientific analysis which has included all relevant conditions. The objectives of the plans seem to be the best available to which take into consideration in order to ensure the development of society in the best interest of everybody.” [Ibid:26] [Our translation]

The technocracy of public planning has led to a situation where the positivist paradigm of science has been predominant and the legitimizing tool. The ideal of natural science has been transferred into social systems without being able to handle some of the most significant social problems of Western societies. As a consequence we reproduce the same solutions to the same problems over and over again.

Public planning from a democratic perspective

As mentioned before a apparent paradox in the development of rational planning goes back to the establishment of liberal democracy, and that has been the conflict between individual freedom and the need of society to intervene in this freedom.

“Public planning can be characterized as a kind of intervention that restricts the space for action for private citizens.” [Ibid:47] [Our translation]

Even though there have been times when the conflict between planning and democracy has had a more central status on the agenda than others, public planning has always had the need to legitimize its decisions. Until the end of the 1960's and the beginning of the 1970's the technocracy and science pretty much succeeded in legitimizing planning and the solutions were accepted by the public to be the best available. Then, however, the pressure on this type of rational planning started to grow. In Denmark there was a public debate about the conditions of democracy and people started questioning some aspects of public planning, especially that which had to do with the centralist physical planning. In order to maintain the legitimacy of planning, the regulation of physical planning in Denmark was delegated to regional and local governmental levels, but still it was kept in accordance with the central administration's attempt to control public expenditure.

Together with the sectorization of public administration and a radical transition of the local governmental structure in Denmark, the decentralization of the physical planning was expected to democratize public planning. These expectations were never properly fulfilled because of the neoclassic economic values of *rational planning* were maintained as premises for decentralized planning.

“One thing the development of a sectorizedt planning show, is that the expectation of this planning would lead to a realization of a freer rein for local wants and needs was not fulfilled.” [Ibid: 133] [Our translation]

From a democratic perspective, one can say that the fundamental values behind public planning together with technocracy and science have created two overall problems. First of all they have led to a situation where all planning procedures which does not take

their departure in an understanding based on neoclassical economics are met with strong opposition from the authorities. Secondly technocracy and science have given the public planners a relative significant political power. In spite of the democratic ideals according to which planners must be neutral and objective, the planner's personal political and philosophical ballast and perception do have an influence on the decisions that planners make. Even if a technocratic approach of planning close public debate, planning is never depoliticized.

“... this put a break to the political debate about objectives but do not become less political. In a way, planners become politicians themselves, even if they have an ideal of being independent counselors. (...) The plans seem just as non-discussible as the objectives in the plans which are brought forward to the affected people, which contribute to the fact that the work of the planners becomes political.” [Ibid: 27-28] [Our translation]

The Danish sociologist Mogens Hansen points out that the attempts during the 1970's and 1980's to develop a more decentralized planning process have been seen as an attempt to break with the classical tradition of planning. From an empirical point of view, the changes of the planning systems could look like a rejection of classical planning and the introduction of a more democratic type of planning. But by looking at the epistemological content of planning one realizes that the theoretical framework behind the changes of the planning system is still the same. One can therefore not consider the development as a real breakthrough for a new type of public planning, but just an attempt to reestablish legitimacy. The differences and the disagreements we find today within public planning are more about scale, complexity and reality than about fundamental changes of the rationality of planning. Public planning today is basically represented by an analytical and technocratic approach to several opportunities – the *rational* and *comprehensive* model – or to a more consensus oriented approach, including few alternatives and society's power elite – the model of “*muddling-through*” or *incremental* planning.

Democracy in the field of nature conservation

By following the development of planning from the 1990's into the new millennium there is reason to claim that the element of neoclassical economics in public planning, in many ways been continued as it was in the 1970's. The financial iron grip at the local government level has been tightened even more, now because of the need to adjust society to a more global market. There is therefore no reason to assume that the rationality of public planning has changed radically during the last decades. The democratic deficit still have a significant impact on the political as well as the scientific agenda.

As described, there has always been an ambivalent relationship between public planning and the democratic conditions. It is, therefore, no surprise that a lot of the critique of public planning contains a critique of the absence of democracy. This is not least the case within the field of nature conservation and is illustrated in Denmark by the fact that the authorities within this field– especially during the 1990's – have made several attempts to involve the citizens in public planning. However, the same authorities have at the same time been criticized for *not* involving citizens in the planning.

“The ordinary political conversation has been pushed away by the rationale of the discourse of the negotiated economy. If you have no expert knowledge or are not

rooted in some kind of organized interests, you do not have many chances to have influence. The domain for political amateurs is still decreasing and the distance between the ideal of a democracy and the actual political expert system and its logic of control is still increasing.” [Bang & Dyrberg, 1997: 20] [Our translation]

Two examples of the contrast between political intentions about participation and actual planning in a Danish context are the development of the largest nature restoration project in Northern Europe – The Skjern River restoration project - and the regulation of one of the world's biggest wetlands - the Waddensea.³ In both examples, politicians and planners expressed their intentions to involve local citizens in the planning process. When it came to the concrete and substantial planning there was, however, no real civic participation but rather participation on the symbolic level [Arnstein, 1969] in order to legitimate decisions made by the authorities. In line with rational planning scientific and technocratic rules were used to declare the knowledge of experts more valid than others – lay people - making a disconnection of the local cultural knowledge. The local citizens were not able to talk or understand the discourses controlling the debate and to that extent the locals didn't have the opportunity to voice their grievances and priorities, unless these 'echoed' the voices of the exciting planning discourse.

In the dialogue with the experts to things characterizes both cases. 1) Local opinion did transform into an opposition to the objectives of the public planners, for whom citizens were considered as a time-consuming and disturbing factor as their opinions were not in harmony with the direction of the planning process. 2) The local values were seen as trivial and hawked by the planners and could not find any recognition in the process of planning. As a consequence, the locals were marginalized as the dominant discourse in fact served to disguise them from the political process. [Svennevig & Tolnov Clausen, 2002]

In both cases, the marginalization of local opinion led to a long and hard struggle between the local population and the central administrative authorities. The two examples therefore seem to illustrate how public planning often reproduces exactly the same problems that it – at least verbally rhetorically – tries to avoid. From a democratic perspective, the examples illustrate a difference in the perception of public participation between the authorities and the local population. This difference is not necessarily a matter of two answers to civic participation. More likely it seems to be questions of barriers produced by the western planning that prevent the development of an institutional capacity, which could enable the planners to develop some better criteria of success for planning.

Implementation and legitimization

One central factor behind the intentions to create a more direct involvement of the citizens in public planning e. g. nature conservation is the gap created by an increasingly individualized population and self-centered public planning. What we in other word witness is a polarization between different kinds of control. From the authorities' point of view this control is about implementation and legitimization, while from the perspective of the citizen is about social, cultural and individual control. In other words, the societal development has not just created a need for civic participation, but it has also made a more realistic participation a necessary condition for public planning.

³ The problematics of implementation connected to the Skjern River restoration project – and the regulations of the Waddensea are described in Svennevig & Tolnov Clausen, 2002

As mentioned earlier, within the last decade, there has been an increasing awareness of the ongoing separation of public planning from citizen's cultural and social knowledge. This awareness is built on that fact that people have been reduced to spectators of the public regulation which influences their lives. The fact that such awareness is created at all is due to the increasing recognition that the participation of citizen in the processes of public planning is a necessity if the political intentions are to be achieved. Although it has occupied social scientists for years, it now looks as though politicians and planners [Læssøe, 1992] are also beginning to understand the need for changes. At least it seems as if there is a growing understanding within the field of nature conservation and environmental policy that experts cannot solve all the environmental problems alone, and that a more sustainable development is also a democratic project.

“Just to the extent that ordinary people are involved in their formulation of arguments for environmental regulations and become a part of a political and cultural process of formation, we will be able to develop a sustainable environmental regulation, founded on the cultural consideration for nature, just a natural pillar equally to their recommendation of commissions of experts and risk assessments” [Agger & Aagaard Nielsen, 1997: 87] [Our translation]

The problem about implementation is therefore not only related to the mechanical practice of social objectives – for instance ecological sustainability – through a set of strict and formally shaped methods. The post-modern objectives have, compared to the traditional physical planning, lead to a demand for the integration of social and cultural aspects within nature. Something indicates that society's social objectives more than ever needs at planning strategy that will break down the boundaries between ideas and reality in order to be realized. These boundaries have been created by the barriers of interpretation, which is the reason why the citizens don't understand and speak the language of the experts which is in fact setting the political agenda. Such boundaries are also the cause why experts apparently don't understand the real world's contextual coherence [Ibid.] and meaning. In that respect, the main problem is that expert knowledge is to often separated from practical knowledge developed through social and cultural experience. [Læssøe, 1992]

The pressure for more genuine participation in public planning is however not a problem of implementation alone but also, as mentioned, a question of democratic legitimization. [Agger & Aagaard Nielsen, 1997] In Denmark the political cooperative tradition for negotiation, starting with the development of the negotiation system established between the two sides of industry, has basically affected all areas of policy making in Denmark, including physical planning and environmental issues. For many years, the democratic legitimization of the field of nature and environmental policy, has been fulfilled by the involvement of certain interest organizations in decision making. All the way back to the beginning of the 20th century, the NGOs have played a significant role, first within the nature conservation area and later also with other environmental issues. [Schroll, 1997] The significant political role of the NGOs has to a large extent been caused by the institutionalization of what once were “green” grass-roots movements. The border between authorities, social movements and experts has been blurred and together with their own networks of experts, the NGOs become more or less authorities themselves. [Hansen, 2002] As a consequence, the distance between the NGOs and the population is increased and the NGOs have lost some of their democratic legitimacy in the political process of planning.

“The grassroots and their organizations have been turned into experts themselves, and the experts and their institutions have been politicized. The increasing professionalizing of the grassroots has caused a decrease of the activity of the members. On the expert level a shift in direction of an increasing dependence of the political system have happened and thereby a loss of personal freedom and freedom of research.” [Agger & Aagaard Nielsen, 1997] [Our translation]

“Regardless of the fact that the environmental organizations face great sympathy and a lot of support, their increasing professionalization has strengthened the barriers between” the players on the field and their spectators” instead of breaking them down” [Læssøe, 2002]

The local and the global

The point of involving people in public planning is, however, not just about implementation and legitimization, but also a matter of creating coherence between mind and action for example regarding the political intentions of a more sustainable development. This is not a local, a regional or national matter. With international conferences, conventions and multilateral agreements political matters have become global matters. Within the field of nature conservation one can witness the development from the Rio-conference and the following Agenda 21” agreement, to even more emphasis on international conventions about biodiversity, nature protection and sustainable development. Paradoxically, it is the same globalization that makes it necessary to involve citizens on the local level.

“Because the local agenda 21 has a local point of departure, it is central to use the local competence of the citizen by an active involvement of the citizens. The citizens have the insight into the local culture which is essential for the planning.” [Miljø & Energiministeriet, 1995] [Our translation]

It is the perception of the committee that the dialogues between plot owner and other local resident and the local regional, and central authorities have to be developed and practiced in the daily work of Nature Protection and as close to the local resident as possible. It is also the perception of the committee that an active and local engagement and a broad understanding of nature are fundamental for reaching the objectives within the nature and environmental area.”
[Wilhelmudvalget, 2001] [Our translation]

Globalization indicates that it is not sufficient to blame the difference between the democratic ideal and the actual structure of society as the cause of the democratic discrepancy between the individual and the over all society. The changes in the physical conditions of democracy also play a role and besides having an impact on the social perception of nature, globalization has also changed the physical borders of democracy and planning. The picture of the representative democracy framed by some clear geographical borders seems to be replaced by whole new set of borders.

“What liberal theorists of democracy have never taken into serious account is that the construction of an “all” also demands a delimitation of the geographical liberty of democracy. This oversight is probably caused because the national states for years have been the hegemonic principle in organizing the society.” [Sørensen, 1997: 82] [Our translation]

The dissolution of geographical frames of democracy caused by the transformation of society can be claimed of having created a need for a new democratic orientation that aims to protect the *private* from intervention in line with the liberal principle of the inviolability of privacy. A principal which could cause the making of special interests and which is emphasized by the conflict of interest that characterize public planning and which constitutes a barrier to reaching the social objectives of the society: *the common good*. The question then arises: *exactly who constitutes the common and what is the common good?*

The values of democracy

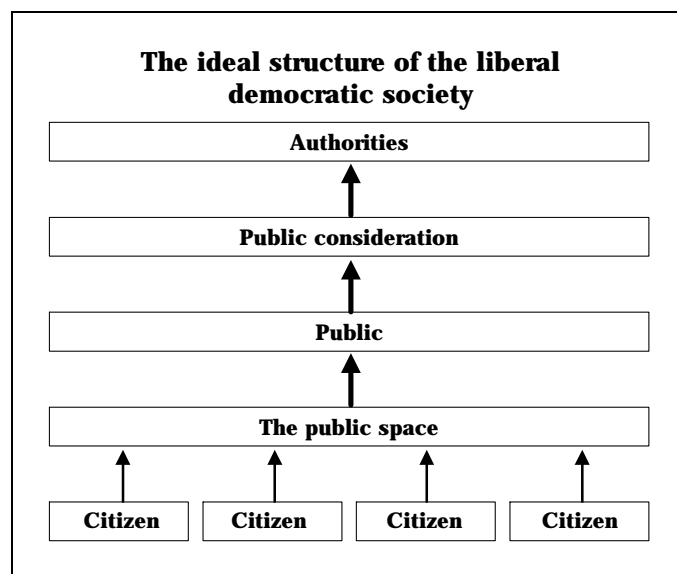
The problems that public planning faces today can as previously mentioned be seen as a product of the classical conflict. On the one hand, western societies are built on some fundamental liberal ideas about a clear separation between the privacy of the citizens and the limitations of state intervention. These ideas are directly rooted in the liberal revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries and in the principles of freedom and equality, and the protection of privacy. Principles which are written down in basically every modern constitution in the western world,[for those that have them] among these the Danish constitution from 1849. On the other hand, the same liberal ideas recognize the necessity of organizing society in order to ensure the common good. The conflict between the freedom of the individual and the common good occurs when the borderline between the two has to be drawn. As a consequence democracy is challenged by the organization and the planning of society, and vice versa – when the claimed objectivity of the public planning is challenged, either by massive conflict of interest or by a rival “objectivity”.

An analysis of this classical conflict can be made by applying liberal democracy to perspectives. One perspective is the social aspect that means everything regarding democratic norms and the social organization of society. Another perspective is the physical aspects, that is to say everything regarding the geographical frames for democracy. Common to both perspectives of a liberal democracy is that they deal with the limitations of the state intervention in the private sphere. To claim the existence of a universal democratic principle from where the norms of the democratic borderline between public planning and the privacy of the citizen can be drawn is, from the point of social science, not possible. But probably no one would object to claim that the liberal democracy of the western world is built upon a number of common determinants regarding the liberal principles of democracy. The question is to what extent it is possible to define these common determinants. An illustrative attempt to describe the liberal principles of the society has been made by the German sociologist Jürgen Habermas in his thesis ‘Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit’ published in 1962. In this, Habermas described the liberal society’s understanding of itself and analyzed the classical conflict between the individual and the state. The description of the liberal society’s understanding of itself is made through a historical analysis of liberal democracy going all the way back to ancient Greece. The analysis of the classical conflict is made through an empirical consideration of the actual democratic praxis of society. In other words, Habermas tried to compare the ideal of liberal democracy with reality.

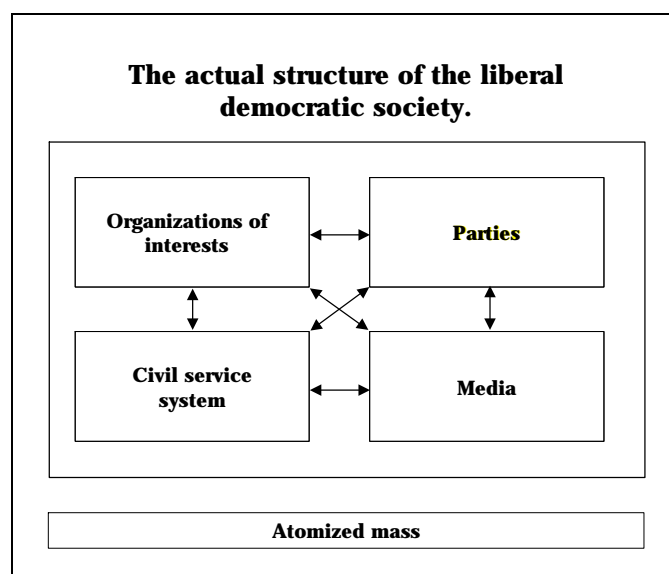
In his description of this ideal, Habermas sketched out a model of society divided into different social rooms, where privacy is the most sacred and inviolable. The status of the privacy means that the state is allowed to intervene in this privacy on very special occasions only and only on the basis of a democratic debate between the state and the

privacy of the citizens, *the civil society*. This means a decision about intervening in the privacy of the citizen that can only be made from a conclusive debate in the public space, also called *the public consideration*. The appearance of a common *truth* is made out of an unprejudiced discussion among private citizens.

“The first condition is the establishment of society, which involve the nature of a private sphere where public authorities are not able to interfere with commands or prohibitions. However, there exist things of common matters (typically domestic, legal and foreign affairs). These common matters are not handled by an arbitrary power of the State, but is the solution that the specific problem has to be found in the discussion of private citizens gathered in to a public: the public consideration. /.../ The Constitution (...) therefore once and for all constitutes the frames that ensure the relationship between the privacy and the authorities. The separation between the society and the state is formally a statutory matter.” [Beck Jørgensen, 1978: 12] [Our translation]



Figur 2. The ideal structure of the liberal democratic society. Interpretation of Habermas based on Torben Beck Jørgensen, 1978: 12.



Figur 3. The actual structure of the liberal democratic society. Interpretation of Habermas based on Torben Beck Jørgensen, 1978: 33.

Regarding Habermas' analysis, there is a clear discrepancy between liberal societies' democratic self-perception and reality, first and foremost because the state increasingly crosses the border of the inviolable. In his analysis of the classical conflict between the individual and the state, Habermas finds that the reason for the conflict is due to changes in the social spaces and the function of the public in society. The changes have led to the atomizing and marginalizing of the citizens and to the creation of a social élite of politicians, members of the civil service, media and organizations. The Habermas term "*the colonization of the social lifeworld*" is directly related to the technocracy of decision making and public planning. As the intertwining of state and economy increases, along with the growth of complexity and bureaucratization of the social system, the means-ends rationality of the political economy becomes more and more prevalent in the family and the public sphere, supplanting the intersubjective communicative rationalities that define the social lifeworld. [Fischer, 2000:17] The consequence is that the communicative sense and experience which exist in the everyday life of lay-people is eroded by the rationality of institutionalized systems. In the frame of a technical rationality, this erosion leaves the social lifeworld impoverished and without any social values. [Agger & Aagaard Nielsen, 1997]

When considering the development of the environmental field the bureaucratization can be seen as an erosion of ordinary people's social and cultural everyday experience and ability to navigate politically in society. The consequence has been an increasing marginalization of laypeople in political decision making and public planning, because the foundation for an equal dialogue disappears together with the experiences and capacity of the people, which is the basis for the citizen to enter a public dialogue. The changing of the social space has to be found in the rational planning's relatively narrow neoclassical understanding of the economy and its dominance over society. Unfortunately, the neoclassical understanding of the economy has not been able to maintain the regulation of society as intended. Instead this understanding has contributed to undermining the border between the privacy of the citizen and the state.⁴

"... the system of the economy cannot guarantee rationality - economic conflicts breaks therefore into the public. (...) the major private organizations are transformed into semi-public authorities and are delegated public authority while the state intervene the civil society, i.e. the border between the privacy and the state breaks down." [Beck Jørgensen, 1978: 31-32] [Our translation]

⁴ Regarding the environmental area one can say that the dominant understanding of the economy has an impact on two levels. First, the institutionalizing of the NGOs has led to their professionalisation. The organizations have specialized them selves, they have hired administrators and experts with specific professional competences within those areas of politics which the NGOs deal with. Because a lot of public institutions within the environmental area have come into existence - not only at national level but also at international level - and because the competition about inference in the decision making has increased, lobbyism is now an essential part of the NGOs work. A professional organization is expensive to run which is why the rationality of the economy must be presumed to play a significant role for the social orientations of their organizations. Also at a higher level, economic rationality plays a significant role within the environmental area. Instead of discussing sustainable solutions of the problem caused by the externalities' of the production, there is a tendency to focus on specific sectors and technical fixes. Also here the citizens and their social and cultural values from everyday life are marginalized from the planning process.

Two dimensions of democracy

Harbermas' description of the Democratic self-understanding of the liberal society is close, on several points, to the commonly used description of Danish democracy presented by Hal Koch a Danish Grundtvigian, in his book "Hvad er demokrati?" (What is Democracy?). Koch warns against decision making based on majority voting or by societal elites alone. Pointing to the experiences of the 1930's and 1940's "experiments" with totalitarianism, Koch argued that democracy was only able to survive if it was maintained and developed through the active participation of the citizens and true conversation and dialogue in order to reach a common good for society.

"If the decisions are made in advance and the point of views of the opponent never becomes present, then the negotiation is just empty words and parliamentary rubbish, as the hard critics of democracy used to say. But if the mind is kept open and the respect for the views of other people is maintained, and interest for the common is kept alive, results will be made which would be impossible if one part alone dictates, no matter if it's a absolute monarch, a privileged overclass or a modern political party strong enough to have dictatorial ideas. A voting procedure does not insure the correct result, and even decisions made by the majority can in a Democratic society be openly discussed and criticized. In an authoritarian state the opposition keep their silence when a decision is made." [Hal Koch, 1960: 21] [Our translation]

"What actually happened was that the peasant took over the power from the intellectual. Did it go as badly as predicted? Did we see the mob and anarchy rule? Not at all. We saw their ability increase with the responsibility. Peasants and smallholders were not as inarticulate as believed." [Ibid: 36] [Our translation]

Koch's emphasis on dialogue and the competence of the citizens, underlines to things of importance to democracy. First of all, democracy is not simply representative democracy. Democracy is more than that which thereby complicates the traditional social terminology of top-down or bottom up. Secondly, democracy needs genuine public participation in the decision making.

Nowadays theoretical considerations about democracy can be seen as the extension of Koch's thoughts and the analysis of the classical conflict between the privacy of the citizens and the state made by Habermas. Hal Koch's and Jürgen Habermas's interpretation of liberal democracy is reflected in the participatory democracy as well as in the deliberative models⁵ of democracy. Both are critical toward an interpretation of democracy as a question of representing most preferences in decision making or purely as a matter of ensuring the constitutional rights of the individuals. Instead the participatory and the deliberative definitions of democracy emphasize the need for the genuine involvement of the citizen in the political processes of the society at all levels due the development of both the individual and a common political culture and identity. Only such an involvement through an open and free debate will legitimate the decision making.

Put a little more simply, one can say that the theoretical analysis of democracy reflects two dimensions of democracy, *the vertical* dimension - understood as the representative dimension of democracy - and *the horizontal* - understood as the dialogue focused and empowerment dimension of democracy. The horizontal dimension is also the condition

⁵ A model which Habermas not surprisingly has had a significant influence on.

for the Democratic development of each individual and thereby the condition for the creation of a common Democratic identity.

The need for institutional changes

The increasing focus on greater involvement and participation of the citizens in the public planning, can be interpreted as a pressure towards a more horizontal practice of democracy and thereby an attempt to break down the legitimating character of public planning. Maybe this, as is on the horizon right now in Danish planning, are perhaps steps toward a reinterpretation of the democratic practice. Taking a geographical and representative basis as a point of departure, there is now a possibility that the gravity of public planning is perhaps moving in the direction of a more functional practice. This development has been verified over the last decades by focusing on the creation of new institutions and new expressions of decision making, with even more emphasis on the functional elements and a more direct involvement of the stakeholders.

“By giving up the illusion that the political area can be limited to a certain sphere in the society, based on geographical conditions of influence, there are now opened up for a number of collective and individual forms of influence that can be categorized as political and democratic”. [Sørensen, 1997: 89] [Our translation]

“Is a third transformation of democratic limits and possibilities now on the horizon?” [Dahl, 1989: 312]

If it is true that the developments we are witnessing really are attempts to reinterpret the democratic practice of planning at the micro level, it is important that this development also lead to changes on the macro level. Otherwise the institutional systems will experience a growing democratic vacuum. Such a vacuum is what the civil servants of public institutions already today find themselves in the middle of when given the task of transforming political intentions and objectives into practice, or when given the task of combining international agreements on a large scale with the citizens democratic needs of protecting their privacy. The civil servants can to a certain extent maintain their formal and legal authority, but in the long run they will, if they do not develop a more democratic capacity, loose the democratic authority, necessary when implementing plans and objectives in order to fulfill a common good. Where the civil service system in the earlier days had a relatively large room for action, established by the authority of the citizen towards the political representative process and the consensual cooperative character of democracy, the system today faces new and completely different challenges.

“From a deliberative point of view, the democratic ideal of the citizen empowerment is essential for the state of democracy. Also from the citizens point of view (...). The question occurs how it is possible to develop institutions that can help such a political empowerment...” [Goul Andersen, 2000: 6-7] [Our translation]

Empowerment of the citizens

As an answer to the ongoing marginalization of laypeople in political decision making, political empowerment refers to the acquisition of political capacity which makes the citizen able to get on in the political arena giving him or her a real possibility to be a part of decision making. The idea is that an active involvement and participation within a political context will develop a political self-confidence which generates further

participation. In that way, political empowerment also refers to the will and ability to transform resources and possibilities into action in a participatory manner.⁶

As mentioned, a significant consequence of the technocratic dominance of nature conservation, has been the erosion of the cultural and social experiences of laypeople's everyday life and their ability to navigate within the political field of planning. Such experiences and abilities *could* be the starting point for establishing a communication between laypeople and experts. With the focus on people's participation in environmental planning as a question of legitimization it has, however, neither been possible to equip the citizens with the necessary authority nor to embrace relevant insight from beneath.

“Empowerment is not a matter of a certain state but about a process - a development, institutional possibilities for action is assumed leading to a high degree of participation which again leads to more knowledge and motivation for participation.” [Ibid: 125] [Our translation]

In Danish nature conservation, the lack of experience has shown itself to be a major problem regarding the ambition to fulfill the political objectives about getting more support and involvement from the local citizen in concrete projects. The idea that nature conservation should go hand-in-hand with principles of volunteering, participation and democracy are reason for frustration among politicians and planners because it is proven extremely difficult to dismiss traditional pattern of behavior to the benefit of a more deliberative and dialogue oriented way of planning. Several of those participatory initiatives which have been tried implemented have, in spite of an explicit intention of involving people in the planning process, maintained a legitimizing approach instead of real involvement and empowerment of the citizen. In many cases, there is clear asymmetry in the influence citizens are given in identifying problems and working out solutions. In most cases problems are identified and plans worked out by the experts while the citizens are given the role of supplementary data suppliers. Against these backgrounds planners, politicians and the NGOs often conclude that real participation is impossible because the citizens don't have the ability and the necessary responsibility to participate.

It is important to be aware of the premises on which conclusions like this are made. We will argue that as long as the asymmetry between citizens and planners is maintained in the planning process, there is no reason to conclude that lay-people don't have the ability and the necessary responsibility to participate in nature conservation, environmental planning or for that matter, in other types of public planning. We still need to see some real experiments on a large scale to find the practical and substantial limits to civic participation and the involvement of the citizen in public planning. Unfortunately, such experiments seem very difficult to get funded and too often – at least in Denmark – such experiments are met with institutional barriers more related to the culture of public management than to the ability and responsibility of the citizens. On the other hand, the experience from the very few small experiments conducted within nature conservation, using methods of action research is that the capacity and the responsibility of citizens seem to be equal to that of planners and experts. [Nielsen & Aagaard Nielsen, 2003] A genuine empowerment of the citizen is therefore not - as some planners and NGOs fear - just a replication of the Chinese Cultural Revolution and rejection of academic knowledge and expertise.

⁶ This understanding of empowerment is inspired by the definition of the terms of “internal efficacy” and “external efficacy”. Goul Andersen, 2000.

Participation as a process of empowerment and general education

The idea of establishing a “dialogue approach” in relation to the planning process is to create an expectation about new ways of cooperation between politicians, citizens and planners in order to clarify the objectives for the common good. Such an approach can be described as a real empowerment of the citizens, partly because empowerment is a product of the fact that citizens are taken seriously and given the necessary room in which to speak and act, partly because empowerment is a product of general education.

On that definition, empowerment is not just about political empowerment but also about a learning process that takes into consideration that democracy and the ability to find the best solutions is not always given, but is something that citizens as well as experts have to develop through an active and mutual dialogue. Such a dialogue would include academic expert knowledge as well as lay people’s social and cultural knowledge. In other words, the assumption is that the citizens through an active and genuine participation increase their democratic identity and self-confidence and step out of the role as suppliers of ideas and proposals for the authorities’ implementation. In that way, democracy becomes an integrated part of people's everyday life, where they through the dialogue and the mutual creation of knowledge relate themselves to *the common good* and take over the responsibility for the development.

Once again we will emphasize that the fact that the citizens are taken seriously and are given the necessary space in which to speak and act, has to involve the development of a public institutional capacity that are able to handle the empowerment of the citizens. In order to talk about true empowerment, it is not enough just giving people a *feeling* of influence through new forms of dialogue and though a higher sensitivity towards their wishes. The substance of a democratic identity will first be created for real together with the opportunity of transforming resources and possibilities with real influence.

“Democratic nature conservation is about the effort for more sustainable development, strategically and in substance and has to be seen as a cultural process of development and learning. The involvement of the people has to be about the participation of the people in that process. Not just understood as a political power changing the structural conditions blocking for reaching the objectives of a more sustainable way of living. But also a cultural process of development and experience which search and enlighten, adapt and develop the external as well as the internal condition for such way of living.” [Læssøe, 1992: 13] [Our translation]

Action research as method developing

The development of methods to achieve a more dialogue oriented democratization of public planning in the field of nature conservation is still in its embryonic stage. In an extremely differentiate modern world, the question is if it is possible at all to develop such methods or if it is necessary to reduce the complexity and develop completely new ways of living and producing. [Agger & Aagaard Nielsen, 1997: 79-80] In the last part of the paper, we will argue that action research, with its historical and dynamic orientation of praxis, could be the methodological starting point towards more democratic and sustainable public planning.

Breaking down the hierarchy of knowledge

A forward-looking approach to the question to what extent a dialogue oriented democratization of public planning is possible could be found in the consideration that the critic of civilization does not only exist in alternative social movement and academically circles, but increasingly also in the personal political reflection of laypeople within the lay people's risk society. The development of the political field of nature conservation and environmental planning cannot give citizens much hope for the future and make the prospects foreseen painful for experts as well as for laypeople. [Ibid.] It is not alone within the recommendation of experts and the risk assessments that sustainable alternatives appear. Even in the local community there exists a potential for cultural and social understanding of the environment and the use of resources. As an alternative and critical approach, this understanding has its source in traditional everyday knowledge about nature and the environment and the need for regulating the imperatives of the misused natural resources.

Traditional everyday knowledge has a different cultural starting point for a considerate regulation of nature, which nevertheless contains some long term potentials for the protection of nature. To bring this "lost" element of knowledge back into nature conservation in the terms of some a "personal understanding of policy" could ensure a challenge to the existent solutions made by experts and thereby the argument for a more democratically development of planning. The question is only how?

New alternatives and serious attempts to the development of methods to a more dialogue oriented democratization of nature conservation can be found in the Danish as well as in the international experimental action research.⁷ With its basis within the research into working life, it is only recently that this kind of research has found its way into the area of nature conservation in Denmark. Nevertheless, the first incipient result is quite interesting. In the particular area where the methods have been used it has created a local incentive and a number of ideas and initiatives for the development of local plans for nature conservation and social development which is far beyond any experiences up to now. The conflicts that have characterized a lot of other Danish nature conservation projects did not have the potential to grow in this experiment, because the debate about protecting nature was a part of a more comprehensive discussion about the actual socio-cultural problems and needs. One can say that a quite new dimension has been added to the term 'participation', which on could conceptualize as an '*inverted participation*', meaning that it is the local citizens themselves who initially develop the plans followed up by support from experts and authorities.

Inverted participation

The idea of practicing inverted participation is founded in the *hermeneutic relation* within action research [Aagaard Nielsen, 2001: 121; Nielsen & Aagaard Nielsen, 2004]

⁷ As international examples of the use of action research in nature conservation should Hilary Bradbury (1999, 2001) and Darlene Clover (2002) be mentioned. They both see the action research as being of significant value in building capacity for, and in the study of, efforts in support of sustainable development. From an international perspective, there are also some similarities between the Danish action research within nature conservation and the term "Public ecology". As within action research Public ecology is oriented towards the contents as well as the process. The process of Public ecology is also focused on nontraditional groups of citizen including scientist, politicians, citizens and special group of interests. Regarding the content Public ecology is oriented towards the production of the so called bio cultural knowledge described as: "*a citizen science information base that directly relates to and results from participatory research processes and openly the deliberative and democratic decision making.*" David P. Robertson & Bruce Hull, 2003: 400.

precisely with the objective to establish a dialogue oriented role for the expert. In this dialogue planners as well as citizens are experts while they enter into an equal dialogue about the meaning and interpretation of the problems and objectives. Knowledge is not just something solemn and agenda setting. Knowledge is a matter of changes among actors in the field, and since dialogue contains an element of change, it is necessary that the planner are confronted with the ideal of objectivity and become a part of the reality which is to be investigated. In other words, it is necessary that the planner not only relates to the social engagement of actors but also to his or her own reality. This is why the aim is to risk his or her own knowledge instead of aiming at neutrality and independence.⁸

In relation to the conflicts that affect nature conservation, there is still a challenge in articulating the anxiety about the future from which many conflicts within the political field of nature and environment derive.. This anxiety of lay people is, however, unfortunately too often ignored in order to seek the expert's definition of harmony. As an example, anxiety among farmers about the consequences of establishing national parks in Denmark is based on the fear that such parks will ruin agriculture as a business and thereby also the future of farming. The local NGOs hope that national parks will result in a better nature conservation but they fear that the farmers will get too much influence on the planning process and that increasing tourism will wear down nature.

Parallel to the changed role of the planners and the appearance of new criteria of truth, new openings will eventually occur by the use of dialogue- oriented methods of planning in order to deal with the uncertainties of the future regarding nature and culture. The dialogue will then become a motivating force for laypeople and experts. These are the possibilities and openings that one is experimenting on within action research; i.e. by bringing democracy, learning processes, the experiences of laypeople and the analytic knowledge of experts into game within the frames of a *utopist self-understanding*. It is this utopian element, among others, that decreases the significance of hierarchy, because as utopists everyone is in the same boat. In the utopian proposals for the future, they can meet each other and suggest relevant knowledge.⁹

The advantage of this approach is that it generates general education and development resulting in a democratic self-understanding. Present experience with action research has shown that when the traditional hierarchy of knowledge is eliminated, there is a possibility for making changes. Experts as well as laypeople change through dialogue and makes new orientations and solutions possible. So far the experiments have, however, suffered from being executed at a local level, which is why it is also a challenge to bring the innovative ideas to a higher institutional level. Along with the need for developing a social capital (a democratic self-confidence) at the micro level, there is, in other words, also a need for generating an *institutional capital* that is able to embrace genuine citizen participation.

⁸ Considerations about the neutrality of science and the construction of a "reality" have been discussed by one of the great fathers of action research, the Norwegian philosopher Hans Skjervheim. Aagaard Nielsen, 2001: 129-136.

⁹ As a method action research relating to civic participation in nature conservation has been used in two different cases in Denmark. So far it is the experiment from the river valley of Halkær in Jutland that has been described and analyzed. For more information see the report *Natur- og lokalsamfundsudvikling i Halkær* 2003. While the report is written in Danish, it is of limited interest for an international audience. A paper '*Peoples participation in Nature conservation and the Renewal of Local Communities*' is however in Press in English.

Four principles

Finally, based on our own experiences as planners and from our work with action research within the field of nature conservation, we will put forward four principles which we believe important for the planner facing a task of ensuring a real involvement of the citizen in a process of public planning. It is our view that these four principles make up for the asymmetry between the citizens and planners as well as with the traditional pitfalls of public planning. The principles do not constitute a model for civic participation but constitutes some important guidelines that can help planners through processes to create the real participation and empowerment of the citizens.

The citizen has to be drawn in early and actively: Citizen's active participation is a condition for breaking with the dominance of the experts. To avoid the early formation of objectives which will shot off alternatives from beneath an early involving of the citizens is necessary. The condition for participation and for the formation of missions and objectives must be as equal as possible. That will lead to a break with the product orientation of rational planning and helping not just to look at the solutions the planners regard as sufficient. The alternative is to keep the process open to alternative proposals as long as possible.

Redefine the traditional way of thinking about information: The idea that information creates knowledge that knowledge creates positions and that positions create action very seldom in line with reality. The logic of this perception of communication often goes wrong because the one way dialogue which is embedded in the traditional perception of public information, only to a limited extent allows for new cultural processes of General Education. "Free entrance" to the knowledge of experts is not a solution to participation because it creates a situation where a few inform the many without creating the necessary reflectivity and self-confidence. To achieve insight and initiatives from the citizen it is necessary to reject the old idea of a natural relationship between information and competence of action. Positions and action are about the role and identity that the actors takes as active participants in each Planning Project. That's why dialogue and action has to be a part of a learning process that at one and the same time problematize actions and expands the space for action.

The myth about unprejudiced experts must be eliminated: From a Democratic participatory perspective the idea of the neutral and independent experts is useless because it maintained an object/subject relation between the planner and the citizen. With the idea that the planners, from a professional point of view, are able to deliver logical and consistent proposals maintaining the hierarchy of knowledge and are not open to genuine cooperation. Instead plans will be made by the planners and the illusion of some kind of objectivity will emergence. Neither the planner nor the traditional way of planning can be objective because the underlying idea of creating some kind of harmony makes it very difficult to define reality as a compromise between what one thinks is necessary, political acceptable and economical affordable. The wish to avoid conflict will have an influence on the selection of data used in the planning process and in the creation of the paradox that the final proposals will not fulfill the common good. That kind of rationality creates a gap between the public planning and those citizen the have to live with the consequences of the plans in their daily life, because the data that constitutes the plans are too far from reality. The myth has to be thrown overboard in favored of more emphasis on the everyday life, the development of new ways of co-operation between experts and lay-people and thus for the interplay of different kind of knowledge.

Focus on the interaction between different kinds of knowledge: The new and relevant knowledge provided by the citizens can be called *everyday experiences* or *local knowledge*. It separates itself from the scientific and universal knowledge about the nature by being founded in the local social and cultural context. It is closely related to experience of people and is not necessarily common with the experiences from other people living elsewhere.¹⁰ Instead it covers several themes: nature, culture, society which makes it a resource in public planning. Exactly because it is a complex kind of knowledge based on experiences from everyday life, it can contribute with detailed knowledge about local conditions and solutions to specific local problems. Knowledge and solutions no experts would think of. In addition it can contribute to the critical path mentioned about desirable elements of reality, which the traditional planners in the struggle for harmony normally would avoid but nevertheless elements that could make a plan fall apart because they were overlooked from the beginning. Insight from “beneath” can, in other words, put together a more realistic picture of the local conditions which is not just focusing on the problems but also the solutions for more sustainable development in the long run.

Is the local by mention has to be taken seriously it is first and foremost necessary to create a mutual respect between the local knowledge and the academically expertise. Nature is a global and scientific phenomenon characterized by the laws of nature, but it is also a complex social and cultural phenomenon which is why the best solution for the common good is to combine existing knowledge within the two phenomena.

Conclusion

The difficulty of involving citizens in public planning in general and in the field of environmental planning and nature conservation in particular is caused by the technocratic understanding of modern public planning rooted in the Age of Enlightenment. This planning tradition, which is dominated by a rather positivistic thinking, the idea of objectivity and a heavily permeated neoclassical understanding of the economy, can be addressed as *rational comprehensive planning* or just *rational planning*. The conflict between the ideal of the liberal democracy and rational planning goes all the way back to the establishment of the modern liberal democratic society. In order to improve democracy in public planning it is necessary to focus on the transformation of the rationality of public planning toward a more radical and contextual way of thinking planning, including the social and cultural element factors.

The political interest in putting civic participation and the involvement of the citizen in public planning on the agenda is not just about a trendy idea in a contemporary context. It is more profoundly anchored in the ideas of liberal democracy and it a consequence of an increasingly pressure from the population and a widespread political recognition of the fact that a more realistic participation by citizens is needed in order to strengthen a sustainable development. Not at least within the field of environmental policy and nature conservation this is an expressed matter of significant importance, enhanced by global developments, the individualizing of people and the changes of the physical borders of democracy. The question then is, if the political reconnection of the necessity of involving the citizens in public planning, in order to ensure a more sustainable development, will establish better conditions for a transformation of public planning

¹⁰ The differences and unequal power relations between different types of knowledge have been a major subject for the last decade within social and cultural sciences. One of the best descriptions of the expert-lay knowledge divide in environmental politics is made by Bryan Wynne, 1996.

alone. In a country like Denmark, the latest development in the field of nature conservation in Denmark *could* point in that the direction.

In order to meet the pressure against public planning and to fulfill the political ambitions for a more realistic participation by civil society in public planning we have to redefine the role and the capacity of the citizen in the process of public planning. It is important to go beyond the question of the implantation and legitimating of planning and to break down the hierarchy of knowledge. Some significant changes of the institutional public system of planning must be made in order to establish a genuine dialogue with all the stakeholders of the planning process about the content and definitions of the problems, as well as the solutions.

Experiments in the field of nature conservation, within action research, have so far indicated that the citizens are not narrow sighted and irresponsible when it comes public planning if they are given the responsibility and the opportunity to integrate their own experiences and needs from daily life. It *is* possible to create a kind of inverted participation which can move the focus from the solution of conflicts between stakeholders and instead focus on some more sustainable overall solutions created by the people closest to the source of the problems. Because of the dialogue oriented and democratically traditions of action research – which are fundamentally different from the positivism dominating public rational planning – action research could maybe play a key role in the transformation of rational public planning toward a more radical way of planning.

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