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Author(s): Leino, Helena; Peltomaa, Juha; Santaoja, Minna  
Title: For the sake of the lake: multi-signification and improvisation in the practices of two lake restoration projects in Finland  
Year: 2010  
Journal Title: Local Environment  
Vol and number: 15 : 9/10  
Pages: 775-784  
ISSN: 1354-9839  
Discipline: Other social sciences  
Item Type: Journal Article  
Language: en  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2010.509385>  
URN: URN:NBN:fi:uta-201403201251

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# **For the sake of the lake: Multi-signification and improvisation in the practices of two lake restoration projects in Finland**

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Abstract: In many countries over the last decades state initiatives have emerged to promote and support public participation in policy-making. Despite the emphasis on participation and deliberation, there are groups which remain outside the participatory proceedings. We follow through two case studies from Finland on how active citizen groups became excluded in the policy processes but decided to act nevertheless. Conceptually the article tells two stories about multi-signification and improvisation in nature conservation processes from the citizen participation point of view. Using practice-oriented policy analysis we explore the actors' conflicting interpretations of acting for "the sake of the lake". We argue that in these kind of complex policy processes improvisation should be given more space.

Keywords: nature conservation, participation, improvisation, multi-signification

## **Introduction**

In many countries over the last decades state initiatives have emerged to promote and support public participation in policy-making (Rowe & Frever 2004). Evidence of this trend can be found in the various initiatives, policies and programmes that promote public participation at EU, national and local levels. According to Maarten Hajer (2003a), it is the local policy making and policy implementation that has become the locus of politics. Public participation has been expected to deliver a lot of promises, such as improved quality of decisions and acceptance for commonly binding decisions (e.g. Irwin and Stansbury 2004). Despite these recognized objectives, there remains a gap between the rhetoric and the practice of participation (Rauschmayer et al. 2009). There are groups that are not able to take part in the participatory proceedings and express their point of view. What seems like a failure of participation

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may come forward partly due to the way participation is framed to start with, excluding types of citizen activity that do not get channelled through defined, structured participatory processes.

Even though the practices of public participation often remain controversial, the epistemic argument for participatory, deliberative democracy in governance is that it is superior to representative arrangements in dealing with complexity because it increases diversity and interaction among people (Wagenaar 2007, 18). Frank Fischer (2000, 2) names three goals for public participation: first of all, participation gives meaning to democracy, secondly, it contributes normatively to the legitimization of policy development and thirdly, participation has the potential to provide new, local knowledge and thus contribute to professional enquiry. The emphasis of this article will be on the participatory processes from the policy analysis point of view; we are concentrating on the micro-politics of practice. Practice oriented policy analysis (Hajer & Wagenaar 2003) has been in favour of recent participatory research, especially when the focus has been on analysing the experiences at the local level. (Forester 1999, Yanow 2000, Fung & Wright 2003).

We will operationalise this aspect by telling two stories about citizen participation in lake restoration work. First question is, how is the policy issue - improving the state of two Natura lakes in our cases – being framed by the various actors? As we unwind the different meanings that are at stake for the diverse actors, we reveal the complexity and the diversity of policy implementation practices in our cases.

As both of our cases involve enthusiastic citizen action and complicated social situations we then explore the nature of improvisation appearing outside the formal environmental governance procedures. The second question of our article is how does

the improvisation by the local activists effect the whole procedure and how the implications of this should be dealt with. In recent research on environmental policy planning (Wagenaar & Cook 2003; Waterton 2002) it has been recognised how the practices of informal governance steady out uneasy or conflicting situations with participants by means of improvisation. According to John Forester (1999, 8-9), the planners and other civil servants improvise in novel and complex situations all the time. In this article we want to widen the role of improvisation in policy implementation processes. Our view is based on the assumption that participatory planning practices always involve improvisation but the productive aspect of this is somehow missed. If this is taken seriously, then the environmental policy processes should direct more attention towards experimental implementation (Krohn & van den Daele, 1998) in their participatory practices.

### **Practice-oriented policy analysis**

Recent work on the practice perspective on policy analysis implies a change in its analytical focus and in its stance towards multiple actors, who all enact their valuations, meanings and engagements in the given policy process (Hajer 2006, Hajer & Wagenaar 2003). The practice-oriented analysis always entails an overall judgement taking into account various aspects of the situation, both the objective and the personal (Wagenaar & Cook 2003, 167-168). We use the practice-oriented policy analysis in our cases, as this point of view approaches problems, people and policies interactively, investigating the experiences of situated people in concrete settings. Actors engage each other on the basis of their assessments of the other's sincerity and

trustworthiness. If this relation has been violated, they may withdraw from further action (ibid. 168-170).

Our cases represent the dynamics of informal governance processes that include multiple actors, unexpected opportunities and unpredictable turns. In these kinds of settings governance is not a routine-like activity. Hajer (2006) captures the complexity of this phenomenon by using the concept of *multi-signification*. Human beings are meaning-making animals and to make sense of what happens around us, to make sense of the “significance” of a particular event, we draw, implicitly or explicitly, on systems of signification. However, as the respective participants in a policy deliberation operate from distinct systems of signification, the very meanings that are at stake for the various participants are often unclear to each other (Yanow 2000,16). Multi-signification is a broad challenge to contemporary politics, as in policy making conflicts of meaning and misunderstandings abound (Hajer 2006, 43). This approach is applicable in our analysis, as we agree with the idea that multi-signification brings institutions to life, showing their specific rules for appropriate behaviour in specific types of situation (Olsen 2000).

Besides multi-signification we want to conceptually focus on *improvisation*. Wagenaar and Cook (2003, 153) as well as Waterton (2002, 2003) have recognized how the practices of informal governance involve improvisation in solving unstable situations. As Waterton points out, improvisation is not something that only the citizen participants do, but it is an integral part of the professional practices of the environmental administrators. We want to extend this consideration of improvisation, as we see it as a natural consequence of the policy implementation practices and for this reason improvisation should gain more attention within the frame of environmental policy planning.

Improvisation has been recognised time and again in the field of organisational theory and management, where the growing interest has pointed improvisation as an alternative to overt strategic planning (Chelariu et al. 2002, 141). The idea has been to consider how improvisation can enrich a routine performance (Crossan et al. 1996, 30). Improvisation is a way of responding to unexpected opportunities. It involves activity without formal plans or systematic procedure, or activity that departs from the plan or procedure. As in a performance, improvisation in the policy implementation process can also be either brilliant or clumsy. It may provide just what the process needs in a difficult situation, or it may further hinder the situation. (Sharkansky & Zalmanovitch 2000, 321.)

Our argument is that attention should be paid to improvisation, since it happens anyway as an inevitable part of the policy processes, and its consequences can vary drastically. As Wilkinson and Young (1996; after Chelariu et al. 2002) argue, if all players in a system are aware of and respond to the perceived complexities of a challenging environment, but are not able to respond to the current complexity of other players, there is a danger of the actions interacting and increasing the complexity further. Thus, Stefano Moroni (2010) has recently argued for finding new means for enabling spontaneous local action instead of hierarchical order in land use planning. He points out how trying to handle the complex social situations in an authoritative way generates only more confusion and disappointment.

One final remark before setting the stage for our empirical analysis and introducing the cases. We acknowledge the evident possibility to approach the empirical analysis from the power relations point of view. The tension between the key actors and unexpected action strategies in both cases could direct the focus towards analysis of power by Michel Foucault (1998). Nevertheless, our interest here

is on the positive outcomes of improvisation. We want to discuss the productive elements of improvisation and how this experimental implementation could be employed in developing the participatory procedures of environmental governance.

### **The context and cases**

The principles for Finnish water protection policy are set in the Environmental Protection Act and in the Water Act. The EU Water Framework Directive came into force in Finland in 2000 and was implemented in the Act for Water Resources Management in 2004. The directive aims at good ecological status of European waters by 2015. The first regional water management plans according to Water Framework Directive were finished in 2009 in a participatory process. As both of our cases are Natura 2000 -sites, the EU Birds and Habitats Directives also apply. The implementation of the Natura network created the largest environmental conflict ever in Finland in the first stage, as the land owners felt mistreated due to communication deficits (c.f. Hiedanpää 2002).

The case sites are two lakes, Lake Kirkkojärvi in the municipality of Kangasala and Lake Ahtialanjärvi in Lempäälä both situated in Pirkanmaa, southwestern Finland. The lakes are part of the Natura 2000 -network and located near centers of the rural municipalities of approximately 20 000 inhabitants. We look at the lakes together through a comparative and complementary analysis of the unexpected citizen activities, acknowledging the obvious differences between the cases – especially the clear distinction in how the legitimacy of expertise among the citizen activists was constituted. The main actors in both cases are the citizen activists and regional environmental administration.

The material for the Kirkkojärvi case consists of 10 thematic interviews from 2007 with the involved actors in the case. Additionally newspaper articles were also

used in the analysis. The newspaper material consists of 112 articles from two of the main national newspapers and one local biweekly 1994-2007.

The Ahtialanjärvi case data consists of 11 thematic interviews with the key actors during 2009. Other materials include official written data from the management of Lake Ahtialanjärvi, correspondence between the citizen activists and environmental administration and discussion on regional BirdLife association's e-mailing list. Newspaper articles covering years 1997-2009 were collected from both the local as well as regional newspaper.

### ***Kirkkojärvi, Kangasala***

Lake Kirkkojärvi next to Kangasala municipality centre was an "open sewage" of the municipality from 1950's until 1980's. Due to negligence in waste water treatment the lake is now badly eutrophicated. The smelly lake has been a nuisance to the people who live nearby and a source of shame to the municipality. The regional environmental authority has instructed the municipality several times to do something to improve the condition of the lake, but with little success. At the same time the eutrophication has created conditions for diverse bird life. The lake is recognised as an internationally important wetland according to the Ramsar convention and it was included in the Natura 2000 -network in 1998 according to both Birds (SCI) and Habitats Directives (SPA).

In 2004 a few local citizens who had gotten tired of waiting for the environmental authorities to do something decided to take the initiative on the lake restoration in their own hands. They had come upon a new kind of EM (Effective Micro-organisms) -solution that had been used in water improvement experiments



elsewhere. They decided to try out the substance in Kirkkojärvi hoping to improve the state of the lake. The citizens involved in the pouring did not contact the regional environmental centre, the authority responsible for managing the Natura -sites, in advance partly because they thought their attempts might not be received very well. Hence the activity came as a surprise to the authorities who tried to find out more about the substance from the citizens, who in turn thought it was the authorities' responsibility to use their contacts and expertise to find more information about the solution. As no sufficient information was found, the authorities decided to ban further plans on pouring the solution into the lake. The decision was based on the lack of scientific knowledge concerning the consistency and functioning principles of the EM-solution and on the Natura 2000 -status of the lake that called for precaution. At this point the channel for discussion and possible new openings was closed and the citizens decided to give up their attempts for cooperation and further activities.

The controversial citizen activity got a lot of media attention, but the real surprise came year and a half later, in summer 2006, when the water in the lake was exceptionally clear. In the media a connection between the application of the EM-solution and the miraculous clearing of the lake was made and the activists were treated as saviours of the lake (Peltomaa 2008). The environmental administration was unwilling to draw such a connection pleading on lack of scientific evidence, but their alternative attempts to explain the suddenly improved condition of the lake did not convince the public. The activists and people in support of them got hold of the public discussion and the environmental authorities were left aside with their expertise and faculty to judge questioned. At this point the authorities felt strong distress as the control of the whole situation slipped from their hands. One of the unexpected outcomes of the illegal citizen action were the enthusiastic enquiries from

other lakeside inhabitants from all over Finland willing to try the miraculous substance in their own lakes.

The activists had previously been involved in the local environmental association, but did not get any support from that side either in trying the new and somewhat unknown solvent to the lake. One reason for this was that the working mechanisms of the substance were a bit unclear also to the activists themselves but the experiences they had heard of were so promising that they wanted to give it a try. Other reason for the local association's unsympathetic attitude was that they wanted to concentrate on more traditional and institutionally recommended means of conservation such as cutting down the waterside vegetation.

### *Ahtialanjärvi, Lempäälä*

Lake Ahtialanjärvi is situated next to the municipality centre of Lempäälä. In the last century the lake got eutrophicated due to increased load of nutrients from agriculture. The lake is part of the national programme for bird water protection as a nationally important bird area (FINIBA) since 1980, and in 1998 the lake was entered into the Natura 2000 -network.

In the beginning of the new millennium two local birders started experimenting with restorations at the lake. Based on their initiative, local environmentalists put together a restoration project that got EU Leader+ funding for 2001-2004. A management plan for the period 2001-2006 was made for the lake in cooperation between national, regional and municipal environmental administration, local birders and environmental protection association, fishermen and local inhabitants. The three-year project was successful in bringing people together for the

lake. The network did not however outlive the project, as the project bureaucracy was experienced to be too heavy an undertaking for volunteers.

After the Leader -project ended in 2004 the two committed birders were left to continue alone. They continued seeking support from regional, national, and municipal environmental administration, as well as the regional BirdLife and other associations. The support they received was nominal. Thus, they fear for the continuation of the restoration works and are seeking stability in form of contract that would secure support for a ten-year period.

The various administrative bodies have been bouncing responsibilities between each other concerning the case. The municipal administration expected the regional environmental administration to take charge of the lake restorations. The regional administration has claimed to be dependent on funding from the national ministry, but the corresponding officials at the ministry of environment plead on the autonomous decision-making of the regional level. Both of them point their finger towards EU in increasing reporting duties and limiting options. Life Nature programme as one of the primary means for funding lake restorations is experienced to be very rigid.

In this situation the birders have taken matters into their own hands. Their work has paid off and the Lake Ahtialanjärvi is now known as the most diverse inland bird water in Finland. The two birders have not been able to restore the whole 159 hectares of the lake – their efforts have concentrated on a two hectares island Lökkisaari in the middle of the lake. Thanks to their ”metre-by-metre artisan work” the small island now attracts a variety of nesting and migrating birds. Were it not for the impressive results, the restoration project of the enthusiasts would be easy to silence to death.

The restorations that started in the Leader -project in 2001 had the mandate of the landowners by the lake. The two birders have not asked further permissions for the restoration works, as they fear the land owners might ban their activities. They are doing the restorations on other man's land in silence, but they seem to have silent consent of the regional environmental administration. In 2010, in an attempt to clear air with the regional environmental administration, they decided to proceed “by the book” and applied for the necessary permits for this kind of works at the Natura site. However, the administrative processes were too slow for the birders, and they continued to improvise on their own terms without the legal permits.

The lake activists have gained experience-based expertise that could be useful in other restoration projects, and the case could grow into a pilot in experimental restorations, given the appropriate support. The latest initiative from the birders is establishing a national fund for wetland conservation. The committed birders refuse to accept the pace in which things take place in the environmental administration; in a few years is not soon enough for them. The administration has responded that they have to fix plans years before execution, and that they need to be carried out exactly as promised, or there would be sanctions by the EU.

## KUVA TÄHÄN

### *At the core: a history of communication problems*

The various actors in the cases were not previously unknown to each other; their paths had crossed before in other contexts. Whenever a new policy issue emerges, it is positioned within existing actor networks and governance style. In local governance networks people may have a long common history, and the previous experiences have

an effect in the interaction within the current situation. The relationships between the actors have been built over the years and the common history has an influence on how credible the actors perceive each others and how open-mindedly they engage in discussions regarding the present policy issue. Interaction is easier if the line is already open, but negative previous experiences may complicate the situation.

In our examples the active citizens were not able to mobilise their knowledge and concerns in an institutionally acceptable way. In both cases the actors had lost contact with environmental authorities already within previous events. They had also lost touch with their background organisations – the local environmental association and the regional BirdLife association – and so the active citizens had been left to their own means. Being left without support the active citizens decided to act – to improvise – which came as a surprise to the environmental administration. This illustrates the wicked nature of the situation; diverging and conflicting action strategies caused surprising and unexpected outcomes (Bueren et al.2003).

### **The multi-significant lakes**

The concept of multi-signification (Hajer 2006) helps explaining the complex situation and the contradictory practices the actors applied in both cases. What is good for the lake depends on who is the one defining the "good". Inability to explicate the various meanings lead to conflicts and misunderstandings.

At a first glance, the legitimacy of conservation practices and the "good for the lake" is clear in both our cases. They are classified as Natura 2000 -areas and the implementation of EU conservation policy defines the legitimate means of improving the lakes and their surroundings. This was the frame from which the environmental

administration as well as the local BirdLife and environmental associations looked at their possible spaces for action. However, the Birds (1979) and Habitats (1992) Directives setting the ground for Natura network do not give specifics for policy implementation in a participatory and collaborative manner. The Habitats Directive from 1992 encourages to obtain the opinion of the general public “if appropriate” (Council Directive 92/43/EEC, Article 6). Both Directives have become outdated in respect to public participation, and thus it is hardly sufficient to plead to the strict ecological requirements of the directives in neglecting calls for more inclusive governance. The loose formulation in the Directives leaves plenty of leeway for national and local improvisation in implementation.

The local activists did not take the Natura 2000 -legislation as a starting point for their activity. Yet they very much saw themselves as acting for the sake of the lake. In the Kirkkojärvi case the activists’ aim was to improve the state of the badly eutrophicated lake for recreational purposes and diminish the nuisance it caused for the local inhabitants, but they also acknowledged and respected the important bird values of the lake. They thought it was possible to improve the state of the lake while still operating within the Natura 2000 -frame and not risking the values why the lake was taken into the network. They also understood the problem caused by the unauthorized EM substance, but for the activists it was worth trying anyway. The idea behind the experiment was to gain legitimacy for the further pouring and actions afterwards, when the substance had shown its effect. This path of argumentation materialised only partly, as the activists gained publicity and support from the media. However their action was strictly condemned by the environmental administration who were genuinely puzzled on how to position themselves with the active citizens.

In the Ahtialanjärvi case the activists had a more radical attitude towards the Natura 2000 -legislation. They questioned the Natura 2000 -conservation policy and saw their own action as more valuable for the lake than the mere implementation of the EU directive that on their opinion concentrates on rigid protection of species. This caused some friction and misunderstanding between the birders and the regional environmental administration, which had to make sure that the natural values for which the lake was entered in the Natura were maintained. Due to the restoration works, it seemed that the nesting sites of two Bird Directive species were lost in the Lokkisaari island in an effort to create nesting sites for a number of other bird species. The environmental administration accepted the situation when the birders proved the two species to have enough suitable habitat on the lake shore still within the Natura area.

The birders criticise the environmental administration for not doing its job even in maintaining the status quo at the lake. From their perspective, they have been performing the duties of the environmental administration. The mistrust is amplified by different practices: the regional environmental authorities are dependent on funding from the national and EU levels, which then results to few large projects with big budgets. In view of the local activists, this mode of functioning is ill suited to the local dynamics by the lake. They criticize the administration for wasting a lot of money for very modest results, whereas following their own small-scale experimental approach has proved to provide results with little resources.

Our cases show how challenging and sometimes frustrating endeavour participation in practice can be (Fischer 2000, 260). From policy analysis point of view our empirical work illustrates how situated knowers argue from different standpoints (Yanow 2000, 9). Depending on the persons and their background the

frames from which the good for the lake is defined are highly different. This also leads to different practices on how the “sake of the lake” gets performed. In our cases the citizen activists and the environmental administration have not come together to discuss the meanings of the lake and the restoration attempts between each other. The communication is stuck in a situation where the parties are talking past each other, if communicating at all. Here Frank Fischer’s notion (2000, 65) on laypeople’s ambivalent and somewhat alienated attitude towards expert institutions becomes real, as we next continue to explore how the citizens chose to improvise outside the formal procedure.

### **Improvising the rules of the game**

The fundamentally diverse conceptions on how to improve the state of the lakes led the citizen activists to improvise in both cases. This was unexpected in nature and caused problems in administration on how to deal with the active citizens while still taking care of the administrative obligations.

Our empirical work supports the notion that there actually are no routinised, standard solutions without situated improvisation. In both of our cases there was a clear gap in the interaction between the actors in which improvisation could have been employed to overcome the limitations the formal procedure entailed. Had there been more attempts for discussion, the actors could have extended the understanding of each others' positions and practices, and perhaps developed new solutions how to cooperatively improve the states of the lakes. Now the improvisations of citizen activists were performed without authorisation and in the absence of any formal rules. In Kirkkojärvi case the improvised act gained wide media coverage which caused even more work to the environmental officials, since they had to answer to the



enquiries coming from other lakeside communities and inhabitants, who wanted to improve the condition of their lakes with the controversial substance. In Ahtialanjärvi the improvisation did not cause as visible a problem to deal with for the environmental administration, but the improvised volunteer work has continued now for ten years and the officials have chosen to react afterwards to the new initiatives instead of developing the area together with the local activists. In both cases the citizens' improvisation has caused the environmental administration to improvise in order to stabilize the uneasy situation.

As improvisation takes place anyway, it should be accounted for in the practices of environmental governance. In our cases the improvisation of the activists has caused and is still causing extra work to the environmental administration – an unwanted situation in many ways. An attempt to give space for improvisation could be made consciously. This could provide opportunities for collaborative natural resource governance and for finding new ways to channel citizen concerns into practices outside the structured participatory processes. We are not proposing to “institutionalise” improvisation, this would cancel out the whole idea of improvisation. We wish to employ Hajer's (2006) idea of “living institutions”: instead of assuming the rules of conduct, the actors will have to work these out interactively, “in vivo”. This could mean creating shared narratives of the situation and thus shared practices (ibid., 48-49). As Sharkansky & Zalmanovitch (2000, 322) argue, despite the contrasts between improvisation and planning, the two actions may coexist. In real life improvisation always fills the gaps that emerge when policy implementation takes place. The results of improvisation tend to be drastic and judged retrospectively. However, if the formal procedure would give more space to open interaction enabling spontaneous communication channels to emerge, then the improvisational part of the

policy implementation could turn from “extreme examples” into generative interaction for finding solutions to local problems.

## **Conclusions**

In both cases the various actors shared the goal of doing what is good for the lakes. Interpretations of what this actually means and what needs to be done, however, vary between the actors. We agree with Hajer (2006,43), as he states that multi-signification is a broad challenge to contemporary politics, leading to conflicting situations also in the participatory practices of environmental policy planning. Analysing multi-signification has revealed the improvisational nature of everyday practices in Finnish environmental administrative institutions, such as the regional environmental centre. Yet we see that it is not something the administrators want to openly announce. The improvisation flexes only as far as liabilities are not in question and the administration does not have to fear for losing their face.

There clearly are apparent problems of accountability, and the legitimacy of the improvisation practised by the citizen activists in both cases may be questioned by other actors. Indeed, our aim here is not to encourage similar activities without consulting the environmental authorities.

Informal governance practices can threaten the openness of policy processes, but formal procedures do not guarantee inclusiveness either, if citizens are perceived as passive consultees. However, if we put aside the questions of accountability and legitimacy of the civic activities, we see our cases illuminating the problematic basis of conservation policy composition. The unexpected citizen activity in both cases challenged the legitimacy of the current conservation policies and the rigid “freeze-frame” Natura 2000 -conservation scheme. This brings us to the point Frank Fischer

(2000, 260) has recalled: given that we cannot simplify the environmental issue at hand, how can we innovate new relationships between citizens and experts that facilitate a wider range of lay participation? One of the crucial questions is to recognize that this involves more on the level of attitudes and practices than as a matter of developing legal premises for participatory procedures. This requires developing new approaches and practices that offer more space for improvisation and thus encourage local conservation.

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