

Citizen dialogue in planning and the delicate balance of formality and informality¹

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Abstract

This paper looks into some of the difficulties involved in the meeting between the formal institutions and citizen initiatives, using case study narratives as a basis for the analyses. One central question regards whether urban development, planning and design practices need to loosen up some of its rigid frameworks and move towards a more emergent and adaptive approach. Although some of the cases give support for that, there are many strategic choices to make regarding on which levels and under which conditions informality can be enabled. The paper arrives at a critical discussion about current discourses of citizen dialogue in Swedish municipalities, and its potential of empowering socially excluded groups in society. The case studies, carried out in two stigmatized urban residential areas in Gothenburg, involve empirical data collection through participant observation and qualitative interviews. In both areas, the local city district councils work with citizen dialogues in connection to urban development projects, and in both areas there are local inhabitants starting up own initiatives. Although every process is unique, there are also general lessons to learn. The project's overall approach to research methodology is transdisciplinary, meaning that there is an endeavour to transgress traditional disciplinary thinking and produce knowledge in collaboration between research and practice.

Keywords: urban planning; citizen participation; informality; empowerment; citizen initiatives.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sweden has long looked upon itself as a model state regarding welfare and bureaucratic performance. There is a vivid debate, however, whether the current system actually delivers according to the expectations. A common topic in conversations around lunch tables in public organizations concerns the somewhat paradoxical situation that requirements of rigorous documentation and formal procedures increase while at the same time budget cuts makes it more and more stressful to manage the primary tasks of service production. In parallel, the ideas from the 1990s of a communicative turn in planning [1] seem to be on the agenda, with strong focus on intersectoral collaboration, partnerships and public participation. There is a general call for more 'deliberation' in the democratic system [2]. In Gothenburg, Sweden's second largest city, this direction is to a certain degree expressed in the new statute for the City District Councils (*Stadsdelsnämnder* – SDNs), and the commission on 'deepened democracy' which was launched in connection to the reform [3,4]. Although the new SDNs became larger, they also got a more active role in planning for local development and increased responsibilities regarding citizen dialogues. There is, however, a great uncertainty about how these dialogues should be carried out and how they relate to the representative democratic system.

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There are different kinds of rationales behind the current demand for increased citizen participation: For example, it can be seen as a democratic right; as a way to make planning more efficient; to increase trust and political legitimacy; or to placate opposition against unpopular reforms [5,6]. One specific challenge that the city needs to address is the alarming segregation and the social exclusion experienced by many living in stigmatized areas. Even though the connection is not emphasized in the city's directives, it seems accurate to view empowerment of socially excluded as an important objective of citizen dialogues in stigmatized areas. At least, the potential of participation as a vehicle for social inclusion should be tried as an option [6,7].

The transdisciplinary action research project *Interplace*² has studied how the city's officially initiated dialogues meet (and fail to meet) grassroots initiatives, with focus on stigmatized suburban large-scale residential areas. This paper takes its point of departure in one of the issues that have emerged during the research project, concerning the role of predefined frameworks and formal procedures in relation to the demand for openness and flexibility due to the 'organic' character of the settings. There are several possible ways to theorize this issue: It can be connected to, e.g., the *system's* colonisation of the *lifeworld* [8], the transition from *facework* to *faceless* commitments [9], *strategy* vs. *tactics* [10], or the *root-tree* vs. the *rhizome* [11]. In this paper, the issue will be discussed in terms of the balance between *formality* and *informality*, concepts that will be introduced further in the sub-sequent section.

The objective of the paper is to explore how formality and informality may influence the interaction between citizens and planners, with the point of departure in a series of case studies. The overall purpose is to contribute to a critical and constructive discussion around participatory planning approaches.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Formality vs. informality is a classical dichotomy within organizational theory. A relatively simple and forward way to capture the distinction between the two terms is to say that the *formal* stands for the deliberately *designed* while the *informal* emerges without, or in disregard to, such as plans or regulations. Such a definition can be applied on organizational structures as well as planning or decision-making processes. The common uses of the notions for sectors of economic activities [12], or behavioural codes and modes of social interaction [13], can be seen as a slightly different traditions although there are connections.

As discussed by Guha-Khasnobi et al. [12], formality-informality is a rather elusive dualism with relativistic qualities, i.e. there are no definite states of the formal or the informal and there is no exact line between them. However, the terms can be useful in theoretical analyses and discussions about relations between them. Practically, it is never a matter of either the one or the other – formal and informal structures coexist in all organizations and processes [14].

Formality has its advantage in being able to provide a transparent, judicially secure and trustworthy system. In a formally well-performing system, you can rely on the contract once it is there. Its shortcomings are connected to the inflexibility and difficulties to adapt rule systems to unforeseen situations or changes in society. Hence, informality can have a clear advantage in regard to such as innovativeness and resilience.

3. METHODS

² 'Interplace' is the working title for the research project 'The interplay between citizen initiatives and invited participation in urban planning: an interaction research project', funded by Formas 2011-13, see mellanplats.se.

The project's overall approach to research methodology has been transdisciplinary, meaning that there has been an endeavour to transgress traditional disciplinary thinking and produce knowledge in collaboration between research and practice. The discussions in this paper are anchored in a series of narratives from concrete local development processes. Using narration is a part of the case study method, where complex relationships are analysed and also communicated in a way that is open for different interpretations. Although every process is unique, there are also general lessons to learn. The cases have been selected to illustrate different types of interplay between the authorities and citizen groups.

The case studies involve empirical data collection mainly through participant observation and qualitative interviews. Observations regard researchers participating at different types of activities to follow the processes, sometimes as mere observers, but often with a more active role. In the Backa cases, researchers have even been initiators of many of the activities. Interviews have been conducted with key actors in the processes described, but also with politicians and civil servants involved in forming policies on a more central level in the city.

Different kinds of seminars have been arranged as a part of the analytical work: work seminars with the research team when different cases or issues have been analysed; topically broader seminars where tentative results have been discussed with a mixed reference group; specific seminars with civil servants to discuss their experiences in relation to research results and theories about participation; and finally open seminars with invited key note speakers and discussions.

4. CASES

The narratives presented here are not attempted to give 'the whole story,' as that would require much more space than what is possible in a paper like this. More in-depth descriptions and analyses of some of the cases can be found in other publications [15,16,17,18]. The two neighbourhoods – Hammarkullen and Backa – are housing areas outside the city centre of Gothenburg, designed after modernistic planning ideals during the 1960s to 1970s as part of 'the million homes programme'. They suffer from a stigma of being 'problem areas', which is at the same time a result of and a main cause for a demographic composition with over-representation of low-income households.

The City District Councils (SDNs) and its administrations have an important role as the main representatives of the governmental system. There are ten SDNs in the city, each encompassing around 40-60,000 inhabitants. Among the responsibilities of the SDNs are social service, elementary school and child care. Since 2011, they should also work comprehensively with local development issues in dialog with civil organizations and other stakeholders. The new development units of the SDNs are thought as an important interface between the municipality and its citizens.

4.1 Mötesplatsen – a grassroots vision locked in by formal complications

A couple of years ago, a group of residents in Hammarkullen took initiative to a new meeting place (*mötesplats* in Swedish). After years of protesting against cuts in public services, they wanted to turn their engagement into something more proactive. The vision was realized in a vacant building next to the square, a wooden house built by the municipality for children and youth activities. For a period of one and a half year, Mötesplatsen filled the empty house with activities – courses, workshops, meetings, seminars, etc. One key aim was to keep it open for everyone in the culturally diverse area.

The main challenges were to get access to the building, owned by the municipality, and to finance salaries for one or two coordinators. This showed to be much more complicated than what the initiators first thought. Although everyone seemed to value the project and the SDN's political directives were clear on that initiatives like this should be supported, the civil servants meant that there

was also a principle of *not* funding non-governmental organizations for salaries or rents. Another formal complication concerned restrictions of commercial activities: As the building was rented by the municipality, the original plan of giving unemployed women a chance to start a cafeteria had to be abandoned, and a social enterprise which started by the group had to move out.

The group managed, however, to get temporary funding for the salaries from a governmental programme. Moreover, one civil servant of the SDN lent them the keys, assessing the potential benefits to be higher than the costs and risks. Those were temporary solutions for the group to get started while working to find a more long-term formal arrangement with the SDN. After two years of almost constant struggle to solve the formal issues, they gave up, closed the meeting place and disbanded their association.

What is interesting is the apparent conflict between the SDN's will to support the initiative and the formal system's inability to find a solution. What first seemed to be a gift from above – a group of enthusiastic local residents who wanted to contribute to social sustainability in an area with many problems – eventually was turned into a problematic issue for the municipal administration to handle. Mötesplatsen could open due to partly informal arrangements, but their long-term establishment was dependent on also getting formal recognition. The group was frustrated over not getting answers and not knowing how to support the slow decision-making process. When they finally got their first contract to use the house, it was issued only a week before its termination – it was merely a formal establishment of the informal arrangement up to the current date but still no new promises about the future.

4.2 Videobutiken – informal interventions as a complement to formal planning

Around the same time in Backa, the municipality had just begun a planning process for a larger regeneration of the area. A premises by the square was arranged as an office and planning centre. Everyone passing would see exhibitions and meetings through the glass walls. The centre was a joint venture between the SDN, the Police and the corporative group of municipal landlords, who is also coordinating the process. A group of researchers working with urban interventions got interested in the regeneration plans. They started to arrange different public events on the square and they decided to rent a vacant premises of a former video store (*videobutik* in Swedish) and turn it into a place for urban explorations in dialogue with residents.

Thus, a hundred metres from the municipality's planning centre, an even more temporary node for citizen dialogues was created. One central purpose of the researchers' intervention was to see if and how more open-ended, 'artistic' methods could contribute to the dialogue about the area's development, as a complement to the formal planning processes. They aimed at encouraging people's imagination, facilitating collective formulation of dreams and making the residents subjects of co-creation rather than merely informants in the planning process. They thought that the formal dialogue under the auspices of the municipality would not be sufficient in this regard, and that it would gain from a more informal process on the side.

To make the place more inviting, the intervention group kept it in an order of 'work in progress' – with a cardboard model of the area on the floor and the walls used as note boards with sketches and drawings. They worked actively to involve different groups through networking with schools and organizations and they kept the doors open as soon as they were there. They also continued to arrange activities outdoors on the square, using different methods to involve the public. An example was the 'parascope', a type of augmented reality device³. It is a binocular which can be programmed to show different alternatives to the views around you. Visitors were asked to cut, paste

³ The device was developed by the design group Unsworn Industries, see www.unsworn.org/parascope.

and draw their suggestions on printed stripes of the panoramic view, which were then uploaded to the parascope so that the viewers could swap between the different versions.

Although much of the outcomes lay in attitudes and mind sets, which is hard to measure, some concrete ideas had formed through the processes. One was the gardening project which will be described below. Another was a vision of a 'food palace', which had come up earlier in a workshop with youth. The researchers helped the initiators to develop and formulate the vision. They hoped that this idea, together with other suggestions from their workshops, could be put into the formal planning process. However, the formal planning had its own consultations with citizens in the area and the planners viewed the intervention group's activities on the side as something that complicated rather than complemented the process.

The place itself carried a strong identity – Videobutiken (the video store) used to be one of few meeting place open during evening hours and being closed and empty was a sign for the general sense of abandonment that many felt. The funding for renting Videobutiken lasted only in four months and thereafter they had to close it. However, a new identity had been added and remains from the creative workshops are still visible to everyone who happens to look through the display windows.

The story illustrates, on the one hand, the researchers' idea about the need to complement formality with informality to evoke creativity and co-creation in the planning processes. On the other hand, it also illustrates that the integration of the two types of processes would have required more attention. The planning system sets the municipality in the central roles of coordination and decision-making. To be fully recognized, the intervention group would have needed to settle more clearly their roles vis-à-vis the consortium of the planning centre. When it comes to private developers, it is generally accepted that they often take initiatives and also drive planning projects, but it is unusual and understandably a bit uncomfortable with action researchers intervening with unclear commitments. An interesting question regards if and how the informal activities in Videobutiken and the resources mobilized through them could be used as inputs in the formal processes.

4.3 Gåsagången Gror – contested urban cultivation

After finalising the Videobutiken project described above, the researchers (in a slightly new constellation) continued collaborating with the group of residents who wanted to start a small cultivation. The local intendant working for the municipal company owning the rental apartments around the centre supported the initiative and let them dig up a piece of a grass lawn situated right outside Videobutiken, i.e. next to the most public zones of the centre. During two seasons, three researchers worked closely together with a number of the tenants to grow vegetables and flowers, the second year also in collaboration with a preschool in the area.

Although the group succeeded well in implementing the garden and arranging different activities in connection to it, the reactions were not only positive. They met scepticism especially from the Local Union of Tenants (*Lokala Hyresgästföreningen* – LH), a group connected to a national organization with a long history as the tenants' formal counterpart in negotiations with the landlords. The main claims of the sceptics were that the garden was mismanaged and created a disorderly impression, but another reason for the tensions could be a kind of power struggle between older and newer networks; the LH was dominated by residents who had lived for a long time in the area and the connections with the ethnically more diverse groups of newcomers were weak.

This short story illustrates another important dimension of community organization – the question of representativity of local initiatives and conflicting interests between different groups in the local community. The LH was a formal representative of the collective of tenants and traditionally used as such in dialogues with different stakeholders. The garden initiative represented a more informal

type of organization, but in this case it could be argued that the group was more open to include different viewpoints from the diverse range of residents living in the area. Despite the initial conflicts and tensions between different groups of residents, there is a continuation of the story where one of the garden enthusiasts actually became engaged in the LH. Perhaps, the conflicts over the garden aesthetics as well as the mediation efforts by the housing company's intendant and the researchers contributed to broaden and renew the role of the LH and thus also to give a more formal recognition of the garden initiative.

The local intendant's way of working was essentially informal. He works close to the everyday lives of the residents of the 500 apartments, and issues are often sorted out through personal contacts. This is part of a system of decentralised management units common especially in public housing companies [19]. One key feature of the system is that the local staff has resources and mandates to support tenant initiatives, without passing each question upwards in the organizational hierarchy or requiring too much of formal procedures.

4.4 Uteplatsen – design project in dialogue with citizens

Back in Hammarkullen again, the SDN had received funding for creating a new meeting place in dialogue with the residents. The project – later on named as 'Uteplatsen' (*the patio*) – was a part of a larger development initiative with funding from the EU. One project leader was employed, in turn hiring two consultants to operate parts of the work. It started up very slowly due to complications around the project definition. It was first framed in the application as a 'forum tent' at the square, thought as a mobile and flexible place for dialogues and events. However, a school reorganization after a criticized dialogue process resulted in a kind of trust crisis, and then the idea of the forum tent was generally seen as an impossible project – it would become a symbol of political ignorance to spend a hundred thousand euros on such a thing after the unpopular cuts in the school system. Almost the entire first year, the project leader networked with different stakeholders trying to find ways out of the dilemma. At last, the donors agreed on redefining the project into an outdoor 'meeting place', which by organizational reasons had to be placed in the park (close to Mötesplatsen described above).

At that time, the indignation over the school reform had settled a little, and launching another citizen dialogue about a very concrete investment seemed more hopeful. During the summer 2012, a series of workshops and public events were carried out, narrowing down the scope from 'what kind of meeting place do you want' to 'where should it be and how should it look'. Many residents were sceptical, having lost their faith in dialogues after participating in diverse consultations on 'what do you want in your area' from municipality, organizations and university students without seeing changes. Still, it was possible to collect ideas and suggestions enough to make a final proposal on a little stage and seating, which is planned to be constructed during 2013.

It is apparent throughout this process that dialogue is dependent on trust and that the residents' faith in the authorities (as well as any outsider comings with project ideas) is very fragile. There is a strong tradition of mobilization around different issues in Hammarkullen, and many things have been achieved through grassroots initiatives. But recent years, the general impression by many is that there is a spiralling regression and that nobody listens to the inhabitants.

In one way, it could be questioned whether it is at all reasonable to spend all those resources in involving the residents in such a limited task as designing an installation in the park. In another way, a successful realization of a participatory project like this one can be seen as a crucial way to restore some of the lost trust. And in the end, there is a potential for much more far-reaching outcomes if the inhabitants get a mental ownership over the project. Concretely, this can be enhanced if they also get involved in the construction. However, due to detailed formal rules about public procurements, this would require strong commitment and additional workload by the administrators.

The Uteplatsen process was extensively formal in the sense that it was planned on a detailed level, carefully following existing directives and carried out in accordance with the plans where the expected outcomes from each step in the process were defined. In several ways, the process can be described as a model for those who demand clarity and stringency. Several fundamental decisions around it were also very much steered by formal frameworks. For example, the decision to localize the project in the park was made because the land was owned by one of the project partners, which made it possible to avoid a lot of bureaucratic complications.

So what about informal components? Well, as for most processes, the project was also highly dependent on informal contacts, meetings and networking between key actors. Every step can be discussed regarding informal as well as formal conditions. For example, each encounter between facilitators and residents becomes a meeting between persons situated in a social, cultural and spatial situation which cannot be fully predicted. The night before one of the outdoor events, someone had set fire to the large plastic screen, temporarily placed to hang posters on. On the other hand, a young kid who spontaneously entered the mobile stage to show his rapping skills, attracted a crowd of youngsters from the square who would not otherwise have visited the event. Another unexpected situation occurred on the last workshop. The organizers had desperately used every contact to recruit participants and expected only a handful. Instead, a couple of dozens appeared, many for the first time and some wanted to raise other issues than what was planned. At this late stage of the project, an underlying tension came up to the surface as a group of artists living in the area wondered why all projects always employed people from outside of the area instead of using their competences. To be able to take care of such upcoming issues, a sensitive approach is needed.

4. CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The question about formality and informality is relevant in all kinds of urban development processes. It comes back in different forms in the stories presented above. The overall question addressed here regards how formality and informality should be balanced in the setup of planning processes where civil servants meet residents. It goes into the political culture – the *thinking behind* how participatory processes are designed and run. Can more informality be a good solution to formal complications? Or is it rather so that more formality can reduce the risks involved with informality? Unfortunately, the presented study provides no obvious answers to such questions. However, some tentative conclusions can be drawn and some possible directions pointed out.

It can be concluded that without informal ways of working, Mötesplatsen would not have been able to open; the intervention research project in Videobutiken would never exist; Gåsagången Gror would not likely have gotten the possibility to start growing; and Uteplatsen would probably have been great failure. All the processes were dependent on different degrees of informality. It can also be concluded that formality could be described, at least partly, as hinders in some of the cases. For example, the Mötesplatsen group felt that the decision-making process occurred above their heads, that they never got a chance to have a dialogue with the SDN, and that their possibilities to work sometimes were constrained by rigid regulations. Similarly, throughout the process of the Uteplatsen project there were discussions around possible interpretations of formal agreements and how to find ways to solve judicial formalities around landownership, procurement, etc.

Would there then be a possibility of balancing informality and formality differently? And what would that imply? Perhaps, one type of model can be looked for in the role of the local intendant working for the housing company in Backa, in the way he encouraged and gave support to the Gåsagången Gror initiative and at the same time engaged in mediating the upcoming conflicts with the local union of tenants. That would be comparable to the way in which one civil servant dealt with the Mötesplatsen initiative in Hammarkullen, giving them the keys before all technicalities

were solved. In the latter case, however, the issue was much more complex and a lot of money at stake, which made it difficult to work in that way without backup from the formal system.

It is worth pointing out that both the Mötesplatsen house in Hammarkullen and Videobutiken in Backa are vacant premises owned by the municipality, which temporarily became vivid open public spaces for positive social processes, but are since just empty and closed. It seems like a failure of society that those premises cannot be used by groups who want to invest their engagement in turning them into meeting places, as the need to address social problems are so high and as there is historically a great lack of investments in both areas. This issue is not necessarily about rethinking formality and informality, and it is to a large extent an issue of redistribution of economic resources. However, it can also be seen as a question of moving parts of the budgets for top-down controlled projects to more openly framed funds for citizen initiatives. As a source of inspiration, the Soziale Stadt programme in Berlin has developed intricate systems for neighbourhood management in deprived areas where residents get direct influence over allocation of project funding [20].

In discussions about citizen dialogues, many civil servants come back to the notion of *clarity* – there is a strong demand for clear definitions of frames, roles and responsibilities [21,22]. With a critical view, this can be translated to a demand for *control*, a fear of not being able to steer the process. As the policies and practice now develops, there is a tendency that ‘dialogues’ will take form as consultations of either of two types which both give very small chances for the public to make impact on the urban development: (a) limited, concrete and uncontroversial projects framed by the authorities, or (b) complex, large-scale and long-term tasks where it is implicit that the outcome will be a non-obligating vision with little influence on decision-making.

While *clarity* in this case mainly associates with *formality*, *control* can be exercised with both *formal* and *informal* means. A difference between formal and informal control, however, is that the latter needs a lot more of active efforts. Exerting informal control implies communicative social interaction; it can be expressed as a *political* act. It can be argued that clarity in terms of formal control risks draining participation of its political meaning. On the other hand, if acknowledging the control issue as a field of political interaction, it will open up for more contested and challenging processes with a potential of reviving the democratic system.

In an article about passion in politics, Mouffe claims that “[w]e need to give up the very idea that there could come a time when society is ‘well-ordered’” [23]. I interpret this statement as a critique of a widespread overconfidence in formal frameworks and procedures in relation to the more informal and politically living value-creating processes occurring in shifting relations and networks. Although ‘well-ordered’ seems like a natural goal in any vision of the good society, the order does not necessarily have to be rigid. By focusing on value principles more than detailed rules, the formal order can leave considerable space for informality, hence hopefully also forming a more *resilient* planning system. Most important, though, is that dialogues develop to give socially excluded citizens a real chance to participate, get influence and get involved in society.

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