

The significance of structural power in Strategic Environmental Assessment

Anne Merrild Hansen^{a,*}, Lone Kørnøv^a, Matthew Cashmore^b, Tim Richardson^c

^a The Danish Centre for Environmental Assessment, Department of Development and Planning, Aalborg University, Skibbrogade 5, 9000 Aalborg, Denmark

^b The Danish Centre for Environmental Assessment, Department of Development and Planning, Aalborg University Copenhagen, A.C. Meyers Vænge 15, DK-2450 Copenhagen SV, Denmark

^c Department of Development and Planning, Aalborg University, Skibbrogade 5, 9000 Aalborg, Denmark

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a study of how power dynamics enables and constrains the influence of actors upon decision-making and Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA). Based on structuration theory, a model for studying power dynamics in strategic decision-making processes is developed. The model is used to map and analyse key decision arenas in the decision process of aluminium production in Greenland. The analysis shows that communication lines are an important resource through which actors exercise power and influence decision-making on the location of the aluminium production. The SEA process involved not only reproduction of formal communication and decision competence but also production of alternative informal communication structures in which the SEA had capability to influence.

It is concluded, that actors influence strategic decision making, and attention needs to be on not only the formal interactions between SEA process and strategic decision-making process but also on informal interaction and communication between actors as the informal structures, which can be crucial to the outcome of the decision-making process. This article is meant as a supplement to the understanding of power dynamics influence in IA processes and as a contribution to the IA research field with a method to analyse power dynamics in strategic decision-making processes. The article also brings reflections of strengths and weaknesses of using the structuration theory as an approach to power analysis.

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1. Introduction

This paper takes as its departure point the premise that power matters to environmental assessment (EA) theory and practice. The day-to-day work of EA is unavoidably enmeshed in the politics of development, yet precisely how power works in EA in different contexts, and influences effectiveness, is far from clear. In this research we analyse micro-power dynamics related to a single EA process: the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) for a mega-project in Greenland. The case centres on a proposed aluminium reduction plant which will be the largest industrial project in Greenland to-date, and includes an aluminium smelter, construction of hydro-power dams, roads, a harbour, dwellings and service facilities for workers. The industrial development is one dimension of significant changes presently taking place in Greenland as a result of the adoption in 2009 of a new and more autonomous government constitution. The new constitution has, for various reasons, resulted in a strong emphasis on economic growth (Hansen and Kørnøv, 2010), with exploitation of the nation's mineral resources being viewed as

a strategic priority for delivering growth. The case investigated in this article provides a rich opportunity to explore power within this dynamic political context, and to consider how power can be better conceived and analysed in EA theory and practice.

That EA provides an arena of power exercise and struggle is recognised by several scholars, and recently researchers and practitioners in the EA field have pointed to the need for inclusion of theories of power to understand and capture the role and functioning of EA (Cashmore et al., 2010; Richardson, 2005; Richardson and Cashmore, 2011). Within political theory, early investigations of power were based on narrow conceptualisations of power as the ability to control others' actions, where power was primarily seen as a causal relation between the behaviour of certain actors (see for example Dahl, 1957; March, 1958). The concept of power has developed significantly in recent decades, with diverse interpretations of its meaning having been debated. Power is generally now interpreted as a multifaceted concept that includes a broad range of dimensions, such as domination, manipulation, agenda setting, opinion making, discipline, force and structures (Thomsen, 2005). Consequently, various different approaches to analysing power have emerged and been tested empirically. In this article we draw upon one theory: Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration. The choice of structuration theory (ST) was informed by initial empirical

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +45 9940 3737, +45 25373915 (mobile).

E-mail addresses: merrild@plan.aau.dk (A.M. Hansen), lonek@plan.aau.dk (L. Kørnøv), cashmore@plan.aau.dk (M. Cashmore), tim@plan.aau.dk (T. Richardson).

findings for the Greenlandic case study, which highlighted the important role of agency in the exercise of power in a governance system, which is in a state of transition.

Within the EA field, very few studies have drawn upon explicit theories of power. The lack of research on power in relation to EA appears to be an important lacuna because, as Cashmore et al. (2010) argue, power dynamics may significantly influence how EA is understood and its effectiveness interpreted. It is important, therefore, for analyses of power in EA to be carried out in different contexts, to deepen understanding of these power dynamics. In the absence of an established research field (see Cashmore and Richardson, 2013–this issue), it is also important to explore different conceptual and methodological approaches to studying power in EA, to examine how power dynamics in EA can be interpreted. The aim of this article, then, is twofold. Firstly the paper elaborates a conceptual and methodological framework for analysing structural power in EA, inspired by Giddens' ST and methodologies of social network analysis (SNA). Secondly, structural power dynamics in the case of SEA for the proposed aluminium reduction plant in Greenland are analysed using the ST framework. It should be noted that we do not claim that the analysis conducted represents a complete, holistic analysis of power. Rather, the point is to explore what sort of account of power can be established using a structural–relational approach. We are interested in reflecting on how this could be useful more broadly within a suite of approaches for analysing power in EA (Richardson and Cashmore, 2011). This is achieved in part by reflecting critically on how the account of power found in this case makes sense in relation to the specific politics of planning and development in contemporary Greenland, and to EA practice in general.

The article is structured as follows. Firstly, we introduce ST and develop a conceptual framework for analysing power structures among actors in decision-making arenas involving EA. In the methodology section, we explain how the framework was operationalised to study decision-making, and introduce the aluminium reduction plant case and the research methods employed. Next, the research findings are presented and discussed, reasoning and explaining how power dynamics enabled or constrained actors' influence on decision-making. We conclude with reflections on the insights provided by, and utility of, the conceptual framework and the corresponding research strategy, and by considering whether the approach to analysing power used in this paper provides insights that could be practically useful to development actors in Greenland and the wider EA community.

2. Structures, power and EA

In order to analyse how power dynamics enable or constrain the influence of actors on decision-making, this research uses Giddens' ST (Giddens, 1984). In this section we will show how Giddens' theorisation of power, influence, resources and structures is operationalised in this research. In particular we explain how, by bringing ST into an engagement with the empirical material, this approach led us to develop an analytical focus on access to, and lines of, communication, and what we label as formal and informal decision competence.

ST is based on a premise that power dynamics are present in development processes at all times as a result of knowledgeable and capable actors being "able to intervene in the world or to refrain from such intervention, with the effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs" (Giddens, 1984:14). Power is understood as relational, because the realization of outcomes is dependent upon other actors' behaviour. It is hence understood as "the capability of actors to secure outcomes where the realization of these outcomes depends upon the agency of others. The use of power in interaction can be understood in terms of the facilities that participants bring to and mobilize as elements of the production of that interaction, thereby influencing its course" (Giddens, 1979:93).

Significantly, ST holds that social structures, akin to what are often called institutions, make social action possible, and at the same time that social action creates and/or sustains those very structures (see Fig. 1). Agency and structure should therefore be understood as a duality rather than two separate phenomenon, where decisions are neither the product of structure or agency alone: they are co-produced. Actors may use, and hence reproduce, existing structures; they may change or reshape structures through their actions; or, they may use some combination of these strategies. ST, then, is both a theory about how actors behave within structures and a theory about how structures are (re)formed by actors. By using Giddens' ST we have the possibility to explore and open up the discussion on this duality by exploring the dynamics by which structures implicated in the application of EA are reproduced and/or altered. ST, and its emphasis on power exercised by 'subjects', mirrors trends in other theoretical fields, notably institutional theory (see, for example, DiMaggio, 1988; Scott, 1987). Despite that both institutional theory and ST contend that structures and actions are interlinked, institutional theory tends to theorise and research from the 'top-down', or macro social level (Barley and Tolbert, 1997; Scott, 2005). ST with its explicit focus on relational dynamics is complementary and, "particularly helpful ...in developing a more balanced conception of the relation between freedom and order" (Scott, 2005: 468).

Why use ST in this study? Firstly, ST constitutes an important theory in the social sciences that, whilst arguably superseded by more recent theoretical works, retains relevance in terms of its significance as an explicit attempt to bridge the structure–agency dichotomy. Secondly, our initial empirical observations indicated that the influence of actors on the decision-making process was largely a function of informal communications which occurred during the planning process. This is in line with Giddens' assertion concerning the coproduction of structure and agency, and the potential for actors to make deliberate choices leading to different outcomes (Giddens, 1985). ST holds that power dynamics initiated by the actions of actors influence societal development processes. The theory thereby emphasises the 'transformative capacity' of actors: their ability to influence development processes through existing structures or by changing or reshaping those structures. Such a theoretical approach is useful because it provides a lens to view the pattern of dynamics among actors in the exercise of power. ST thus raises potentially fruitful questions and supports a critical investigation of what enables and/or constrains actors' influence on decision-making.

Within ST, structures are defined as rules and resources. Rules are procedural regulations, which may be formal (written) or informal (e.g. values or norms) (Giddens, 1984). Resources are defined as "the media through which power is exercised" (Giddens, 1979:131), and are subdivided into two categories: material allocative resources (those generating command over objects, goods or material phenomena) and authoritative resources (those generating command over persons or actors). Action involves the use of resources by actors to secure outcomes compatible with their particular interests. Hence, resources are central to the analysis of power under ST: to understand power dynamics in

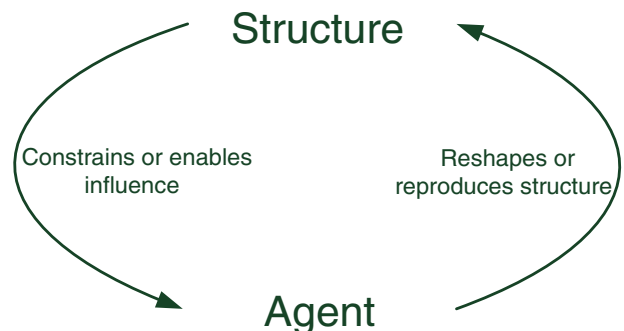


Fig. 1. Principles of structuration (Hansen, 2011a).

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