Talvivaara mine and water pollution: An analysis of mining conflict in Finland

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to the growing literature on natural resource management conflicts and mineral related environmental conflicts in particular, focusing on the case of the Talvivaara project in Finland. The economic and environmental impacts of this mine became a key focus of Finnish politics during 2010–12. Its performance has sparked a heated discussion about the legitimacy of the mining industry and its place in Finnish society. The paper analyses the Talvivaara crisis as a process, which began as a local environmental conflict but would become a symbol of national conflict in the mining industry. The policy analysis presented here is informed by Pondy’s Model of Organisational Conflict.

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1. Introduction

This article contributes to the growing literature about natural resource management conflicts. (e.g. Arsel et al., 2016; Kemp 2011; Franks et al., 2014; Labonne, 2016; Paredes, 2016). The article is a case study from a significant mine project “Talvivaara” in Finland. Through its prolonged and severe environmental and economic problems, the mine and the company became one of the key issues in Finnish politics during 2010–12. The case which has been described widely as “an environmental catastrophe” (e.g. HS, 2012; SLL, 2017; Savon Sanomat, 2017) has also become a symbol or prism through which to discuss the development of Finnish mining as a whole (Tiainen et al., 2014). The significance of the case can be reflected by the fact that already two documentary films (Talvivaaran miehet/Men of Talvivaara 2015 and Nalkamaan sampo (2016) and one fictional film (Jättläinen/Giant, 2016) has been produced. The politics of mineral exploration and extraction in the context of Nordic countries is an under-researched area. This article, therefore, contributes to the small body of mining research on Northern European development.

The aim of this article is to analyze the Talvivaara mine case as a process of social conflict about a complex environmental policy problem, focusing on three different questions: 1) How did Talvivaara become an environmental issue: what stages did the Talvivaara conflict process go through? 2) What content, actors, and features were relevant to the conflict policy process? 3) Which factors affected the exacerbation of the conflict? The questions will be answered by analyzing empirical material and making interpretations of the conflict process. The article examines the Talvivaara conflict as a process, which took several years, and turned from a local environmental conflict into a national symbol of conflict with the mining industry. The revival of mining operations in Finland in the beginning of 21st century marked the spectacular growth of a traditional industrial field after a period of dormancy. As the world price of minerals, metals and precious metals rose, the mineral deposits in Finland, extensive on the European scale, began to interest international mining investors. The new development of mining meant a change in the actor structure of the field. While Finnish mining operations up to the 1990 s were generally in state hands, including Outokumpu Oyj, today most mining operators are foreign corporations. (Ryttteri, 2012.)

Talvivaara Mining Company Plc. was an exception in this respect. Finnish ownership is significant in this traded company. It is the only mining company in which the State of Finland has invested – through its holding company, Solidium Oy. When Talvivaara experienced financial difficulties in 2012–13, the state acted to insure the company’s finances. Because of the share
emission, Solidium Oy became the largest holder of Talvivaara stock (16.7% in spring 2013). Prior to the emission, its holdings amounted to 8.9% (YLE, 2013). The Talvivaara Mining Company Plc. went into bankruptcy in 2015 (Talvivaara, 2015) and, after going through many stages, is now owned by the state-owned company Terrafame Oy. The impact of markets, the problems with the new technology, and environmental problems were all factors in the bankruptcy. In May 2016, The Finnish government decided that it would prepare to close down the Talvivaara mine. The Terrafame-run mine was to be closed over a transitional period, until the end of the year 2016 (Valtioneuvosto, 2016). At the same time, however, negotiations continued with private, non-governmental financing and investment bodies about the possibilities for continuing mining.

Environmental and natural resource conflicts can be approached from the various stakeholders and parties perspectives or by examining the reasons behind the discord (Oksanen, 2003). It is possible to deepen the analysis by clarifying these causes on different (micro and macro) levels or by specifying the stages of the conflict. Peltonen and Villanen (2004) have indicated that conflicts can only be understood by examining them as processes occurring in time. This article focuses on the origin of the conflict and analyzing its stages of development.

Before analyzing the case, we will define our approach and the conceptual instruments of research into conflict processes. Furthermore, we will describe the methods and materials used.

2. Conflicts over natural resources

Our analysis is based on the idea that environmental conflict is a process initiated when one party observes that the other is negatively affecting something of concern to the first party (Thomas, 1992). Contradictions in the interests and values of different parties are generally recognized as the main cause of environmental and natural resource conflicts. Interaction and communication difficulties also trigger environmental conflicts; differing observations and interpretations of events can play a significant role (Wilmot and Hocker, 2001). In the Talvivaara case, various parties have had major differences of opinion about the existence of problems and their effects.

In our analysis we explore the conflict process and its content. In policy science, various models of the stages through which a conflict progresses have been developed from the process standpoint (, 7–8). Pondy (1967) has attempted to bring together the structural aspects, the actors’ individual factors, the process, and the results, all as part of the same course of events, or episodes (Lewicki et al., 1992). He distinguished five stages of conflict:

1) Latent conflict: No outright conflict exists, but there is a potential for conflict because of several latent factors.

2) Perceived conflict: Conflict escalates as groups battle over the cause of conflict.

3) Felt conflict: Actors respond emotionally to each other and attitudes polarize. What began as a small problem escalates into huge conflict.


5) Conflict aftermath: Conflict is resolved in some way. If sources of conflict are not resolved, the dispute will arise again.

This rather simplified model has been used extensively but has also been subject to criticism, correction and addition. Following the manifestation of the conflict, it is possible to add the stages of negotiation, mediation and decision-making (Lewicki et al., 1992). In the analysis it is also possible to add conditions preceding the conflict before the first stage.

Deutsch (1973) questions the convergence of manifest and latent conflict. He believes that the subject of dispute between the parties involved can become a manifest conflict when a deeper, latent conflict remains unresolved. Reasons for this can include the complexity of the latent conflict or the sensitive nature of the conflict. Conflicts, however, are also cyclical in nature. This means that each previously occurring conflict or dispute in turn affects the formation of the impending conflict. This intensifying effect is extremely important if the same parties reemerge later in a new conflict (Peltonen and Villanen, 2004, 8). This is especially noticeable in prolonged conflicts, where the difference of opinion increases and the number of disputes increases over time. The subject of the conflict can be clearly defined or difficult to determine. If the former is the case, the conflict is very limited. When the parties are aware of the actual issue at stake, resolution is often easier. Lewicki et al. (2003, 45) state that the general features of unmediated conflicts are exacerbation, polarization, renewed circles, or cyclical, and growth in the number of questions and parties.

The media has played a major role in the Talvivaara case, and the media source material we collected is important to this analysis, although it is not a media study. According to Seppänen and Valittronen (2012, 170–184), the power of the media partly lies in its ability to create or define the subjects of public discourse. The media can decide what comes into the public eye, and how this is done. Many different actors may be involved in the background to a conflict, but it only becomes manifest when one party observes or reveals the fact that another party has prioritized its goals (cf. Peltonen and Villanen, 2004). According to these sociological and political perspectives, the media is also a substantive party in shaping a conflict. On one hand, the media reflects events in creating a forum for considering the questions of the dispute. On the other, it has its own powerful role, especially in prolonged disputes. In the Talvivaara case, the problems were disclosed and the public mobilized largely as a result of media attention. The formation of the conflict and its exacerbation, in particular, were accompanied by extensive media coverage. This is typical of the media impact on conflict.

3. Materials and methods

We apply document and media analysis to study the stages of the conflict process. This includes the content of various issues, the behavior and reactions of policy actors, but it must be emphasized that we are not analyzing the motivations of different actors or social construction of various views. In this interpretation, we are interested in the reasons behind the exacerbation of the conflict process.

Our approach is qualitative and data is based on a wide range of media material. Data include newspaper articles, TV programs, documents of the Talvivaara Mining Company Plc. and environmental authorities, material from civic movements, academic research, and positions presented at various forums. The key resource used here is, however, coverage by the Helsingin Sanomat (HS) national newspaper concerning Talvivaara from 2004 to the end of 2012 (Fig. 1). Other important sources are current affairs television programs, chiefly YLE (the Finnish Broadcasting Company) and MTV3 (a commercial broadcaster). Newspaper articles were collected through a search of the HS digital archives using the keyword Talvivaara, excluding articles which only mentioned the mine in passing. The Kainuu Sanomat (KS) newspaper provided regional media coverage of Talvivaara for the period 2010–12. We excluded letters to the editor and columns from the research material. Above all, the media analysis was used to depict the history of events in the conflict process.
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