Participatory environmental governance in Estonia-

public participation professionals' understandings and practices of participatory process design

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Participatory environmental governance in Estonia – public participation professionals´ understandings and practices of participatory process design

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Abstract

Environmental problems are often complex, dynamic, and require flexible and transparent decision-making. Thus, participatory process design is getting more and more attention in the field of environmental decision-making.

This interpretive study aims to analyse Estonian local authorities' public participation professionals' understandings and practices of participatory process design. It is investigated how the ideas of participatory and deliberative forms of environmental governance practices are understood and practiced by the local authorities' public participation professionals in Estonia. . The focus is on the institutionalised governance structures that tackle environmental issues on the Estonian local authority level. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with three public participation professionals who have led face to face participatory meetings in the form of different minipublics.

This study reveals that although the language of participation is used in Estonia, the overall understanding of participation and the universal ideas of process conditions are different from those articulated in communicative planning theory. This study shows that the public participation professionals do not see the diversity of participants as an extra value for the process. Another important finding is that the public participation professionals in local authorities understand the interdependence between actors mainly as a relationship between the authority and all the other actors seldom exploring the interdependence between all the different actors. It is also found that the public participation professionals in Estonia value the opportunity to articulate different standpoints most as the condition of the participatory process. Changing and negotiating the preferences and opinions together with the other participants was not seen as an important condition for the participatory process. None of the Estonian local authorities' public participation professionals found it essential to recruit a neutral professional facilitator on behalf of the local authority due to their understanding of the qualifications of this role that are mainly related to expertise in the field or the process leaders' trustworthiness.

Based on the findings, I argue that the universal participatory ideas are contextualized and changed when they are practiced in different contexts. Therefore, drawing on this thesis I suggest that these ideas should be adjusted to the Estonian environmental governance setting. Thus, to contextualise participation better in Estonian environmental governance, I suggest developing in-service trainings for the public participation professionals in institutionalised participation practices. In education it would be crucial to not only teach the methods for participatory process design but also expand public participation professionals' competences via developing their understandings about universal participatory ideas.

Keywords: Environmental Communication, Collaborative Rationality, Facilitation, Participation, Local Authorities, Public Participation Professionals, Natural Resource Management

Preface

The idea of this thesis stems from the personal interest in the practice of participation in the context of tackling environmental issues and belief that it is one of the democratic tools that could be more used in the field of environmental governance. More precisely, I am curious about the role of these practitioners who are creating the participatory space where different conditions that are necessary for a successful outcome can reveal.

I have consciously followed and tried to make sense of how participatory environmental governance is practiced in my home country Estonia. However, based on listening experience stories, reading the stories from news and social media, it has often seemed that the practices behind these processes are sometimes missing some of the qualities of transparency, inclusiveness, and deliberation. Thus, my perception of the current qualities of participatory processes in Estonia has prompted this research. My interest in this area developed while learning more about participatory ideals during the SLU Environmental Communication and Management master program in Sweden. This triggered my question of how seemingly the language of participation is taking more and more often place in our day-to-day administration in Estonia. Nevertheless, many of these practices are not resonating with the theoretical ideas of participation. That is why I found it crucial to investigate how participatory ideas can be understood and practiced differently in different contexts.

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Abbreviations

SLU	Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences
CP	Communicative Planning
DIAD	Diversity Interdependence Authentic Dialogue theory
PPP	Public participation professional

1. Introduction

1.1. Problem formulation

Climate change, air pollution, species extinction, and deforestation are only some of the major environmental problems that affect people worldwide. Environmental issues are often complex, dynamic and require flexible and transparent decision-making that considers a large variety of expertise and values. Thus, participatory process design is getting more and more attention in the field of environmental decision-making (Reed 2008). We can find examples from all over the world about how governmental and non-governmental organisations see collaborative dialogue as one way to tackle problems that seem intractable (Innes & Booher 2010).

Estonia is one of the countries where participatory practices have increased over time (Sooväli-Sepping 2020). According to Healey (2012), both the general idea as well as concepts, techniques, and instruments are travelling from one place to another. She also notes that the new policy ideas often travel around in national political and policy discourse and move within international and global networks. However, as Healey (2012:190) points out, "the ideas could not just be extracted from its context of the invention, uprooted and 'planted' somewhere else" as context matters. Therefore, considering that participation can be done in different ways in different context, in this thesis, I will look at how participatory ideas are understood and practiced by the local authorities' public participation practitioners' in the context of Estonian environmental governance..

The researchers in participation (Gaventa et al. 2011; Innes & Booher 2010; Innes 2016) also highlight that it is crucial to not only look at the existence of the collaborative process but analyse how these processes are implemented in practice since not all participatory processes are equally valuable. Innes and Booher (2010) have developed a practice called collaborative rationality that can help ensure that the participatory processes are designed so that they are productive and valuable. According to Innes and Booher (2010), striving for the particular conditions of collaborative rationality such as diversity, interdependence, and authentic dialogue can help bring participation closer to the ideal type of process. However, they point out that these conditions can never be completely achieved.

Innes (2016) notes that if the participatory processes are not conducted in the way that they meet principles of collaborative rationality, they can even have a counterproductive impact on the process. On the contrary, Innes (2016:2) emphasises that properly designed and managed processes that approximate the ideal of collaborative rationality "can reduce conflict, prevent mistakes, enrich their thinking, offer new options and reframe difficult problems so they can be managed, while at the same time officials retain their authority to decide what to do". Thus, participation should not be seen just as an alternative to political representation or expertise but rather as a complement to these practices. As Fung (2006:66) argues "public participation at its best operates in synergy with representation and administration to yield more desirable practices and outcomes of collective decision making and action."

Different scholars have recognized the need for professional actors with sufficient facilitation skills to ensure successful participatory approaches (Innes & Booher 2003; Escobar 2011; Westin et al. 2014; Reed 2008). Good facilitation requires practices that enhance the possibilities of deliberation, allow positions to be openly debated instead of claiming something defensively. Using more innovative and interactive practices could help to refute the reproduction of old hierarchies and exclusions and allow diversity of voices to be heard while amplifying the minor voices (Cornwall & Coelho 2007). Researchers use several terms to describe these people who are responsible for the participatory processes. Bherer et al. (2017:3) give an overview that this role can be also called as "facilitators (Moore 2012), participatory process experts (Chilvers 2008b), public engagement practitioners (Lee 2014), professional participation practitioners (Cooper & Smith 2012) […]," and the list continues. In this thesis, I use the term 'public participation professionals' (PPP) as Bherer et al. (2017) suggest using this term since it is the broadest.

Even though collaborative processes are often seen as valuable, they are sometimes criticised for being too expensive, time-consuming, or impractical. Some of the barriers might also be the inability to pay for a trained professional, the time-pressure with decision-making, lack of support from the superiors, or failure to get stakeholders behind the table (Innes 2016). One solution to overcome possible limitations of collaborative processes is to institutionalise stakeholder participation that might mean, for instance, developing organisational cultures that can facilitate these goals (Reed 2008).

PPPs are practitioners whose professional trajectories have led them to become experts in organising public participation in addition to their other role in public administrations, NGOs, or private firms (Bherer et al. 2017). Despite the importance of their role in these institutionalised practices, it is not well studied how participatory ideas are understood and practiced by these professionals in different contexts. Moreover, it is previously not sufficiently studied how

participatory process design is understood and practiced in Estonian environmental governance context.

1.2. Research aim and questions

The aim of this thesis is to address the above-described research problem by analysing Estonian local authorities' public participation professionals' understandings and practices of participatory process design. Thus, I focus on the practitioners who are using participatory process design while working in the institutionalised governance structures that tackle environmental issues on the Estonian local authority level.

Research questions

1. How do different public participation professionals in Estonia make sense of and practice the participatory process design?
    a. What are the differences and similarities between different Estonian public participation professionals' understandings and practices of leading participatory activities?
    b. What are the differences and similarities between Estonian public participation professionals' understandings and practices and the universal theoretical ideas of participation?

2. Previous research and context

2.1. Public participation and Estonian context

Public participation is an umbrella term that defines different processes which enable people's concerns, needs, and values to be incorporated into decision making. It can happen in different arenas and can take various forms (Nabatchi 2012). Participation can enable achieving important democratic values such as legitimacy, justice, and efficient governance (Fung 2006). Furthermore, creating more meaningful relationships between citizens and public institutions is a valuable process as it can strengthen democracy and enable progress as a civilization (Nabatchi & Leighninger 2015). Participation could even be seen as one of the cornerstones of democracy since it carries the value of the rearrangement of power that allows the citizens who are currently "excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately involved in the future" (Arnstein 1969:216).

These days, 'participation' has sometimes become a buzzword due to the widespread use of the term by several institutions. Thus, the phrase has become quite ambiguous since many activities could simply be reframed to meet any demand made of doing participation. This has raised an issue of defining what the concept actually means if it can seemingly consist of almost any process that involves people (Cornwall 2008). The ambiguity of this term could sometimes lead to the use of participatory approaches in a way that can even be seen as tokenism (Escobar 2011) or as a way to legitimise decisions that are already made (Silver et al. 2010).

The questions of participation have become highly relevant also in Estonia. Since Estonia regained its independence in 1991, the planning practices have become increasingly open and democratic in the country (Sooväli-Sepping & Roose 2020). However, it is discussed in the latest Estonian Human Development report (Sooväli-Sepping 2020) that despite the promotion of deliberative and participatory culture in Estonia, the level of civic activism remains low, being several decades behind other Northern countries such as Finland and Sweden (Ainsaar & Strenze 2019).

It is argued that some of the reasons might be that people in Estonia have a lack of understanding of public participation benefits and have thus often passive or even pessimistic attitudes towards public participation (Vahtrus et al. 2019). This attitude might be caused by inadequate feedback about using the participants' contributions and a widely used formal approach to engaging with the public. This, in turn, "reduces the meaningfulness and credibility of public participation and gives rise to participation fatigue" (Kljavin et al. 2020). Another aspect is that public administration might have become too bureaucratic and technocratic (Sooväli-Sepping & Roose 2020), and this can cause the situation where bureaucrats, elected officials, and planners often inhibit collaboration as they prefer to keep control and avoid others' ideas to disturb their decision-making choices (Innes 2016).

Thus, it is suggested that in order to promote the unused potential of the participatory democracy in Estonia, there is a need for more effective, transparent, and feedback-based ways of engaging with citizens to ensure the exchange of knowledge and establish trust between the state and its citizens (Sooväli-Sepping & Roose 2020).

My reading of the literature indicates that there are several ways to categorize different ways of doing participation. One way of categorising participation is distinguishing direct and indirect participation. Direct forms of participation mean the settings where the citizens are personally involved and actively engaged in providing input, making decisions, and solving problems (Nabatchi & Leighninger 2015). Therefore, I will also focus on the direct processes in this study since the role of public participation professionals becomes more influential in that kind of participatory processes.

Generally, the need for participatory processes is not well regulated in Estonia. However, some requirements about participation can be found in Estonian legal acts such as General Part of the Environmental Code Act, Planning Act and the Local Government Organisation Act which is indicating the need for participatory processes also on the legal level. Also, one can find a participation guideline for the public and third sector from the Estonian Ministry of the Interior's website. This document highlights that the most commonly used methods of participation in Estonia are information events or publications, written consultations, and various discussion meetings (face to face meetings with partners, working groups, forums, etc.). Although these are all appropriate methods, the authors of the guideline highlighted an additional list of methods that could be used more in Estonia. Open space, citizens' forums, world café, simulations, deliberative mapping, and citizens' juries were described as some formats with a deliberative nature and unused potential. However, it was also mentioned that these methods are currently not widely used, and there might not be much information about these formats available in the Estonian language (Hinsberg & Kübar 2009).

Drawing on the literature, there is no standard form or institution of direct public participation in contemporary democratic contexts (Fung 2006). Instead, we can see from the literature that there is a wide range of institutional possibilities for public participation and various mechanisms of direct participation. Arnstein's typology - "eight Rungs on a Ladder of Citizen Participation" – has become one of the most influential articles on participatory democracy. It describes eight rungs grouped into a) non-participation where participation is used for manipulative or educative purposes; b) tokenism which allows people to speak up without actual influence; c) citizen power with an increased degree of decision making power.

Even though the Arnstein's 'ladder' describes very well the variety of processes, some contemporary authors see its shortcomings. For instance, Fung (2006) focuses on the optimal structure for a particular purpose instead of finding the ideal form of participation. Thus, even though public empowerment is highly desirable in some contexts, there are also other situations in which sometimes, for example, a consultative role would be more appropriate for the members of the public rather than complete 'citizen control'. Nevertheless, it is suggested in the Estonian Human Development report (Sooväli-Sepping 2020) that the opportunities for participation should be expanded, especially in the fields where the legal framework might not be developed enough yet as well as establish the practices. "It is important to continue contributing to the development of participatory practices. For meaningful participation, those who lead these processes need new skills, a flexible approach, and approaches that suit different target groups" (Vahtrus et al. 2020).

2.2. Theoretical background

2.2.1. Communicative planning theory and collaborative rationality

This study is investigating how the ideas of participation are understood and practiced by the Estonian local authorities' public participation professionals'. I have related my work to the communicative planning theory, which formulates the general and universal ideas of participation.

Democratic governance has had a significant effect on strategic planning, emphasising co-thinking in developing new solutions. A planning model based on a framework where planning is seen as a communication and negotiation process, emerged in the 1980s and 1990s with John Forester, Tore Sager, Judith E. Innes, and Patsy Healey as some of the leading theorists. It aimed to criticise previously widespread rational planning and challenge the hierarchical expert-driven planning processes (Westin 2019). When theorising, many communicative planning scholars found significant influence from the philosophy of Jürgen Habermas and his ideal

speech situation and communicative rationality. The idea behind communicative processes is that the "qualities of comprehensibility, sincerity, legitimacy and truth, as well other qualities, such as openness, inclusivity, reflexivity and creativity" (Healey 2003:210) can help people solve problems in better ways. Also, the communicative processes can prevent the situation where one social group could legitimately force its preferred solutions to joint problems on the other groups (Sager 2009).

Innes and Booher (2010:10) have noted that even though collaborative planning is more likely to generate reasonable and legitimate decisions than traditional decision making, it is important to notice how the collaborative process evolves. They refer to disagreements in the literature which sometimes lead to very generic usage of the word 'collaboration' for every kind of process where people come together to cooperate.

Several authors have tried to articulate the principles of the collaborative process, which could sufficiently describe the qualities of the process (Innes 2016; Innes & Booher 2003; Innes & Booher 2010; Healey 2012; Forester 1982; Sager 2009). Mutual comprehension and legitimacy (Innes 2016; Sager 2009; Forester 1982), right to speak and to be listened (Innes 2016; Sager 2009), trustworthiness (Innes 2016; Sager 2009; Forester 1982), civility and respect (Innes 2016; Healey 2012) are just some of the possible qualities to name.

Innes and Booher (2010) suggest meeting the conditions of collaborative rationality that can help to ensure that the participatory processes help tackle the problems. They outline three collaborative process conditions: diversity, interdependence, and authentic dialogue (the DIAD theory of collaborative rationality) that they find critical to strive for the collaborative process to be collaboratively rational. The DIAD model highlights the need for diverse representation of interests as well as the recognition of the mutual interdependence as some of the conditions needed for authentic dialogue and, ultimately, opportunities to reach consensus.

Furthermore, in Innes' article from 2016, she has outlined seven concrete principles of collaborative rationality that have some similarities with the DIAD model. However, she has added some extended principles which could lead to conduct more successful practices.

According to Innes and Booher (2010:6), the basics of collaborative rationality are related with the process of deliberation. In general terms, they say that "a process is collaboratively rational to the extent that all the affected interests jointly engage in face to face dialogue, bringing their various perspectives to the table to deliberate in the problems they face together". For the process to be collaboratively rational, all participants must be informed, and the conditions should enable them to express their views and be listened to. It is mentioned that the power-relations that exist outside the process should be left aside and even those with little power

outside the process should be heard and be part of the process. The process should be dialogue-based and involve mutual learning and joint reasoning (Innes 2016). Moreover, even though the principles of collaborative rationality should be aimed at, it is emphasised that they can never be fully achieved (Innes & Booher 2010).

Many conditions of collaborative rationality that Innes and Booher (2010) as well as Innes (2016) cover are also discussed by the other noteworthy scholars as mentioned above. Thus, drawing on their work, I will use collaborative rationality and its conditions as an example of the universal ideas of participation in this study. Below I describe more precisely three conditions that I have focused in this study as some of the universal conditions for participation.

Diversity

The first principle is the diversity of participants in the participatory process. In the DIAD model (Innes & Booher 2010:36) it is described as a condition to ensure that the process includes "not only agents who have power because that are "deal makers" or "deal breakers", but also those who have needed information or could be affected by outcomes of the process. [...] There must be many values, interests, perspectives, skills, and types and sources of knowledge in the process for robust ideas to develop and for the system to build a capacity to adapt over time." Innes (2016) describes the importance of having the diversity of participants for ensuring the variety of points of view on the issues. She adds that "leaving out an inconvenient opponent can mean that results will not be robust or legitimate" (Innes 2016:2). When some affected interests or perspectives are excluded, the process cannot be collaboratively rational (Innes & Booher 2010).

Interdependence

Interdependence of participants (Innes & Booher 2010) describes the acknowledgment by the participants that they depend on each other to meet their interests. Realising the interdependence would help participants keep interested and energy to engage with each other during the process and motivate reaching an agreement (Innes & Booher 2010). This condition is similar to the principle by Innes (2016:2) that highlights the need to focus on a problem or task that is in interest to all participants since "this allows a group to identify and build on shared interests and gives them the incentive to work together to find the best solutions."

Authentic dialogue

Authentic dialogue defines the engagement of all participants in an authentic face to face dialogues meeting Habermas' speech conditions. It means that "the deliberations must be characterized by engagement among agents so that they can mutually assure that their claims are legitimate, accurate, comprehensible, and

sincere. The deliberations must be inclusive of all major interests and knowledge. Moreover, those on the power position outside this processes should not dominate over others. Also all participants must have equal access to all the relevant information and an equal ability to speak and be listened to. "In the authentic dialogue, all participants can challenge any assumptions or assertions. Nothing is taken for granted, and nothing is off the table" (Innes & Booher 2010:36) The same principle is seen in Innes's (2016:2) framework divided between several principles including a description of face to face authentic dialogue, "where all are equally empowered to speak, all are listened to, and all are equally privy to data and other forms of knowledge on the issues." Also, Innes (2016:2) emphasises the role of skilful facilitator for ensuring "focus, civility, mutual comprehension, legitimacy of participants' claims, and testing of evidence they contribute." and encouraging participants to generate "out of the box ideas" as well as learn more in depth about the situation, understand others' interests and consider new possibilities.

3. Method

3.1. The interpretive approach

This thesis is built on the constructivist worldview. The underlying assumption is that there are multiple understandings and meanings of the world around us rather than a singular truth (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2011; Creswell & Creswell 2018). Therefore, in my research, I look at how individuals seek understandings of the world in which they live and work while developing subjective meanings of their experiences. As the meanings can vary, the complexity of views relying on the participants' views of the situation is studied. According to Creswell and Creswell (2017), constructivism is often combined with interpretivism and is seen as an approach to qualitative research methods. As my main interest is in individuals' meaning-making in a specific context, I decided to apply an interpretive research approach in my thesis project. According to Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2011:1), interpretive research "focuses on specific, situated meanings and meaning-making practices of actors in a given context.", thus, making it a suitable approach for my thesis.

Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2011) suggest that qualitative interpretive research often follows the abductive logic of inquiry. It means that "the reasoning begins with a puzzle, a surprise, or a tension, and then seeks to explicate it by identifying the conditions that would make that puzzle less perplexing and more of a "normal" or "natural" event" (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2011:27). During the puzzling-out process, the researcher is constantly "[…] moving between what is puzzling and possible explanations for it […]", and "[…] simultaneously puzzling over empirical materials and theoretical literature" (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2011:27).

For interpretive researchers, it is common that the idea for research comes from their own everyday experiences or the tension between experienced reality on the field and expectations based on prior knowledge (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2011). It describes well the background of my initial research idea, stemming from the perceived dissonance of the theoretical ground of participation in environmental governance, and current practices in Estonia, as I described in the preface.

3.2. Data collection and generation

As the interpretive researchers "are not bringing their own scientific definitions with them to field settings in order to test the accuracy of those understandings, but want, instead, to understand how those concepts, roles, and so forth are used in the field" (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2011:18), interviewing was used as a suitable method to learn about different public participation professionals' understandings. I conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews based on the interview guide with mainly open-ended questions. The interview guide was divided into three blocks: background and experiences, the practice story, reflections and lessons (Forester et al. 2015). This guide enabled to start with the questions about the background, continue focusing on the case, and get interviewees to explain what happened during the meeting that they were responsible for. The final and more reflective part added some interpretation to the practice story. The questions were rather broad and general about the case so that the participants could construct their views and opinions about the situations (Creswell and Creswell 2017). During the interview, I asked the interviewees to focus on one face to face participatory interaction since in that kind of direct participatory process PPP's role becomes more influential.

In the data collection phase, I interviewed three people who had led different participatory meetings on the local authority level in Estonia. All interviews were conducted via the Zoom platform, and all interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees. Afterward, the interviews were transcribed. Each interview was followed by analysing how the interviewees understand and practice participatory process design.

Thus, the interview transcriptions were color-coded based on the themes that were developed based on collaborative rationality conditions from the DIAD theory (diversity, interdependence and authentic dialogue) by Innes and Booher (2003; 2010) and collaborative rationality conditions by Innes (2016). This approach was chosen since it helped to explore how the ideas of participation are understood and practiced in Estonian context..

While color-coding, I also added comments highlighting other interesting similarities or differences in the interviewees' understandings about the participation. Close readings of transcripts constantly followed up the color coding to analyse interviewees' understandings of the participatory process design.

The cases and the interviewees were chosen based on the deliberative nature on the descriptive level, meaning that the participants of these processes aimed to have some degree of influence on decision making rather than performing only an information or consultation role. All participatory processes were designed to represent a different form of minipublics. I used Fung's (2006) model of Democracy Cube for choosing the PPPs to interview. The model constitutes a space in which any particular participation mechanism can be located. It distinguishes three

dimensions that form a space in which participation mechanisms can be located and therefore varied. These dimensions are a) scope of participation (who participates), b) mode of communication and decision (how participants communicate), and c) the extent of authority (how discussions are linked with policy or public action) (Fung 2006). We can see that some participatory processes are open to all who wish to engage, whereas others invite only, for example, interest group representatives. In many public meetings, participants only get information from officials who publish and explain different policies. Much less activities are deliberative, meaning that citizens can take positions, discuss, and change their opinions. The third dimension describes the link between discussions and policy (Fung 2006).

My sample was formed by PPPs who have led a participatory process which was located in the points on the model's scales Authority & Power and Communication & Decision that require more robust engagement and thus a more significant role of public participation professional. These decisions were made based on the process's descriptions. I found these cases based on the written descriptions on the web pages or contacting municipality workers and asking for participatory cases. I left out the cases where the local authority had a comprehensive overview of the participation principles and procedures on their websites but did not have any experience putting these ideas into practice. Also, the cases where some local authorities had experience with participatory processes, but these processes were not related to environmental governance, were left out. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many recent participatory activities were held online, and since my focus was only on face to face activities, these cases were also excluded.

The processes and cases differed in scale from regional to the local level. They also differed in content of the issue, type of participants, process design, and dialogue management.

For all three interviewees, it was common that although their primary profession was not being a facilitator, the institutionalisation of participation on the local authority level has put them in a situation where they have adopted the role of conducting participatory processes. Thus, the concrete cases I investigated in my study were not the first meetings these people have led, so they could all be considered experienced leaders of participatory meetings. Therefore, these practitioners are called "public participation professionals" (Bherer et al. 2017) in this thesis. Different authority institutions have different structures and different aims for participatory processes. Therefore the "primary role" of the interviewees differed quite a lot from a specialist at the Association of Local Authorities of one of the Estonian County (case 1) to Rural municipality mayor (case 2) and a Chairman of the rural municipality (case 3).

In the first case the interviewee was facilitating regular stakeholder meetings regarding the complex regional development issue. The particular meeting was the second one and this meeting aimed to discuss a model for the region's future and

receive feedback for the model and reach a consensus on how to continue. The model was pre-made based on the previous session and the public opinion survey. In the second case, the interviewee was facilitating a community meeting organised because there was a high public interest towards the particular environmental issue. The mayor claimed to have a participative governance culture, thus he decided to organise an open meeting. This meeting aimed to provide solution and disprove the widespread misinformation about the planning project, which had long irritated the local community. In the third case, interviewee 3 facilitated a regular community council meeting as a chairman of the community council. The particular meeting was focusing on the green energy infrastructure project with a high local public interest. Thus there were also regular citizens participating in addition to official members of the council. The aim was to gather the community's opinion on the local authority's decisions.

3.3. Methodological reflections

In interpretive research, the differences in interpretations between researchers need to be acknowledged. These differences are inevitable since "neither researchers nor research participants are assumed to be interchangeable and [...] both researchers and participants are seen as "embodied" or situated, and that situatedness, which can be person-specific, plays a role in the co-generation of data" (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2011:95). Therefore, it is important to "make potential sources of difference between researchers as transparent as possible and using those differences to account for the generation of knowledge claims" (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2011). Thus, considering myself as a researcher with my background, possible biases, knowledge, perceptions, etc., during the research was crucial, and therefore it is important to be explicit and critical about it.

It is also essential to analyse how the researcher's identity may affect the research. It can be both as claimed by myself as a researcher but also how others perceive me (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2011). For instance, I kept my introduction mainly on the academic role (master student at SLU) and not focused on my job in the environmental sector since this could have potentially biased the interviewees' perception of my neutrality as a researcher about the environmental governance. To make trustworthy and valid research, I followed Yanow and Schwartz-Shea's (2011) three overarching principles of researchers being doubtful, systematic, and reflective. It means I actively considered how my own sense-making affects the process, and I was aiming to be reflective about it. Openness to doubt is also crucial to the generation of knowledge. Especially in the abductive research where I was moving cyclically between my puzzles and the possible theoretical explanations. The doubt was the underlying driver for my research. Being systematic refers to

explicit decisions about my research design as well as methodological choices. Thus, I acknowledged my personal opinions about the environmental issues and how they might impact the interpretive processes.

4. Results

Investigating the Estonian public participation professionals' understandings and practices of participatory process design revealed that overall, the public participation professionals' who I interviewed had rather similar understandings of participatory ideas. However, their shared understandings' have several significant differences from the universal theoretical ideas of participation.

The results of this study suggest that when the collaborative rationality scholars provide a wide range of different conditions that should be ensured in participatory process, the PPPs in Estonia are using only a small spectrum of these ideas when describing their understandings of the participatory process design. In the following paragraphs, the main results and explanations of how I have arrived at these results will be highlighted. All the used citations I have translated from Estonian to English. The following table (Table 1) describes how the processes and cases differed in the content of the issue, type of participants, process design, and dialogue management.

Table 1. Overview of interviewees and the cases

Interviewee and case identification	**Participation practice**	**Target participants**	**Participants' extent of authority and power**
Interviewee 1/ Case 1	Regular stakeholder group meeting	Professional stakeholders (Fung 2006)	Advise and consult (Fung 2006)
Interviewee 2/ Case 2	One-time public community meeting	Open, self-selection (Fung 2006)	Communicative influence (Fung 2006)
Interviewee 3/ Case 3	Regular community council meeting	Professional stakeholders + open, self-selection (Fung 2006)	Advise and consult (Fung 2006)

4.1. Diversity

The first principle which was analysed was the diversity of participants in the participatory process (Innes & Booher 2010; Innes 2016).

All three event designs used different forms of minipublics, based on different participant selection methods varying from open self-selection methods to professional paid and unpaid representatives (Fung, 2006). The PPPs usually have the freedom to choose who to invite and who not to invite to the event. However, it is not always so clear with the institutionalised practices since it might be indicated by background documents or framework which actors should or could be involved.

Both minipublics, which involved stakeholder participation, had frameworks that their recruitment process was based on. For case 1, it meant that it was following the EU framework that defines which stakeholder groups should be involved in the representatives' group who will meet on a regular basis. However, PPP from the first case took the liberty to open up the selection of stakeholders. It meant his understanding that all stakeholder groups should be able to join on an equal basis in addition to those stakeholders who were required by the initial process framework. Thus, some other stakeholder groups were also accepted who expressed their desire to participate. Similarly, in the community council case, in addition to stakeholders who were fixed by statute, the meeting was opened up to everyone. Case 2 was using an open self-selection method and was, in principle, open to everyone.

Nevertheless, only one interviewee explicitly described diversity as an essential condition for the process quality.

> *I1: "The biggest challenge in this process is getting the right people involved behind the table. Because the question is not whether we want to have 10 or 100 people or more in the room at a time, but it is a question of the input we get from them and the feedback they give to our ideas. And how we can move forward with it and how they, in turn, will disseminate and use the information they receive from the process. That is the key. Therefore, we do not have any individuals involved in the platform; all are representatives of some kind of organisation."*

Although diversity was not seen as an extra value for the process by the other interviewees, all respondents considered it necessary to ensure openness to diversity and provide conditions for equal opportunities to participate. It means that it was understood that the process manager should provide the openness and conditions for equal opportunities to participate. So, if the event is public, the organiser has to use the accurate communication channels to reach people. Also, as this was relevant for the multilingual target group in case 1, live translation should

be provided to overcome language barriers. In addition, the time of the event has to be suitable for as many people as possible (one event was held on Sunday afternoon, another one in the workday evening). The timing was more relevant for those events that were also open to individuals since participating is not part of their daily work as it was for the stakeholder participation.

If the conditions for participation are ensured, the stakeholders or actors who want to be involved must be proactive themselves. The PPPs believed that if open participation is ensured, using the opportunity to participate should be participants' own responsibility. This could imply that the participants are not explicitly excluded, but the access to information might be limited since the PPPs do not pay extra attention on the inclusion of diverse participants. This is described well with the following quote.

> *I3: "That, well ... at least no one can say he couldn't come. If he does not want to be out so late, he just does not bother to attend. But that is already his concern. But at least the opportunity is offered."*

Also, in the results appears that the theoretical principle of designing an event that is open to everyone, not always necessarily ensure equal access to the event or some elements of the event. In one of the described meetings, even though it was open to everyone in principle, the interviewee explained that the local community expressed their desire to exclude one NGO from the meeting because the NGO was not considered as part of the local community, and the members of this NGO were perceived as too provocative during the previous meetings. The PPP accepted the community's opinion and decided not to invite this organisation to the particular meeting. Thus, an environmental NGO who has stated on their website that they "speak for stakeholders whose voices have not yet reached the ears of our forestry and environmental policymakers" was left out. They were not explicitly excluded, but the invitation process did not ensure that they were aware of this participation opportunity. When it comes to environmental issues, it raises the question of creating a legitimate process with a sufficient diversity of actors to discuss topics such as forestry, land use or green energy infrastructure that have high local, regional and national interests. Interviewee 2 chose to involve only local community members to ensure keeping it on the local level. Case 3, on the other hand, was open to also those actors who were interested in the issue and were coming from different regions.

Also, having diverse stakeholders involved did not always necessarily mean that all the different participants had similar rights within the process (e.g., the right to vote). Case 3 used a process design where the distinction between different roles became visible even in the physical setting of the room since some people were sitting around the table and some were sitting further away, in the audience. The

cause of this distinction laid in need to distinguish people who were officially part of the institutionalised community council and who were the guests. The community council's statute fixed the right to vote and form a community council's formal opinion.

When it comes to differences in the opportunities to speak, interviewee 3 emphasised the importance of giving a chance to "both sides" to say a word. However, the chance to share their ideas was given proportionally more to the "key players".

> *I3: "The key players must be given the floor in any case. Just like ..., it is not like we have a draft prepared by the rural municipality government, for example, and I do not give the floor to the rural municipality government. Or that the opponent for this draft is the developer, and I will not give the floor to the developer. And also give the floor to the developer and the representative of the rural municipality government more than the others because they are the main carriers of the subject. "*

Even though Innes (2016) has separated the principle of diversity from the principle of different knowledge, they are interrelated because to have additional knowledge included, one has to include different people. The principle by Innes (2016) declares that expert knowledge and community knowledge should be both parts of the dialogue. In order to have other knowledge included, one must involve different knowledge holders at first. Information plays a central role in the collaborative dialogue, and therefore various sources of information are an essential condition for an authentic dialogue.

All interviewees perceived the role of the participatory process as a mediator between knowledge transition. The role of the meetings was seen as either to share information with the participant or gather information or input from the participants. The approach is dependent on the scope of the participatory process. For instance, interviewee 1 emphasised having a broader view on the issue and gathering input from the representative groups.

> *I1: "The level of participation is different. When I was a head of the local municipality, we had less than 1000 people in the municipality and the participation meant going to the grass-root level. But on the county level we need to avoid it."*

Interviewee 2, on the other hand, wanted to reach out to grassroot level. Thus, the citizens were invited to the event, and interviewee 2 himself took the responsibility to transfer the knowledge collected beforehand from the institution whom the citizens opposed. According to interviewee 2, leaving out the institution's representatives who were perceived to represent only one side of the problem and

having only citizens invited to the meeting enabled more genuine and open discussion between the municipality and the people. Also, he appreciated that several people had a chance to tell their personal stories and add local knowledge to the discussion.

> *I2: "One local person who talked about the forest and how it was cut 30 years ago and there was also a resistance. But today everyone enjoys the forest. [...] One local person told about his roads which were destroyed by the forestry trucks and tractors."*

However, these stories were not responded since the aim of the meeting was to disprove the widespread misinformation and provide a preexisting solution.

Interviewee 3 was combining different approaches meaning that both the stakeholder representatives as well as the community council and guests as the regular citizens were attending.

> *I3: "In any case, the municipality needed input from the local community and used the participation structure it had developed for this purpose. [...] The meeting aimed to get the community's opinion on the local municipality's position."*

4.2. Interdependence

The second condition for collaborative rationality is interdependence. It means the understanding that the participants cannot meet their interests independently. Instead, they are interdependent with each other (Innes & Booher 2010).

Another participatory process quality, interdependence, was broadly understood as something related to the freedom to speak and opportunities to express opinions.

Interviewee 1 described how the interests of the participants were interdependent because they all saw the importance of finding compromising solutions to the issue. Thus, during the particular meeting, he, as the PPP, presented a "solution model" that connected two interdependent aspects (good living environment and well-paid jobs for locals). This model was created based on the previous stakeholder meeting and the local community survey. When the model was presented, all the actors with seemingly different interests were able to notice the importance of having other interests represented in the solution, which led to discovering reciprocity between the interests of various stakeholders. Nonetheless, not all participants saw the importance of covering different aspects, and this led to misunderstandings.

> *I1: "Some stakeholders say that we should not give so much time to environmental organisations. But it is not that like... they are*

also representing an important point of view, which needs to be presented."

However, interviewee 1 saw his role in balancing the interests. He also emphasised the role of the face to face meeting as a platform for forming new cooperation ideas or projects. These cooperations outside the platform were seen as essential in implementing the plans and solving the issue.

I1: "This platform has been set up for such cooperation so that such new initiatives would emerge and then things would actually get into action. This is the most important thing."

However, as a process designer, he did not use any supporting activities during the meeting to enhance the creation of that kind of cooperation and explore future interdependence. Moreover, he described how people preferred to sit close to similar stakeholders, and different sides on the issue had a conflicting nature from the very beginning of the process.

Interdependence in the context of participation was made sense as a dual process. On the one hand, the PPP-s saw the opportunity to share information, describe decisions, and make their processes more legitimate by involving other actors. On the other hand, they saw the role of participatory meetings in creating space for actors to provide input for the authorities. While doing it, the participants were encouraged to take positions seldom explained these positions and deliberate how they could meet each other.

The other processes were also interdependent, meaning that the participants depended on the local authority's decision to achieve their goals (according to interviewees - express their opinions). The local authorities, in turn, needed an opinion from the participants to implement and legitimize the decisions that were on the table. Moreover, in the case 2 and 3 the participants' interests were interdependent because the focus was on a problem of interest to all. It appears from the interviews that people become active if the issue is somehow more "close" to them or just more emotional. One of the interviewees said that he has noticed that being against something unifies people and activates them to be more interested in opportunities of participation. However, even if the participation is institutionalised and people have the chance to participate regularly if the issue is not too polarizing, people are not actively using these official opportunities. As seen in case 3, where the opportunity for "guests" to join was not that popular before the particular conflicting case.

I3: "Another question is how actively the local community actually uses this participatory platform. [...] Community council meetings have not been very crowded so far .. that, in

fact, as long as there is no subject that [...]in some ways seems dangerous or uncomfortable."

Also, case 2 reveals the issue of access to the participatory platform. Before the meeting, there were several other opportunities for people to express their opinion, including signing a petition. If more than 1000 people signed the petition, only about 20 people appeared at the meeting. Interviewee 2 saw the petition as not the most legitimate way to analyse people's attitude towards the question because he thought people were not informed enough to form a comprehensive opinion for the petition.

Although the stakeholders were interdependent in principle, the systematic articulation and discussion of conditions for collaborative rationality were not described. According to the process descriptions by the interviewees, the participants were encouraged to take positions seldom explained these positions and deliberate how these positions could meet each other. Much of the activities that were described as discussions were not meeting the qualities of descriptions of multiway dialogue, instead of organised as one by one round of speech. Thus, the disagreements remained largely not deliberated, and it was not easy to discover reciprocity or shared interests. Therefore, the interdependence between actors was understood mainly as a relationship between the authority and all the other actors, seldom as the interdependence between all the different actors, including the authority.

4.3. Authentic dialogue

Diversity and interdependence are both necessary pre-conditions to enable creating space for authentic dialogue. When people meet in a face to face setting, several aspects define the procedure's quality. I have divided Innes and Booher's (2010) and Innes's (2016) authentic dialogue criteria into two sub-categories that I focused on in my analysis: skilfully managed process and authenticity of dialogue. These processes were seen as one category by Innes and Booher (2010) and Innes (2016). However, for the analysis it was more convenient to separate the procedural aspects from the general nature of the process.

4.3.1. Skillfully managed process

According to the collaborative rationality principles, the process is skillfully managed if the focus, civility, mutual comprehension, and legitimacy are ensured (Innes 2016). For all three cases, the focus of the meeting was ensured with a concrete agenda setting and timekeeping. Setting the ground rules was emphasised

as an essential factor for a successful meeting, and it was seen as the role of the PPP to ensure compliance with the rules. Some of the mentioned rules were speaking one-by-one, speaking clearly, and talking about relevant things.

Legitimacy was often described together with the freedom to speak. On the one hand, it was seen as crucial to ensure that all participants can express their opinions and positions; on the other hand, it is important to ensure that what participants say is legitimate and truthful to prevent spreading misleading information. Some interviewees also noted that they could use their role as PPPs to interrupt people who speak and ask them to justify their opinions if they are doubtful about their legitimacy. This is also related to keeping civility in the meeting since having different ideas was seen as one of the causes of the conflict. Another cause is when people criticise each other's opinions and are going too personal with a critique. According to the interviewees, this is the moment when the PPP must use his power to interrupt. Ensuring civility was, on the one hand, the PPP's responsibility. It was important to ensure that people treat each other with civility and respect. On the other hand, two interviewees mentioned that the participants regulate some of the conflicting situations between themselves when some people call to order the others if they start talking about off-topic things or disturb other speakers when it is not their time to speak.

> *I3: "People accept such rules in a complete understanding way. Because they actually understand that some kind of order must prevail. Otherwise a meeting cannot be held. And they are interested in such an order to exist. And in fact, in such participatory meetings, people are angry with others who may not follow the rules. Who takes the floor voluntarily. They are not registered, out of order. Who tend to talk more...or who are too emotional or something. That, in this sense, the establishment of such rules is essential and accepted by the people."*

Also, two interviewees emphasised the importance of explicitly encouraging people who are shy or not capable of public speaking to express their opinion, even if they do not raise their hand or not express a willingness to speak. Interviewee 2, on the other hand, also mentioned that many people come to the meeting and they do not want to talk, they prefer listening, and it is important to take this into account.

Nevertheless, the rules should support PPPs' power to judge the legitimacy of what is said and enable some deviation from the rules if necessary. It was understood, that it is the power of the PPP to decide if the speaker is talking about "relevant things" or for how long she or he can speak. This is illustrated by interviewee 2 practice of interrupting speaker if the statement does not sound legitimate and asks for the proof. He also provided participants with a fact sheet

before the meeting to prepare them with some baseline facts and arguments to ensure focus and encourage them to keep legitimate arguments on the table.

> *I2:"A very important moment for those who organise these workshops is that I put them on paper very clearly and specifically ... one A4 story points, facts are enough. It should be as easy as possible for the average person to understand what we will do. [...] Yes, we put it on the website...[...] but also on Facebook .. it works best if you put a statement and then add behind, like, is it wrong or right. To tell people very clearly that ...to avoid a spread of misinformation about what is planned to do."*

Another interviewee, on the other hand, believes that the PPP should interrupt people only when they are directly insulting others. It was also found that the time for speaking depends on the content; if it is relevant, then the PPP can let some people speak longer than the initial time given for him. Following the rules and keeping order for speaking was seen as an important element to ensure that more than 1-2 most active people have time to speak.

Interviewees also mentioned that visual tools such as maps, schemes and presentations were used to keep the discussion focused and stuck to the facts.

4.3.2. Authenticity of dialogue

According to Innes and Booher (2010) and Innes (2016), a dialogue is authentic when all participants are equally empowered to speak and listened and enable participants to change their views, learn, and co-create new ideas and meanings. Dialogues with a deliberative nature suggest leaving position-taking until late in the process and enable participants to understand others' interests and consider new possibilities. Although according to the interviewees, the participants in all three cases were empowered to speak and be listened to, the nature of the discussions and other interactions within these processes did not seem to meet the ideas of collaborative rationality.

Providing the actors with equal opportunities to speak and ensuring that they are listened and not disturbed were understood as some of the core values of the process. A right to speak was described as one of the main conditions in the process design. According to the interviewees, they designed the meetings so that the meeting structure allowed people to speak one-by-one without disturbance and further discussion. It was a common design element for all three cases. Being listened throughout the process was ensured by using different rules that limited speaking to one by one and required listening to the others. Having rounds of speech and question-answer format was justified with the potential tensions between

contradicting opinions. However, it sounded that the rules and meeting order hindered the deliberation, so the participants did not have many opportunities to co-develop their ideas or better understand each other's positions. According to interviews, the meeting order did not encourage the participants to push taking the position towards the end of the events. Instead, it was described how the participants described their positions when it was their turn to speak.

Although the interviewees discussed the importance of discussion in their processes, the meanings behind the term "discussion" were mostly related to expressing opinions and making space for people to say what they think is true and not that much focused on the dialogue and collective meaning-making.

Moreover, giving the word to all participants was seen as a guarantee for the process to be smooth and legitimate when finding consensus. To avoid having unsatisfied participants in the later stage of the process, it was important to ensure that they can express their opinion early enough to decide and enable the process manager to move on.

> *I1: "That it is.. not only with participatory processes, but classic project management. There is a moment when some decisions and positions have to be put in place to move forward. Otherwise, the further process may not be as smooth and legitimate. Otherwise you have to go back to the beginning once and it is a huge waste of time."*

Interviewee 1 also emphasised that those with power should not have a privilege in the process that is well-aligned with scholars' suggestions about the means of equality in the dialogue.

> *I1:" The idea is that everyone has the right to express an opinion so that there is no such thing as someone's opinion being greater. In terms of the platform, the most important thing is that everyone's opinion is important. No one would have a say in category A [...] they need to feel that they are all equal. No matter what position you are in every day and how many people are behind him .. or money. It is not important."*

Based on the interviews and the meeting descriptions, it can be noted that the physical settings of the room were not arranged in a way that could support the deliberative processes. In case 1, participants were sitting together with similar stakeholders and also according to their language. Meeting 2 was held in the outdoor amphitheater-like concert venue where participants were seated higher, and the PPP and other municipality workers were down in the centre of the "stage". In the third case, the official members of the community council and the guests were

physically divided in different parts of the room. Neither of these settings supported people having an authentic dialogue.

5. Discussion

There is increasing demand for participatory processes in environmental governance on the local authority level in many countries. One can also find growing attempts to use the participatory approach for tackling environmental issues in Estonia. However, the way how these ideas are understood and practiced was not well studied before. Therefore, this thesis aimed to analyse Estonian local authorities' public participation professionals' understandings and practices of participatory process design in the context of Estonian environmental governance.

The study was driven by the puzzle that was built on my perceived dissonance between the ideas of participation that can be found in the communicative planning theory and the common practices of participation in Estonia, as I also described in the preface.

The results confirmed the doubts that were driving this study – nevertheless, the widely used language of participation in Estonia, the PPPs understand participatory ideas differently compared to universal ideas that can be found in communicative planning theories.

5.1. Understandings of participatory ideas

This study revealed a gap between the universal ideas of participation and the Estonian PPPs' understandings of participatory ideas. It means that the understandings of public participation professionals' understandings of participatory process design were generally not resonating with the theoretical ideas about conditions for collaborative rationality. This result relates to Laan et al.'s (2018) article, where the shortcomings of Estonian deliberation culture are acknowledged.

In my study, the interviewed public participation professionals considered it necessary to ensure openness to diversity and provide conditions for equal opportunities to participate. However, using the opportunities to participate was seen as the participants´ own responsibility, and only one interviewee considered achieving diversity as separate process quality. Consequently, it can be discussed that this kind of understandings might bring potential limitations as the processes can easily end up including only people who are more active and easily recruited

(Innes & Booher 2010). This is highly relevant in the Estonian context since the recent Estonian Human Development report has noted a lack of people's understanding about the potential benefits of public participation and a passive or even pessimistic attitude towards public participation (Vahtrus et al. 2019). Interviewees also believed that different actors tend to be more actively engaging when they are against something, they had noticed that this is more unifying and activates a larger group of people. It is crucial to see this trend when working with institutionalised participation practices and striving for diversity because not all the questions are conflicting. Thus, it needs further discussion on motivating diverse actors to participate in the participation practices when the question is not contradictory.

Furthermore, the analysis revealed that the PPP's justifications about including or excluding several actors are very different from the theoretical understanding of diversity as a condition that is necessary for ensuring that the process is collaboratively rational. It can be discussed how to create a legitimate process with sufficient diversity of actors to discuss topics such as forestry, land use, or green energy infrastructure that have high interest on different levels (local, regional, national). The conscious decision about leaving out some of the troubling actors, as was seen in one of the cases, is criticised by Innes (2016) who suggests that it might cause long-term problems with the legitimacy of the overall process since allowing public officials to choose who can participate can harm the purpose of the meeting.

The study also found that the PPP's understand participatory processes often as an opportunity for the participants to express their opinions, articulate standpoints, and what they believe is true. This disaccords with the ideas of collaborative rationality that value processes that create conditions for learning and making sense together, changing and negotiating the meanings and understandings (Innes & Booher 2010; Innes 2016). This finding of my study is supported by Laan et al. (2018), who also argue that on the example of the processes of accession negotiations in the Estonian local authorities, they discovered that generally there is a lack of ability to listen to other partners with different views and, in essence, to debate disagreements to find consensus (i.e. find common ground). Instead, they have concluded that it is more common that the opinions could be right or wrong, which hinders finding common ground. Innes and Booher (2010) articulate that the participant must recognize the interdependence between each other. Without diversity and interdependence, the opportunity for participants to reach authentic dialogue will not occur.

These findings of the institutionalised practices in Estonian local authorities could be explained by the critical studies about the bureaucracy of the systems. Even though the importance and need for public participation and stakeholder interactions are often highlighted in policy documents and laws, in practice, some authors have noticed that "national and European policymaking are often rather

bureaucratic (Kaiser and Schot 2014 see Geels et al 2019), relying on in-house expertise and inputs from large companies. Policymakers may want to interact with stakeholders, but not give up too much control, which can lead to passive interaction processes (focused on informing or consulting) rather than active ones (based on advising and co-deciding)" (Geels et al. 2019). The study revealed that the public participation practitioners' do not enable people with contradicting ideas to discuss their different points of view and collaboratively explore the new meanings. Innes and Booher (2010) also discuss that unwillingness to give up too much control might be one reason why those who conduct participatory processes might hinder the deliberative processes. Another reason could be that authentic dialogue is too unpredictable, and it requires a skillful practitioner who can both be flexible and adaptive, focused and agreement-oriented.

The previously discussed gap between the universal ideas of participation and the local authorities' PPPs' understandings of the participatory process design is also supported by the official participation guidelines for the civil servants and NGOs, shared by the Estonian Ministry of the Interior. In this guideline, the primary goals of the participatory practices are described mainly by gathering input, ideas, or feedback. These are all described as clearly measurable goals for participation. However, it is acknowledged that there may also be more difficult-to-measure, but no less important goals, such as strengthening cooperation, increasing active citizenship, mutual learning, etc. It is said that these other goals are usually achievable over time, and their actual achievement is more difficult to assess. However, these indirect goals are also worth acknowledging (Hinsberg & Kübar 2009).

5.2. Further development of competencies

Those who conduct participatory processes play a crucial role in ensuring the conditions for collaboratively rational processes and therefore contribute to more open and inclusive environmental governance.

Even though the language of participation is widely used in Estonia, the PPPs´ overall understanding of participatory ideas is simply different from the universal ideas about collaborative rationality. Based on these findings, I argue that the universal participatory ideas are contextualized and changed when they are practiced in different contexts. Therefore, drawing on this thesis, I suggest that these ideas should be adjusted to the Estonian context.

This study also reveals that the interviewed Estonian PPPs, whose professional trajectories have led them to become experts in organising public participation in addition to their other roles in local authorities, do not understand conducting participatory processes as an activity that needs a professional facilitator to be involved. Instead, conducting the participatory processes is seen as one practice

within the pallet of practices that a local authority or people working at local authorities should be capable of implementing. The primary qualities of those who conduct the participatory processes were not seen related to process design. Rather the expertise in the field or the process leaders' trustworthiness in the eyes of participants were valued. These understandings differ from Innes (2016), who suggests involving a neutral facilitator to enhance the collaborative process's qualities. She suggests that facilitation should be seen as a specialised profession since the planners are too involved in tasks related to the issue and therefore not seen as neutral. Innes (2016) also highlights that if the process is planned to be collaboratively rational, the planners should hold back on offering their solutions until the process is complete. This idea also contradicts the results of this study since two interviewees held a power position (in addition to PPP's role) related to the issue (e.g. decision-maker in the municipality), so they couldn't be considered neutral actors. Two interviewees also expressed quite strong personal opinions about the focus issues without an explicit interview question about their positions within the issue. Both interviewees also expressed scepticism towards environmental organisations. Nevertheless, I argue that PPPs and institutionalised practices have great potential to develop Estonian participatory environmental governance on the local authority level if the conditions of collaborative rationality would be more extensively pursued.

Currently the practitioners in Estonia do not make sense of the participation in the way that resonates much with the conditions of collaborative rationality. On the same time, it is also important to note that the interviewed PPPs themselves evaluated their performance relatively high as practitioners who conduct a participatory process. Building on these contrasting understandings I suggest developing in-service trainings for the public participation professionals in institutionalised practices.

This is supported by Innes and Booher (2010) who argue that the complex requirements, training, and experience could improve skills that help to ensure that the participatory process design will be understood in the way that brings the process closer to the ideal type of collaborative rationality. Also, Laan et al. (2018) propose that the development of a culture where listening and consensus-seeking are enabled could be an essential new direction in the training of local government leaders.

Therefore, drawing on this thesis I say that to contextualise participation better in Estonian environmental governance, developing in-service trainings for the public participation professionals in institutionalised participation practices could be used to broaden the local practitioners' understanding and meaning-making about participatory process design. Moreover, in the education it would be crucial to not only teach the methods for participatory process design but also expand

public participation professionals' competences via developing further their understandings about universal participatory ideas.

These developments could increase the potential to strengthen democracy and participatory design processes that offer more likely the benefits of participatory processes when tackling environmental issues.

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