To talk or to communicate?

A study on the prerequisites for communication in public consultation meetings

Tove Sandström

2009-05-21

Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences

Sveriges Lantbruksuniversitet (SLU)

Faculty of Natural Resources and Agricultural Sciences

Fakulteten för naturresurser och lantbruksvetenskap

Department of Urban and Rural Development

Institutionen för stad och land

Unit for Environmental Communication

Avdelningen för miljökommunikation

Author: Tove Sandström

Title: To talk or to communicate?

    -A study on the prerequisites for communication in public consultation meetings

Abstract

The aim with this study was to investigate the communication that takes place in public consultation meetings. My intention was to study and analyze both attitudes about the communication, as well as the factual behavior at the meetings, in order to found possible potential for improvement.

In order to fulfill my aim I interviewed six people that were working with public consultation meetings in one way or another. I also observed three public consultation meetings. The information provided to me by the interviewees corresponded quite well with my own observations. The overall conclusion I have reached is that there are many potential changes from which the communication in public consultation meetings would gain.

In many aspects the meetings I observed were not conducted in a democratic way and the meetings had more in common with meetings of information rather than meetings of dialogue. However both participants and process leaders would like to see more influence given to the participants and in this study I suggest that by doing so, several communication problems could be avoided at the same time as it would deepen democracy and give greater legitimacy to decisions that is being taken in relation to the meetings. Suggestively, this increased influence could be gained by letting the participants take part in deciding about the agenda for the meetings. The them-and-us feeling, which according to my findings also leads to communicational difficulties, could also be reduced with the participants' greater influence.

The meetings I observed and the interviews I conducted were all related to very different consultation situation. The study and its conclusion therefore become quite general. The need for some kind of change in all of the meetings however indicates that it would be interesting to look even further into each case and I believe that the meetings would gain from compiling my specific findings with the process leaders understanding of the meetings. I suggest that all people in the position of leading public consultation meetings should think and reflect upon the democratic aspects as well as the purpose of such meetings in order to improve their execution.

Think like a wise man but communicate in the language of the people

William Butler Yeats (1865 - 1939)

Table of content

1. Introduction

Public participation has become a central consideration of policy discourses during the last decades. Discussions, planning and decision-making concerning aspects of development and community planning have come to include the public to a greater extent than ever before. The method is today not only used in local policy-making but has entered national and international documents. In the European context the legal requirements for participation can be found in several words of acts, for example the Aarhus Convention (UN, 1998) and the Water Framework Convention (EU, 2000). On an international level, Agenda 21, which was elaborated on the UN conference on Environment and Sustainable Development in 1992, stresses the importance of local engagement in development issues. Public participation is presented in several of the Swedish acts of law, and in many other countries of the developed world, similar national requirements can be found. (Participatory Learning and Action n.d.) However, public participation is today not solely used as a result of law requirements but authorities and companies have discovered the advantages with public participation. The legally bound and the voluntary use of the method are spreading.

2.1. The Swedish model

> *"Local participation is foremost a matter of democracy, - all affected citizen should have the opportunity to take part in a process which results will affect them"* (En Samlad Naturvårdspolitik 2001/2002:173, pp. 31-35) *(Writers translate.)*

The increased demand and interest for public participation in community planning have found its way into the Swedish acts of law and is today presented in the Law of Construction and the Environmental Code. One of the reasons for its advancement in Swedish policy-making was according to the National Board on Housing, Building and Planning, the belief that community planning became too sectionized, at the same time as the public interest to participate in projects concerning their local environment, increased.

Public participation is considered, as stated above, foremost a question of democracy. However, adding legitimacy to decisions and the notion that participation creates knowledge and understanding which result in greater sense of responsibility, is also important parts of public participation. The government also state that the public's awareness and participation add to the knowledgebase from which decisions are taken, and therefore results in a higher quality on the final product. (Regeringsskrivelse 2001/2002:173)

Public participation is an obligatory part of building processes that are considered to be of public interest and in activities that could involve considerable environmental effects (Environmental Code Chapter 5 § 4). The public consultation can be described as a time period during which concerned parts (in this case the public) can give in their opinion on a

given project. During this time meetings are held and the number of meetings is dependent on the project in hand. Both the Environmental Code and the Law on Construction give explicit directions about when, and with whom, public consultation must be conducted. However how to conduct the meetings is up to the applicant for the activity.

An Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) must always be conducted before an environmentally hazardous activity may be allowed. The EIA should identify, assess and describe the planned activity´s impact on human, animals, land, landscape, water and the cultural environment. The Environmental Code states that consultation should be held with authorities, municipalities, organizations and with the public. The applicant is responsible for exercising the consultation which should include issues such as location, extension, design and environmental impacts as well as the content and format of the EIA. (Sammanfattning av regeringens proposition 1997/98:45)

According to the Law on Construction, public interests should be considered in the design and the location of certain buildings. If consultation is "obviously uncalled for" consultation don't have to be conducted. The Town Building Board decides when consultation should be held and who should be invited. The municipalities are responsible for conducting the consultations according to the Law on Construction. (Boverket)

The forms for public consultation and communication differs between the two laws but they have in common that the formal regulation don't guarantee the citizen to get, or experience, any actual influence. Adding to the legal regulations, the people or organizations responsible for conducting the public consultation have to put additional effort into the process in order to reach the goals of participation.(Boverket) Criteria for what can be considered good quality of consultation can however be deduced from experience and research. Such criteria, but also guidelines on how to reach that quality, can be found at the Environmental Protection Agency or the National Board on Housing, Building and Planning. It can be summed up in a few groups of concern:

- *Time aspects*
  All concerned should be engaged and informed early in the project. The processers should not define the interested parties, but as many as possible should have access to the information in order to define themselves interested parties or not. The process should not be rushed.

- *Flexibility*
  The consultation should not be a couple in beforehand decided activities and opinions collected during the consultation should be allowed to affect the form of the consultation.

- *Equality*
  The process holder should strive to level out power relations. The process leader has a dominating position which should be considered and balanced. One way is to use

external moderators or secretaries. To be aware of, to listen to, and to help the weaker voices to be heard during consultations is important.

- *A foreseeable process*
  The process leader must be clear about what the consultation entails, how it is planned to be conducted and for how long it will go on.

- *Accessibility*
  The process plan should be delivered in a language the uninitiated understand.

2.2.   Aim and research questions

The aim with this study is to investigate the communication that take place in public consultation meetings. My intention is to study and analyze both attitudes about the communication, as well as the factual behavior at the meetings, in order to found possible potential for improvement.

To find the answers to my aim, I am guided by the research questions as follow:

- *How do construction companies, EIA consultants and civil servants at the municipalities describe the used strategies for public participation and involvement?*
- *How is communication and participation carried out in public meetings?*

In order to fulfill my aim I have interviewed six people that are working with public consultation meetings in one way or another, and I have also observed three public consultation meetings.

2.3.   Methodology

When working with observations and interpretations of observation the epistemological view from which the observation is carried out becomes important. This study has evolved from a hermeneutic view on reality which states that the reality is just what we experience, and in contrast to a positivistic view, there is no fixed reality out there for us to find or understand. Due to the fact that personal attitudes, believes, culture and values shape our understanding of reality, each person's understanding of the surrounding environment is different from everyone else's.

The sociological theory *Social Interactionism* describes meaning and knowledge as something being created only through interaction between people, highly dependent on the interactions contextual aspects. To interpret and understand the social event where knowledge is created it becomes important to carry out studies within the society, but it also becomes important to be aware of how your own view on reality affects your interpretations.

The method of observation in that sense becomes abductive. While observing, we use theories to interpret the situation but we add our own perspective to that interpretation. In this study, as

9

I gather qualitative data through observations and interviews, I will always be a part of what I am investigating. To question my own affect on the social situation I am in therefore becomes important.

However, the analysis based on the interviews is not theory-based in the conventional way, but is based on experience rather than theory, and the method can therefore be argued to be inductive. Conclusions drawn from experiences instead of theories are described in the research methodology Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The model describes a research that is not based on theories but simply starts off in the collection of data. From the data collected key subjects are extracted and grouped into concepts and categories and these categories becomes the base for the creation of a theory. As mentioned earlier the "no theory"-based analysis does not exist according to the hermeneutic viewpoint, and that view is coherent with the view on reality I as the writer hold. I believe that all conclusions are dependent on the decision takers' pre-knowledge and perspective and that a "no theory-based" analysis cannot be conducted. The analysis of the interviews made, therefore become abductive even though they are not based on a few conventional theories, but on my personal presumptions and pre-knowledge on the subject.

2.4. Structure

I have chosen to present results from both interviews and observations in the chapter Result and Analysis even though different theoretical frameworks are used in the two sections. The results from the interviews are also used in the analysis of the observations.

2.5. Definitions

I have chosen to refer to the person responsible for the meeting as the *process leader*. Dependant on under which act of law the meeting is conducted (as well as on other contextual factors) the profession of the process leader differs between meetings. The numbers of process leaders may also differ. The profession of the process leader is however not important for this study which is why I have chosen to simply use process leader/process leaders when referring to the person/persons in charge of the meetings.

Since I have chosen to limit my study to the public consultation meetings I will from here on refer to the actual meetings, not the whole public consultation process, when I use the phrase *public consultation*.

2. Method

The empirical information for this study was collected during Mars and April 2009. Five interviews were conducted in Stockholm and Härnösand with people working with public consultation meetings, and tree public consultation meetings were observed in Stockholm. The interviews and the observations were conducted parallel.

2.1. Interviews

The informants for the interviews were chosen based on experience with conducting consultation meetings. I contacted approximately 15 municipalities, country administration boards, construction companies and environmental impact assessments consultants, in order to get six interviews. One interview was conducted in pair and four was conducted individually.

The method of *semi-structured interviewing* was used throughout all interviews. The method is a commonly used method when conducting sociological studies and can be described as an informal conversation where I, the interviewer, only have a few key questions predetermined. These questions represent the overall direction of the interview but also give room for the interviewee to influence its content. (McCracken, Jules, & Conway, 1988) By keeping the interviews informal and non-directive the interviewee tend to feel more confident and talk more openly. (Kullberg, Birgitta, 2004) I choose to record all the interviews. I believe that not having to take notes during the interview made me more focused and resulted in a smother dialogue.

2.2. Observations

The main part of the empirical information for this study was gathered through the observation of tree public consultation meetings. In my search for meetings to observe, I used the same channels as when looking for persons to interview. However responses were few. I ended up observing three meetings in Stockholm, all of which were announced on Stockholm municipality´s homepage.

Two of the meetings were formal public consultation meeting conducted in accordance to the Law on Construction. The municipal district of Södermalm was the initiative taker for the third meeting. This third meeting was announced on the municipality's webpage, just like the other meetings, and the jurisdictional differences between the meetings needed further looking into in order to be discovered. To my understanding the participants could not have been guided by the legal meaning of the public consultation meetings, and therefore I chose not to be so myself. I reasoned that a ''good'' communication with the public is important regardless if the law demand for the meeting to be hold or not.

The method of *participatory observation* was used throughout the observations. The method is commonly used in sociological studies and means that the interviewer is present, and

participates in, the social situation she observes. The participatory observations allow the observer to study people in their natural environment as well as study what happens in situations of social interactions. The observation is made from an "insiders"-perspective. The observer uses herself as the instrument for the study and tries to look at the observation from the perspective of the objects of study. (Kaijser and Öhlander, 73-85)

With help from theories on what constitute a democratic situation (see *Theory*), I made a guide on what to observe during the meetings (see *Appendix 1*). I took notes by hand I intentionally chose not to have any pre-knowledge about the projects the meetings concerned. I believe that my ignorance would make it easier to discover communication barriers in the room, such as using highly technical expressions for example. I also believe that it helped me to stay focused on observing the communication and not to get too caught up in the content of the meeting.

With the aim to be able to describe, with the participants own words, how the participants looked upon their own participation, I formulated a questionnaire for the participants to fill in after the meetings finished. After the first meeting I discovered mistakes with the phrasing in a few of the questions in the questionnaire, which gave big room for own interpretations as a reader. I also discovered that it was difficult to get all participants to fill in the questionnaire. The collected data therefore came to feel a bit too thin for further analyses and I took the decision to exclude the questionnaire from my final report.

2.3. Presumptions

Due to the fact that all data collected for this study are results of my interpretations of people and situations, being aware of, and report on, my own presumptions and expectations becomes important. Being aware of, and reflect over, my own presumptions have made it easier for me to look at situations and take in information more objectively as well as looking at things from other perspectives than my own.

Entering the interview situation I presumed that I would be presented to written strategies for public participation. I was wrong. I believed the public sector to have more written down strategies than the public sector. I was wrong. I also believed that the interviewees would give me the impression that public consultation meetings were a necessary evil rather than an asset to the project or good for democracy. Some of the interviews proved that wrong.

I expected the meetings to foremost supply the participants with information on the projects they concerned. I expected little opportunities for public influence on decisions. I also expected to find problems with the terminology used during the meetings. I assumed that I would notice obvious differences in language use between the laymen and the experts, which would lead to irritation and misunderstandings. I thought I would observe little differences in communication between the meetings. As you are about to read; some of these presumptions were proved wrong and some were perfectly fulfilled.

2.4. Handling of empirical material

After each interview I listened to the recordings and made notes divided into the questions asked. The interviews were then compiled based on the topics the informants found the most engaging as well as on the answers I found the most interesting. The interview guide (see *Appendix 1*) was only used as support during the interviews, so that interesting topics wouldn't be missed out.

The results from the interviews were then used as a supplement when analyzing the outcome of the observations. The topics for the final analysis (see *4.2.Public Consultation Meetings*) were chosen based on both the chosen theoretical framework and the results from the interviews.
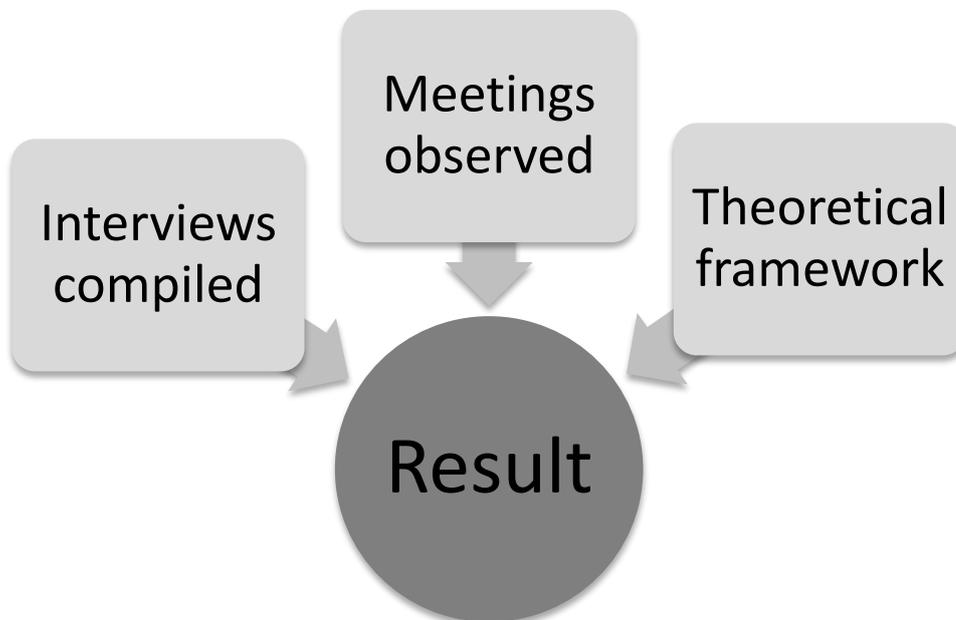
Meetings observed

Interviews compiled

Theoretical framework

Result

Figure 1 Components used for reaching the result

3. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework in which this study has been carried out includes thoughts and theories on democratic processes, communication and learning. The communicative theory, which is based on social psychology, sociology and physiology, is helpful for understanding the communicative situation in which the public consultation meeting takes place. The theories on learning makes it possible to analyze the outcome of the communication as well as it gives us a framework in which the whole meaning with participation can be discussed. To investigate the different strategies for participation that I have been presented to during interviews and observation, it becomes interesting to take a short look into predominant communication strategies and how they relate to the public participation aspect. But I will start by present some theory on the phenomenon participation and what it is claimed to be good for.

3.1. Participation and democracy

As a central part of the umbrella concept of sustainable development lays the idea of participatory democracy. The theory emphases the importance of letting the individuals that the decisions concern, have the opportunity to take part in the decision making process. (Connely & Smith, 2003, p. 5) It advocates the principle of subsidiarity which implicates that decisions are to be taken at lowest appropriate level possible. (Connely & Smith, 2003, p. 276) The positive effects resulting from such politics can be divided into two areas of results; one related to effectiveness and one related to democracy. (Loftsson, Ekström, & Norling, 2004, p. 6)

Local knowledge about our surroundings is assumed to be better used in a decentralized democracy, and this is argued to result in more correct decisions being taken. Implementation processes are also to become more effective. (De-Shalit, 2004, p. 138) Decisions taken in a centrally controlled decision process are accused of being to general in its outlay; local differences are seldom taken into account and decisions end up not fitting any place at all. (Loftsson, Ekström, & Norling, 2004) The democratical aspect is represented by the publics´s greater influence on decisions that shape the community they live in.

Both the democracy and effectiveness aspect of public participation can however be questioned. Even if the principle of subsidiarity is fulfilled it is doubtful that all individuals are really taking part in the decision making which inevitable challenges the democracy thesis. (De-Shalit, 156) Nor is participatory democracy a guarantee for better result according to its critics. In a local setting long term goals may be put aside in favor of short term goals. It can also be argued that it is difficult to keep a holistic approach to national regulations and that there might not be enough knowledge in the group of participants to take a well informed decision. Regulations concerning the environment for example, usually entail long term goals and the complicity of environmental risks can be difficult for a layman to understand and to put in a holistic perspective.

Sherry A. Arnstein connects the aspect of participation with the possibility to exercise power, which he describes in his "Ladder of Citizen Participation" (1996). The ladder describes eight different levels of public participation, starting at "Manipulation", describing the lowest level of participation, and finishing at "Citizen Control", describing the highest. According to the theory, where the ultimate goal for participation is "Citizen Control", participation is an important democratic aspect which can only be fulfilled through the increased power of the citizen. The conceptualizing of participation as a term for power can however be questioned.

Does the individual actually define his or her role in a decision making situation in relation to level of power, or can we find other valuable aspects with participation that don't include power? And are there other limitations to a theory that put citizen control as the ultimate goal of participation?

Participation without power could in theory enable power holders to claim that all parties have been considered in a decision making process even though only some of the parties actually benefitted from the result. From such a perspective omitting the aspect of power from participation could be seen as a threat to democracy. And in accordance, authorities and companies are often accused of primary trying to force through projects which has already been decided upon, when involving the public to participate.

In the compiled studies on strengths and weaknesses of participatory processes, published by The International Institute for Environment and Development, examples on participatory processes that lead to suppression or domestication is presented (Wakeford and Singh 2008). The research article describes how "citizen participation" actually could act disempowering for those with the least power. The already marginalized people can become more marginalized by the actual way that the participatory processes have been organized (Wakeford and Singh, 2). Wakeford and Singh argues that despite the popularity of the phenomenon "citizen participation" among the policy elite, the studies show that it has had little impact on the mainstream political decision-making. Lacking such impact the participation could be considered as merely a frontage behind which the democratic and empowering means with participation decays.

Going back to the limitations of the theory on participation as power, Collins and Ison (2006) accuse the theory of being hierarchic and to simplistic in its form. They argue that the real world is too complex, and the forms of citizen participation are too many for them to be divided into Arnstein´s ladder of eight. They also bring up the fact that all people might not want to be part of the decision-making process even if they are welcome to do so.

3.2. The public consultation meeting as a social act

The public consultation meeting is a social act which requires social interaction. By interacting with others we process, learn and develop as well as we lay the foundation to further social interaction and acts. An important part of the social interaction involves `taking the role of the other´ according to Charon (2007). With the ambition to understand the other part we unconsciously take the other parts perspective, which subsequently gives us new knowledge of our surroundings. By taking the part of the other we can also understand how

we ourselves are perceived by others and it makes it possible for us to shape our identity through negotiate different perspectives with our self. The social act is to respond to, be aware of and interpret another human being or object. Approaching "social" from such a perspective Charon indicates that when taking the conscious decision not to be social, you are social. Even the unconscious social act is a response of social norms and only someone unaware of social norms, for example a small child, can be totally unsocial. (Charon, 139-156)

Linell´s concept of intersubjectivity (Linell 1998) leads the discussion into the preconditions for the social act in which the actors' intention is to understand each other. Intersubjectivity is described as the common ground of perspectives, knowledge, assumptions and norms that we silently agree upon in order to be able to actually have a dialogue and eventually understand each other. According to the theory everything cannot be explained, but in order to have progress in the dialogue some information need to be taken for granted. The intersubjectivities are found in every social interaction and are preconditions for social interaction. Intersubjectives is however dependant on the personal perspective, and can therefore also lead to misunderstandings and be an obstacle for communication in the social situation.

3.3. Communication and learning

Communication can be described as a two ways exchange of information between parties who aim to understand each other's messages. With such a definition communication is not something that one person can do with someone else, but something in need of mutual engagement from all included actors to happen. The communicative act therefore includes both aspects as having the ability to talk and to make yourself understood <u>and</u> having the ability to listen and to understand. (Hallgren Lars, 48)

But how do we recognize communication?

A hands-on theory on how communication can be recognized is presented in Linells´ theory on minimal communicational interaction (Linell 1998) .The theory describes three steps which need to be fulfilled for an exchange of information is to be considered communication. When one actor understand the meaning of another actor's statement, and respond to that statement, the two first steps are fulfilled. As a third step the first actor must understand the second actor's response to the first actor's statement. When the first actor put the information in relation to her prior knowledge, new knowledge have been established between the two actors and the theory on minimal communication is fulfilled. (Linell 1998, 38-39)

The communication act should be studied as an act which not only carries messages between parties, but as an act adding to the shaping and developing of the understanding of the message (Cox 2006, 12). From such a perspective the communication itself creates meaning upon which we relate to our surroundings. The communication itself, not the exchange of knowledge between the communicators, is the breeding ground for new knowledge. Supporting theories can be found among the complex web on theories on learning.

Due to the fact that learning doesn't necessary result in a visible action in the moment of learning, but perhaps results in a different behavior in the person's future, learning is difficult

to explore. It´s complexity has given rise to several theories. Most theories that are of relevance today include dimensions of cognition, emotion and society. However the interplay and relevance of the tree dimensions differs between theories (Blackmore 2007:10).

When looking at the public consultation meeting in relation to learning, theories that focus on the society dimension becomes interesting. Social learning focuses on the learning that occurs through some kind of collective action with others. The learning is not tied to the educational situation, or to the individual learning, but to the interaction between people. There are however branches within the theory. According to Wagner's *group influenced learning* the learning process is dependent on the social setting in which the learning is supposed to occur. The cognitive ability is not defined from the beginning and your cognitive ability and your ability o learn will change dependant on the situation (Blackmore 2007:10).

3.4. Models of communication

In environmental studies Daniels and Walker (Cox 2006) describes a collaborative approach connected to learning. The collaborative approach is described as a two-ways interactive decision-making process where public participation takes on a new form. Five conditions need to be fulfilled for the collaboration to work as set out. Firstly, all relevant stakeholders need to be present at the table of negotiation. Secondly, all participants must have the focus of trying to reach solutions and focus on issues not people. Thirdly all participators must have the opportunity to participate and be heard in the discussion and fourthly decisions should be reached by consensus. Lastly, the relevant agencies should be guided by the recommendations of the collaborations.

The collaborative approach touches upon several of the aspects brought up as goals with public participation presented by Swedish authorities but the condition demanding consensus in decision-making situations is not represented. The communication strategy is however relevant since it advocated a dialogue between all parties in the communicative situation. Opposite to the collaborative approach lies the *classical model of communication* which describes a linear communication from the sender of the message to the receiver. In this model communication is viewed upon as a message that the sender needs to get across to the receiver in order to get a predetermined effect. Participation is not a part of this model. *The relevance model of communication,* on the other hand understands the targets groups' perspective to be of great value. This model argues that the in order to understand and use the information that is being communicated the receiver must understand it from her own perspective. The relevance model looks upon communication as an exchange between sender and receiver where the senders must listen to, and adjust the information to the receivers' point of view and situation. (Cox 2006)

Remembering the aims with consulting the public in society developing issues, where dialogue is described as more important than the delivery of information, it becomes important to look at aspects that separate the informative meeting from the dialogue meeting. As Lars Palm mentions on his book *Kommunikationsplanering* (2006)*;* if the purpose of the meeting is to get participants to actively engage in the subject at hand, the informational

meeting can do more harm than good. The differences between the informative meetings and the dialogue meeting are described in the table below.

	Informative meeting	Dialogue meeting
Goal	Transferring knowledge	Engagement, activity, attitude change
Content	Solutions	New ideas, problem that need to be solved, opportunities that can be developed
The hero	The facilitator	The participant
The audience	Passive	Active
Contribution from the audience	Not popular, risk of running over the time	Encouraged
Duration	The communication process is over at the end of the meeting	"aftercare" is important
Preparation	"come as you are"	The right approach towards the meeting as well as coming prepared, is a prerequisite

Table 1: Differences between informational meeting and dialogue meetings (Palm 2006, 139)

3.5. Democratic conversations and meetings

The goal with a democratic conversation can be described as the development of more knowledge about each other's perspectives and to understand each other (Hallgren Lars, 64). The democratic conversations do not indicate that all people involved agree with each other but set the rules for how the communication should look in order to be democratic. According to Hallgren the conditions for the democratic meetings can be divided into *form* and *content*; the form including time, place, respect and intelligibility, and the content; relevance, legitimacy, progress and credibility. All parties should be able to affect both form and content e.g. how to talk and what to talk about.

Together the involved should be able to bring up and talk about what issues can be considered relevant to discuss for the problem in hand without dismissing, look pass or speak ironically about other participant's ideas. People often understand different issues to be relevant which is why it is important to metacommunicate about content as well as form of the conversation. To actively listen, ask questions and to confirm what other people say becomes important. The goal is to understand and respect each other's points of views.

The language used should be understood by all involved but also different ways of taking in information should be respected. Different people create meaning and learn in different ways and therefore it is important to together come to conclusions on how the meeting or conversation should progress. To give time for reflection, where people can rethink and reinterpret their experiences and thought is important. The participants should also have the opportunity to affect the time and place for the conversation.

To be interested in the views of the other actors in the social situation is a precondition for communication. To believe that all people have capacity to contribute with knowledge is a precondition for democratic meetings.

The Academy for Democracy describes what distinguishes a democratic process in their document "ABC of Democracy" (www.demokratiakademin.se). The demands on a democratic process are coherent with Hallgren´s theories on the democratic meeting and are described in the table below.

Enlightened understanding
Everyone has an equal and adequate opportunity to discover what is in his or hers interest - both at a group level and on a private level.

Effective participation
Everyone has an equal opportunity to make their voice heard and to raise issues on the agenda

Participation

One citizen, one vote
Participants have an equal influence over decisions

Comprehension

The Agenda

Decisions

Control over the agenda
The participants have the opportunity to determine what the agenda should include

Citizenship for all
All participants are considered. No one can be excluded.
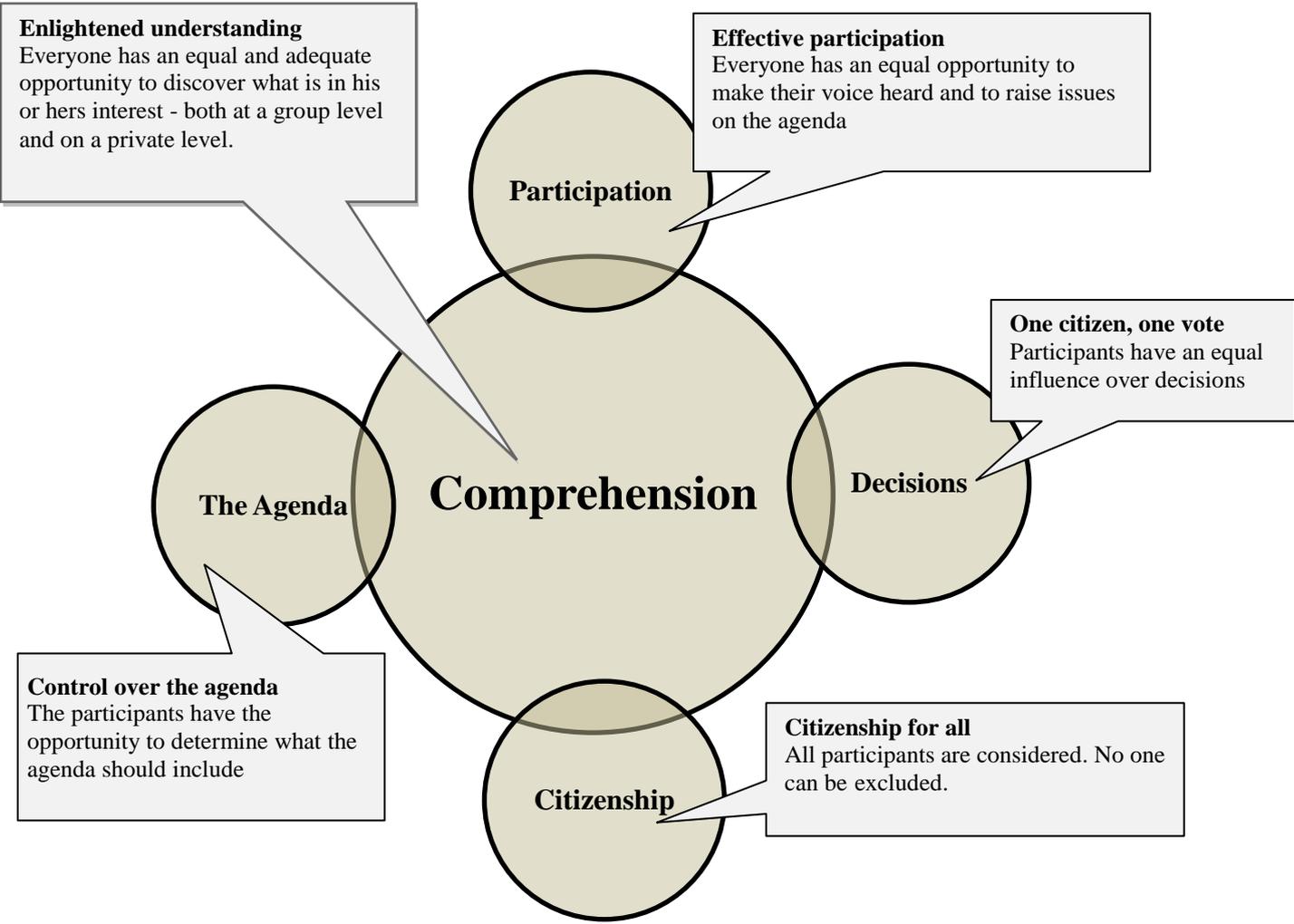
Citizenship

Figure 2 ABC of Democracy Source: www.demokratiakademin.se

4. Result and analysis

In this chapter I will present the result from both interviews and observations. I will start by presenting the analysis of the interviews and then continue on to the observations of the meetings.

4.1. The interviews

In this section I will describe the compiled result of the six interviews I conducted. It is important to keep in mind that the informants refer to quite different types of projects when talking about their strategies and that these contextual differences may color their descriptions. It is also good to keep in mind that the questions asked gave room for both professional and personal opinions and that these are presented in the same text.

4.1.1. Presenting the interviewees

Sofie Tunbrant and Lars Birgersson works at the department for Environmental Impact Assessments at the Swedish Nuclear Waste Management Company, SKB. Public consultation meetings have been held since 2002 at the two sights SKB has found the most suitable for a final depository of nuclear waste. Sofie and Lars do not run the public consultation meeting themselves but attend, observe and take notes.

Maria Röske, is project manager at the wind power company WPD Scandinavia AB. Projecting, financing and running wind power projects since 1996, WPD have had lots of experience with public consultation meetings.

Emelie Eriksson, works as an architect at the Town Building Office in Stockholm. In accordance with the Law on Construction, conducting public consultation meetings is part as her work with Detailed Development Planes and Structure Planes.

Åke Westberg, works at the wind power company Statkraft SCA Vind AB. The company is projecting for a wind power park holding 450 turbines in the north of Sweden. There have been several public consultation meetings on the project so far.

Agneta Höglund-Sjölander, works at the Department for Development at Härnösand Municipality. The Municipality is working with their second Structure Plan for the district, in which consultation meetings with the public have been held. The meetings held so far have not been formal meetings, but conducted as a voluntary initiative from the municipality.

4.1.2. Strategies for participation

Contrary to what I believed I was not presented to any written documents on how public consultation meetings were to be conducted from any of the informants. However, during many of the interviews, worked-in structures for how meetings were conducted became evident. In addition to the formal guidelines resulting from the legal requirements for public participation meetings many of the interviewees had quite a similar approach to how, when, and in what form participation were to take place during the meetings. The majority of the

interviews described a scenario where the public participation was concentrated at the end of consulting meetings. The meetings start off with a presentation of the project in hand, an update on how far the project has come, and then ends with the audience's questions and opinions. The second part of the meeting, where there is room for questions, is described as an important part of the consultation meeting by all of the informants. However, personal experience or experiences within the organizations seem to have influenced and changed strategies for public consultation meetings over time? To my understanding a learning by-doing approach have shaped the different organizations strategies on participation. Sofie and Lars describe how the out lay of the meetings have changed during the years. At the beginning SKB´s presentation took up such a big part of the meetings there was little time for handling all the questions. Today they hold two separate meetings; one for presentation only and one for the audience´s questions.

The similarities in outlay of meetings that was mentioned above is however not valid for Härnösand municipality strategy for public participation in the process of producing a structure plan for the district. At the very beginning of this process, without drawing as much a line on a map as suggestion, public consultations meetings were held. The participants on these meetings were divided into pair of five or six and were given blank maps of the district to draw on. According to Agneta many positive things followed that way of working. Welcoming all opinions and not having to think within the usual frames, she believed were the reasons for the positive atmosphere they experienced during the meetings.

4.1.3. Misgivings about the meetings

Many of the interviewees describe a misgiving about running into retrogressive people with only negative opinions on the project in process. Strategies for dealing with such situations mainly consisted of counting on that these people are likely to show up to the meetings, and to try to steer back the discussion to the issue in question. I interpret this apprehension to be connected to a certain degree of discomfort in discussing issues that the process leaders are not in charge over. Getting stuck in vicious circles of negative remarks that lacks constructive solutions was described as a situation they all wanted to avoid. The constructive conversation is described as a sharing of opinion which brings the discussion forward. Problematic situations are brought up by many of the informants and I will get back to those a bit further on in this section. What I find interesting about the experienced apprehension about facing "problematic" people is that few of the respondents spoke of any plan on how to avoid for such situations to happen; instead the plans were focused on how to handle the situation when such problems occur.

4.1.4. What to talk about and the role of the process leader

Many of the respondents experience that keeping to the subject during the meetings is a difficult challenge. They argue that even if the formal delimitations for what the specific meeting is processing is clearly described in for example a detail plan, the participants usually want to discuss more general questions. This can be considered a problem since spending time on general question means less time for discussing what they came to the meeting to discuss. Emelie says that it is important that the process leader makes it clear from the beginning what the meeting should be about and which questions one has come to discuss, but also that it is

important to be able to handle the questions and remarks that is out of place. To be able to steer back the discussion to the subject in question is described as important skill to possess. One respondent mentions that it's important to explain at an early stage which issues that is up for discussion so that the participants keep to questions that are of interest to the public rather than asking personal questions.

When discussing the role of the process leader it became evident that a majority of the interviewees foremost regarded themselves as informants in the meeting situation. Next to providing the participants with information, listening was described as important. Letting people speak their mind, regardless if the opinions were relevant for the issue or not, were described as something necessary to do.

4.1.5. How to talk

The technical language is described as an obstacle for good communication with the participants. Not only does it hinder the information to reach the participants it is also believed to provoke the participants, and in extreme cases lead to aggression. When having problems understanding, the participants are believed to feel intimidated and small. The reaction to that sometimes is aggression. Some of the informants mention that technical language can make the participants uncomfortable to express themselves. The fact that it usually is differences in knowledge among the participants as well, the language problems don't exclusively concern the communication between process leaders and participants. Sofia tells me how the public stop coming to their meetings due to the fact that large environmental organizations were more familiar with the issue and the technology then the ordinary citizen. This resulted in the citizen becoming less willing to attend the formal meetings and informal channels, such as asking your neighbor, were used instead in order for the citizen to get the information he or she was looking for. Today they have arranged with strictly citizen meetings in order to reach out to the public.

4.1.6. Who is talking?

Many of the interviewees find the task to divide the word between the participants during discussion to be challenging. They talked about how it is always some people that talk more than others, and that it can be difficult to see to that all participants get to speak their mind. Maria describe how WPD changed their way of conducting meetings due to the fact that just a few people always seemed to speaking. The regular meeting with regular presentation and a discussion has been replaces by an open-house meeting where participates and processers discuss with help of an exhibition on the planned project. When running into people eager to talk, one of process leaders can attend to that person while the others keep on talking. According to its advocates, the method prevents one or a few persons from spoiling the meeting for the rest of the participants.

4.1.7. What is the public consultation meeting good for?

The public consultation is foremost described an important process for informing the public what is going on in their neighborhood. The publics' knowledge legitimizes the plan in hand and facilitate for smoother processes. The social situation is described as an important factor for the processers to gain the public trust. Especially in rural areas, the informants have felt

that the personal contact is important for the public trust in the project. Some of the informants brings up the democratic aspects of public consultation meetings and argues that even though decisions are not consensus decisions the public's participation in community planning is described to lessen the distance between the citizen and the authorities by increasing the citizen knowledge about planning and processing community planning. It is however very important to openly show that the public's opinion has been taken into account even though every single opinion cannot be put in print. The problem often lie in failing to report the public's opinion in a way that makes the people feel that they have been listened to. The feeling of neglect could even undermine democracy if one continue to believe that the public have influenced the decisions but in reality people have stop going to meetings. The transparency of the process is seen as important for the public consultation to fulfill its democratic aspect, an aspects that some of the informants believe often is put aside for other interests.

The public participation is foremost discussed in its capacity of being democratic and good for keeping people informed. Local knowledge is not described as an asset to the projects but is rather described as knowledge to consider in order to avoid problems later in the process. Not all interviewees gives me that impression, but most.

4.1.8. What is participation and what can the public influence?
When discussing the meaning and content of the word participation I could detect differences in what the interviewees feel participation should contain and what it actually contained in practice. Having the possibility to give information, to be given information and to have influence over decisions, were described as equally important parts of public participation but no one of the interviewees believed that the part about influence had as big a part as the giving and taking of information. Public influence over decision concerning community planning is described as something that works better in theory than in practice. The questions that the decisions concerns are described as complex processes with many people involved, where the public's opinion don't weigh as heavy as the input from the many experts the decisions passes. Emelie argues that the goal with the public participation is not influence on decisions since the decisions in her case are taken by the politicians, and that the public participation is about having influence on the process that leads to the decision. The final decisions can be influenced by an appeal but that falls outside the concept of public participation.

Sofie and Lars describe that regarding the location of the final depository of nuclear waste, the public has quite little influence. For example, which methods to use, are among other things already decided. Most of which that can be changed, such as where to build the roads, is not cared for by the SKB. They, among several others of the interviewees, describe how the public's opinions often lead to further investigations and the distribution of additional information on an issue.

Close to all of the interviewees believe that the public's opinions influence processes and decisions more that the public believes. This is described as one of the biggest problems with public participation; that the feed-back to the citizens is lacking and the citizens don't believe

they can influence. However some of the interviewees believe there is a value in collecting the opinions even though you can't meet all needs presented. Even though the needs are not met in one specific case the opinions forms a base of knowledge from which future politics can be influenced.

When discussing whether the public should have influence in all matters or not, most of the interviewees seem to agree on that the public often lack sufficient knowledge to have a say in more complex questions.

4.2. Public consultation meetings

In this chapter I will present the three observed public consultation meetings in relation to the result from the interviews presented in previous chapter as well as in relation to the presented theoretical framework. I will start by presenting to you the objects for my observations; the meetings:

4.2.1. Presenting the meetings

Meeting 1. The municipal real estate company Svenska Bostäder is planning to build a new apartment block in a densely built–up area in a district located in the outskirts of Stockholm. The public consultation is called upon as a result of changes in the municipal detail plan and the administrative official from The Town Building Office together with a representative from Svenska Bostäder invite the public to discuss the detail plan. It is Thursday at 6 á clock pm and we are in a school cafeteria nearby the location in question. 5 persons show up. The official from the City have posted a draft of the construction design on one of the walls in the cafeteria. The participants sit down planlessly and form an unorganized circle.

Meeting 2. The City is planning to extend the underground railway. The purpose of the extension is to facilitate the access to a new area that is under construction right outside the center of the city. The project is still in the phase of planning and the public consultation meeting is arranged to discuss the plan so far. Public consultation meetings on the details for the built will be arranged later in the process. The meeting is held in the lecture hall at The Town Building Office in the center of the city, on a Thursday at 6 á clock pm. Approximately 25 participants arrive and take seat in the lecture hall that take around 100 people. The Town Building Office is represented by tree people of whom one has the overall responsibility of the meeting. The city´s public transport company SL is represented by tree people of whom one will hold a presentation.

Meeting 3. The local district administration is planning an upgrading of the park Rosenlundsparken on Södermalm, Stockholm. The pedestrian precinct and the bicycle lane are subjects of repair and a few trees are being removed in order to let more sunlight through. The Municipal District Administration has invited the public to participate in a public consultation in order to collect the public's viewpoints on the plan. The information about the meeting is announced on the municipality's webpage a few days ahead of the meeting but there is no further information about the plan. The plan is not part of any formal detail plan but a local investment planned by the local district. Therefore there are no legal requirements to host a public consultation.

When arriving at the place for the meeting we are told that the local district administration has received complaints from some of the neighbors regarding trees that are considered to make one of the streets in the area very dark and without sunlight, and that this is the reason for the location of the meeting. We are standing on a narrow avenue on a bicycle lane right below the trees in question. It is Wednesday and its 6 á clock pm. Two persons from Södermalms municipal district administration are in charge of the meeting and one of them takes notes. Approximate 20 people arrive at the appointed time but about 10 more will arrive during the meeting. The participants gather around the leader of the meeting in a circle. The meeting lasts approximately 25 minutes.

4.2.2. Equal understanding and opportunity to make oneself heard

All three of the meetings set off with an introduction about how far the projects in question have reached and why the meetings are held. At meeting 1 the introduction lasted approximately 3 minutes before the process leader was interrupted by questions from the audience. The rest of the meeting was about the participants' questions. At meeting 2 the introductions from the process leaders took approximately 45 minutes and then there is time for questions. Meeting 3 had a few minutes of introduction after which the word was given to the participants.

During all three of the meeting I perceived the systems for distributing the word in-between the participants highly arbitrary. At several occasions the participants were not given the word before talking, but took the word themselves, and they were often let to continue to talk. At several occasions participants didn't let other participants finish before talking themselves. There was no pre-decided way for people to act when they wanted to talk. And it makes me wonder: *Is it ok to just speak your mind whenever you wanted, or should you raise your hand first?*

At two of the tree meetings, both styles were used at the same which gave a rather uncontrolled impression. At the first meeting, with just a few people, no hands were raised before talking. My view is that the process leaders had problems distributing the word in an equal way in all three of the meetings. One reason to that may be that the process leaders are not comfortable in their roles as leaders but there is also a risk that the lack of rules for how to act are confusing not only for the participants but for the process leaders as well. If the rules

for talking were decided upon in the beginning of the meeting, and the process leader therefore had rules for talking to lean back on, he or she could perhaps be more firm in distributing the word. Participants would perhaps not feel that they have to interrupt each other or take the word themselves, in order to get the chance to say what's on their mind. There is a distinct risk that the participants did not have an equal opportunity to make their voices heard during the meetings I attended. Looking back on the result from the interviews we can see that distribution of the word is perceived as a problem for the process leaders, and that there is a search for new strategies in order to get round the problem.

The language that was used during the meetings I observed was informal and easy to follow. I had no pre-knowledge on either project the meetings concerned and I didn't have any problems following the discussions. In common, participants at all meetings have quite a good knowledge about the area the projects concerned, and when referring to different locations everyone seems to know its whereabouts and some history about the places. A few misunderstandings were spotted during the conversations but all of them were sorted out quite fast. Using a language that the uninitiated understand, and see to that misunderstandings are sorted out, correspond well with the demands for a democratic meeting. One can say that the common ground, or intersubjectibity, from which the dialogue took off were somewhat understood by all to be the same. The presumption that all participants knew about the area the meeting concerned seem to be accurate and the talking in au un-technical way seem to be appreciated. The participants used an informal language and did not add any technical terminology that had not been brought up by the process leader.

4.2.3. Participation and influence

The participants were not included in the process of setting the agenda in any of the meetings I attended. At the meetings 1 and 2, ways for the participants to influence were presented in the introduction of the meeting. Apart from mentioning the question sessions that would be held later on, the participants were encouraged to give in their written opinions on the project at the end of the meeting. As I understand the situation the process leaders didn't want to deal with personal opinions orally during the meetings. If my interpretation were right the meaning of public participation during these meetings becomes limited to the opportunity for the public to ask questions. Unfortunately I therefore perceived the participatory part of the meeting as being a necessary evil to the process leader, rather than an asset to the project process.

Being presented to correct information, and having the opportunity to add knowledge to the project are, as discussed during the interviews, important parts of participation, but the influential aspect of participation, which also is considered important, was not represented. There are of course practical differences between being able to influence the agenda for the meeting and being able to influence decisions concerning the project the meeting concern, but as I interpreted the situation, the participants had no reason to believe that they could do either.

The interviewees mentioned that the public's influence on decisions and processes are difficult to follow throughout the process of the project, and that the citizen therefore understands his or her influence to be of less significance then it really is. Regardless of this

being true or not, we have a problem. The participants either don't have any influence, or they are not aware of the influence they possibly have. To my understanding, the participants´ belief in their own power to influence the processes the meetings concern, is weak. Questions starting with: *–As I have tried to make you aware of earlier..,* and *–As I have said before…,* are common. My interpretation of the referring back to earlier attempts to influence, is that it is a way to express a weak belief in the own power to influence. At one occasion one participant ask straight forward, how exactly the public can influence the project in hand. After some seconds of thinking the process leader answer that the politicians are of course the outmost accountable since they take the decisions, but that it is possible to influence the different executive authorities as well. During the silence that followed the answer I, as a part of the public, felt the feeling of hopelessness coming over me. I believe that I shared that feeling with many more in that room.

The issues on the agenda can be considered to be determined by the participants themselves in the sense that they have the opportunity to influence the content during the time for questions. But it stops there. There are no explanations about what the participants actually can influence in these processes. What happens with the written notes the participants may submit at the end of the meeting is not explained. The guidelines on a foreseeable process that the Environmental Protection Agency or the National Board on Housing, Building and Planning advocates is not fulfilled. It is not clear how, or to what extent, people can influence the process, or even if they *can* influence the process.

4.2.3.1. Influence as power

To draw conclusions about whether the participants understand participation to be about power over decisions, or if they even *want* to have power oven decisions, becomes a bit difficult due to the fact that I don't have access to the participants own opinion. Taking the role of the participant during the meetings are not enough for drawing such conclusions. However I believe that increased power over decisions, at least regarding the agenda for the meetings, would favor the meeting and the processes. Even if the participants would say no when asking if power and participation are closely linked, I believe that the week belief in their own power to influence is an indicator of wanting to have more influence. The earlier mentioned remarks could be seen as indicators of participants not being pleased with today's level of influence. Either way, if the participants want power over decisions or not, I believe that it is important that the participants are invited to a dialogue where these questions are discussed.

4.2.4. Is it communication?

When analyzing the meetings it becomes important to try their content against Linell´s theory on minimal communication. *Is it actually communication that takes place during these meetings, or it is just talking?* The answer to that question is actually yes and no. I will explain.

For example, when the participants ask questions to which the process leaders do not answer communication is failing. Step three in Linell´s theory is not fulfilled. These situations occur several times during two of the meetings, usually when more than one person talks at the

same time. But a few questions and statements are just met with silence. During the times when there are several people involved in a discussion, or when several questions are put in a row, the process leaders tend to chose to answer the technical questions and leave the more general questions or opinions uncommented. Referring back to the interviews, where a dislike towards the opinions and the general questions were expressed, I interpret choosing the technical questions as being a part of a strategy not to end up talking about issues outside the process leader's jurisdiction. By deciding what issues to communicate about the process leader is in charge of the agenda for the meeting, and we can see how the meetings both fulfill the requirements for communication at the same time as they don't.

The process leader's decision about what to communicate about I believe results in a few problems. By dismissing some of the information from the participants, disagreements regarding what the meeting should be about become evident. By choosing not to respond to certain information, the process leader indirect tells the participants that they are talking about the wrong issues, and an unspoken struggle about the content of the meeting, sets off. At all three of the meetings I understood such struggles to be present at times. At meeting 3 for example, when one participant requested a change of subject, the process leader answered – *that issue is not relevant for this meeting,* and turned to the next speaker. The person who had delivered the opinion, turned to the person next to her, told her that the meeting were pointless, and asked her if she didn't think so too. Regardless of that lady's answer, the powerlessness over the agenda has started a negative feeling towards the meeting and its spreading among the participants. This brings us into how I believe attitudes affect the outcome of these meeting.

4.2.4.1.   Attitudes
The process leader's misgivings about the turn out of the meetings are according to my understanding contributing to the problems I found with the communication during the meetings. When talking about problems that can occur during meetings, I got the impression that most of the interviewees have rather low expectations on the outcome of the meetings. They expect to run into problematic people that make their jobs as process leaders more difficult. This is one of the reasons why some of the strategies for participation have changed. The discussion whether changes have been for better or the worse doesn't belong here, but viewing the participants as problems, does. To be interested in the views of the other actors in the social situation is a precondition for communication. To believe that all people have capacity to contribute with knowledge is a precondition for democratic meetings. I believe that both are necessary for a communication to take place and progress. The attitude towards the other parties in the social situation therefore influences the possibilities for communication to take place.

During my observations I become aware of the fact that almost all of the participants that choose to express themselves are negatively inclined to the project the meetings concern. A "them-and-us" feeling becomes noticeable in the statements from the participants that talks a lot about *us* (referring to the public) and *you* (referring to either the process leaders or the organization he or she represent) when commenting or asking questions. My interpretation to why this atmosphere is created is that the participants feel powerless in the situation they are

in and therefore unite in order to increase their influence. At one time one participant urge the other participants to turn to their local politicians with their critique on the project, since leaving their opinions to the civil servants' in charge of the meeting would not lead to any changes. The statement got little response but the mistrust in the system of public consultation meetings became evident as well as the existence of the "them-and-us" feeling.

There was however some signs of wanting to understand each other in the dialogues I observe. Misunderstandings about what we are talking about at a specific time were rare. When answering questions the process leaders often checked so that the answer actually answered the questioned asked, and when talking the process leaders often referred back to issues brought up earlier by the participants. The process leaders also made it very clear that the meetings took place in order for the public to have a chance to give their opinion on the project in hand, and that these meetings were not solely information meetings but meetings where the dialogue with the public was just as important.

4.2.5. Information or dialogue?

Putting my experiences from the meetings in relation to at Lars Palms table on the differences between the informative meeting and the dialogue meeting I seem to end up somewhere in the middle. At meeting 1 and 2 transferring knowledge was according to my interpretation the main goal with the meeting. The participants' engagement was welcome in the shape of questions but the meeting as such didn't depend on the public's participation. Meeting number 3 on the other hand could not have been considered a meeting if the activity of the participants were taken away. The enquiry of this meeting was very limited; *were the trees to be cut down or not?* , and was solved by voting. Even though the democratic aspect of that voting can be discussed (and will be further in this chapter) this was the only occasion during the three meetings when I could easily follow how the participants' presence on the meeting could influence a decision.

When comparing the content of the meetings with Palms table on differences between the informational meeting and the dialogue meeting I would say that there was possibly a mix between the two categories. Firstly the process leaders presented a lot of decisions that had already been taken; why the project looked as it did and how the project was planned to progress, but then they all firmly stated that at this early stage of the project, a lot were still undecided, and that's why it was important for them to have a dialogue with the public. What that dialogue would lead to was not very clear. *Was the dialogue a platform for new ideas and opportunities to be developed, or for problems to be solved? Or was it just another word for talking about the decisions concerning the projects that had already been taken?*

Unfortunately I would say that the latter question makes a better fit. Defending the projects in hand was much more common than welcoming new ideas. On meeting 1, which finished with a walk to the sight of the planned apartment block, the participants were however given the opportunity to present ideas and changes, to which the process leaders listened carefully. In that sense the precondition for a dialogue meeting was fulfilled, even though it was the participants that insisted on the walk, not the process leaders. The intention with the third meeting was to solve a problem with the help of the public. Despite encouraging new ideas

and problem solving within a very limited issue; the trees future, the meeting had the outlay of a dialogue.

Comparing the remaining categories in Palm table with the meetings, I found *Preparation* the most interesting. From the interviewees I also understood that the differences in preparation can become problematic in some meeting, and I experienced that to be the case in one of the meetings I attended. At this meeting a few of the participants were very well informed about the process. They asked questions about, and gave opinions about, an earlier rapport on the project that has been published. The well-informed few talked at several occasions without being given the word and the participants that were raising their hands did not have the same chance to talk. When talking with one of the participants at the end of the meeting I was let know that she felt uncomfortable talking during the meeting since she didn't believe she know as much about the project as the others.

The problems of differences in preparation in this case became twofold; the participants with more knowledge on the subject seem to have a greater tendency to take the word without being given it, and at the same time does his or hers greater knowledge intimidate the others which make them talk less. Adding to that Palm´s categorizing stated that for the dialogue meeting people should come prepared. According to his theory the people that show up unprepared is more likely to contribute to a meeting being more of an information meeting than the people that are prepared. One problem with this is however that one of the guidelines for public consultation meetings states that the use of language should be understood by the uninitiated. In that sense does the guide lines guide the process leaders in the direction of conducting informational meetings. Having more pre-knowledge could also mean using more complicated terminology which not everyone understands. I believe that the biggest problem however lies in the priority to talk, the "knowledgeable" is given. Once again we come back to the process leader's responsibility to even out the power relation in order to let everyone have the same opportunity to express themselves.

4.2.6. Or Learning?

With the starting position in the theories on social learning, the public consultation meeting is a great place for new knowledge to be created. The creation of new knowledge is also partly the aim with the meeting in order to reach a higher quality on the final product. *But is any new knowledge created?* The question is difficult to answer and is also dependant on which branch of the theory you chose. It is however possible to say that it is difficult to see the knowledge that is possibly created. As mentioned earlier it is difficult to see how the input from the public affects the processes.

As we heard from the interviewees, problems with giving all the participants the same opportunity to talk can be solved by changing the form of the meeting. As well as I understand the effectiveness in changing the strategies, into having open houses instead of normal meetings for examples, changes like that can also have disadvantages. Having the theories on learning and communication in mind it can be considered contra productive to separate the participants into single units. Even though the risk of having a few participants

interrupting the meetings decreases, the knowledge that is created in the social situation is being lost. The chances to develop more knowledge about each other decrease.

The guidelines for the democratic meeting states that the participants should have equal opportunity to discover what is in his or her interest, both on a group level and on a private level. This is closely connected to different people's different ways of learning and indicates that the meetings should respect that different people learn differently. In order to discover what is in one's own interest, reflection over experiences and interpretation is needed and time for such reflection should be given. None of the meetings I attended gave room for any personal reflections, which made it more difficult for the participants to know how to take well thought trough decisions.

4.2.7. Democracy on the run

At the third meeting I attended, talking amongst the participants during the meeting was common. The meeting took place outdoors on the street and in order to hear what the process leader was saying I had to concentrate very carefully even though I was standing just a few meters away from him. During the meeting people pushed further and further against the process leader and soon he looked rather cramped where he stood. Around this group of people subgroups of participants was formatting. I could hear people talk about what the process leader might be talking about, and the talking in the subgroups seemed to make people that were trying to listen to the process leader annoyed. Lots of hushing at each other took place.

Suddenly a voting takes place. Hands are put in the air and it strikes me that just at this moment, the tree's future is decided. As an observer I didn't want to vote, so I remained passive. I later understood that my act actually was in favor for the group wanting to cut down the trees. In a few seconds the voting was over and the process leader altered his voice and said;*"The majority has spoken, we won't cut down anything!"* After 20 minutes the outcome was reached, the trees were to be kept. The process leader thanked the participants for all the views and opinions that had been brought up, and talked about the importance of taking into account the citizens' views regarding issues like these. -*My views*?, said the lady next to me straight into the air - *I cannot hear what the gentleman is saying. Did he say views?*

There are many aspects of this story that is interesting from this study's point of view. When looking at the communication we found some obvious obstacles. Firstly we have the problem with people not hearing what the process leader is saying. The place for the meeting is picked specifically for the location but it doesn't work in the favor of the meeting. Three or four airplanes passed when we were standing there and during those seconds it was impossible to

hear anything. Being able to hear what is being said during the meeting must be considered as a matter of course for any meeting, and I would say that the meeting loses all its legitimacy on that matter solely.

The fact that a voting took place during the meeting brings us the closest to direct democracy as we come in this study, but again we run into legitimacy issues. Many of the participants have little chance to know what the voting concern, which challenges all democratic aspects of the voting. Apart from the fact that it is difficult to hear the actual question the vote is based on, the participants have had access to very little information on the issue before having to make up their mind in a voting. There are no additional information on the plan for the park on their webpage (since it's not a formal meeting they don't have to put out more information)and the participants knowledge about the plan is limited to what the process leader has presented to them during the first couple of minutes of the meeting. There are no time for the participants to reflect over the decisions they are about to take, and there are very scarce information to base that decision on. All these factors combined challenges the theory on democratic meetings. People are not have an equal and adequate opportunity to discover what is in his or hers interest before having to vote and the fact that there were problems with hearing the information provided indicates that all participants did not have the same influence over the decision that was taken.

5. Conclusions

The aim with this study was to investigate the communication that takes place in public consultation meetings. My intention was to study and analyze both attitudes on the communication, as well as the factual behavior at the meetings, in order to found possible potential for improvement.

In order to fulfill my aim I interviewed six people that in one way or another were working with public consultation meetings. I also observed three public consultation meetings. The overall conclusion I have reached is that there are many potential changes from which the public consultation meetings would gain. The information provided to me by the interviewees corresponded quite well with my own observations, and I will now present what I believe are the bottlenecks with communication in the public consultation meeting.

First of all it is important to mention all things that perhaps are taken for granted when communicating. There are as mentioned in earlier chapters, several aspects that must be considered in order for the communication to take place. This study show that aspects perhaps taken for granted sometime can be forgotten in the act communication. That all participants are able to hear the process leader, is an example on such a prerequisite that is essential for the democratic meeting but is obviously sometimes overseen. I will not once again line up these prerequisites but instead conclude my findings.

Is it democratic meetings I have experienced? In many aspects it is not. The participants don't have the same opportunity to make themselves heard, there is little time for own reflection, there are little opportunity to influence the agenda and the opportunity to see the effect of the participants participation is slim. There are however an understanding and sympathy for the democratic aspects of having public consultation meetings and the belief that the dialogue is good for the process is brought up currently. The intention is good but the effort is not good enough. The meetings I have attended are more focused on spreading information meetings than having a dialogue.

In many ways the guide lines provided to the process leaders, guides the meeting in the direction of the informational meeting and most of the time I experienced the meetings to be just that; information. However the process leaders themselves seem to have the intention to lead a dialogue meeting. It is confusing for all parties what kind of meetings one is after. At the meeting where dialogue was the most present, other democratic aspects were missing.

However my findings unanimously show that a greater influence over the meetings for the participants is wanted by all parties. Dependent on the issue the meeting concerns, the room for public influence differs, but regardless if there are legitimate reasons for the size of that room or not, the study show that public influence is wanted in any size. I believe the meeting as a whole gain from having the public deciding over something little rather than nothing.

The agenda for the meeting is a good example. If the process leader were to decide the agenda for the meeting together with the participants several obstacles for the communication could

be avoided at the same time as the meeting would come one step closer to being democratic. The joint decisions could lead to an increased engagement in the issue. This would deepen democracy and give greater legitimacy to decisions. When having influence over the agenda the discussion about what jurisdiction the process leader organization has, and what issues that are appropriate to bring up, can be brought up at an early stage and the problems with handling questions and opinions out of subject could be avoided.

The "them-and-us" feeling found among both participants and process leaders gives rise to a negative approach towards the meeting which is not working in favor for the communication. I believe that the negative approach could be solved by including the participants more from the beginning of the process. Since the participants and the process leader seem to be in a constant unspoken battle about what the meeting is really about, it seems wise to start the meeting with such a discussion. To not only tell the participants about the jurisdictional limitations of the project, but also ask the participants what they want to talk about, would make it clearer why some topics don't belong in the meeting. By doing that the topics that don't fit in would at least be commented on and hopefully directed to the instance that could have the answer. Getting a respond to their input, the participants would feel that they are being more actively listened to. Solving these issues in the beginning of the meeting should result in less irritation and less negative remarks. The misgivings about the meeting would perhaps also fade if the meetings became less hostile. The responsibility in terms of willingness to cooperate, of course lies on all parties but the process leader have the responsibility to make the communication possible. The strategies for making that communication possible should be strategies for cooperation and not for eliminating problems.

There seem to be an obvious need for ground rules during the meetings. Some people talk whenever they want to and some people don't get to talk at all. As a part of a first introduction it should be a good idea to try to agree on some ground rules for the meeting. Having ground rules would facilitate for the process leader to facilitate the meeting. If discussions get out of hand the process leader (or the participants) can remind the others about the ground rules and in that way get back on track.

So what guides the preconditions for the democratic meeting? Even if the basic requirements for the democratic meeting were to be met, we see that additional things are needed. There must be clear rules for the meeting that all parties have agreed upon, and there must be a feeling that there is a point to cooperate. To make clear what everyone gets out of this cooperation and how each participant can influence are essential issues for the communication to progress and for the democratic meeting to take place.

I believe the communicative problems I observed during these meetings can and should be solved by communication.

6. Further research

The environmental communicator works with issues related to the problems I have come across in this study. *How can we have a fruitful discussion over issues of complex nature and how can we agree a common goal when our starting points and expectations are so different?*

There is of course no blue print for solving these problems but by starting to metacommunicate about what issues to discuss and how to discuss these issues, one is moving in the right direction. This study shows that there are potential for an improved communication in public consultation meetings. Both process leaders and participants want changes!

The meetings I observed and the interviews I conducted were all related to very different consultation situation. The study and its conclusion therefore become quite general. The need for some kind of change in all of the meetings however let us knows that there is a need to look even further into each specific case. I would have liked to have spent more time on each meeting in order to compile my more specific findings with the process leaders understanding of the meetings, and together with the process leader work towards possible improvements. Unfortunately there was no time for such analysis in this study but I believe communication during future meetings would gain from such an analysis.

I suggest that all people in the position of leading public consultation meetings should think and reflect upon the democratic aspects of a conversation, as well as the purpose of participation, in order to improve their execution.

References

Blackmore, Cris. "What kinds of knowledge, knowing and learning are required for addressing resource dilemmas?: a theoretical overview." *Environmental Science & Policy*, 2007:10: 512-525.

Boverket. *Miljöbedömningar för planer enligt plan- och bygglagen – en vägledning.* Huskvarna: Boverket, 2006.

Boverket. *Vindkraftshandboken - Planering och prövning av vindkraftverk på land och i kustnära vattenområden.* Boverket, 2009.

Charon, Joel M. *Symbolic Interactionism.* New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007.

Collins, Kevin and Ison, Raymond. *Dare we jump off Arnstein's ladder? Social learning as a new policy paradigm* . United Kingdom: Open University UK, 2006.

Cox, Robert. *Environmental Communication and the public sphere.* California: Sage Publication, 2006.

DemokratiAkademin. www.demokratiakademin.se.

De-Shalit, Avner. *The Environment between theory and action.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Glaser, Barney G, and Anselm L. Strauss. *The discovery of grounded theory : strategies for qualitative research.* Chicago : Aldine, 1967.

Hallgren Lars, Ljung Magnus. *Miljökommunikation.* Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2005.

—. *Miljökommunikation.* Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2005.

http://jureka.net/word.asp. (accessed 04 06, 2009).

Kaijser, Lars, and Magnus (red.) Öhlander. *Etnologiskt fältarbete.* Lund : Studentlitteratur, 1999.

Linell, Per. *Essentials of dialogism -aspects and elements of a diological approach to language, communication and cognition.* Linköping, Sweden: Lindköping University, 1998.

Miljödepartementet. "Sammanfattning av regeringens proposition 1997/98:45." 1998.

Nitsch, Ulrich. *Knowing and doing: on knowledge and action in environmental protection, ed Lars J Lundgren.*

Palm, Lars. *Kommunikationsplanering, En handbok på vetenskaplig grund.* Danmark: Narayana Press, 2006.

Participatory Learning and Action. http://www.planotes.org/about.html (accessed 05 11, 2009).

"Plan- och bygglag (1987:10) ." SFS 1987:10.

Regeringsskrivelse. "En samlad naturvårdspolitik." 2001/2002:173.

Sears, David O, Jonathan L Freedman, and Letitia Anne Peplau. *Social Psychology.* Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-hall , 1995.

Wakeford, Tom, and Jasper Singh. *Participatory Learning and Action 58 - Towards empowered participation : stories and reflections.* London: International Institute for Environment and Devevopment, 2008.

Appendix 1

Interview guide

- Working description

- Strategies for public participation. Written documents? Guide lines for meetings? Training in running meetings or handling conflicts?

- A typical meeting. Problems and successes

- The publics´ influence. Can the public influence final decisions? Project design? Process?

- The role of the process leader. Is the process leader a teacher, a facilitator, a mediator or an informer?

- What is participation? Definitions and content

- Strengths and weaknesses with public participation

Observation guide

- How is the room organized? Physical preconditions for communication

- Introductions by process holder. What information is given?

- Who talks to whom?

- How does one talk? Terminology and pre-knowledge

- Misunderstandings. Why do they occur and how are they sorted out?

- How are critique/questions/opinions being met?

- Information versus participation

- The role of the process leader