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# **SOCIAL NETWORKS AND PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE OF URBAN GREEN COMMONS**

*The Case of Vuosaari District in Helsinki, Finland*

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Department of Urban and Rural Development  
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## **Abstract**

Urban development is today causing the loss of urban green spaces such as urban forests and meadows on which cities equally rely for recreation and other ecosystem services. This loss of urban green spaces is increasingly being contested by some members of the citizenry. This thesis examines the nature of the governance of urban green spaces in the Vuosaari district of Helsinki, Finland and how social networks among residents affect the governance process.

A qualitative research method is employed to examine the Helsinki City Council's collaborative governance approach and how social relationships among residents have impacted this governance in the instance of land development controversies in the district. The research finds weak social connections in the district with a core group of mostly long-term residents active in engaging City Officials while the majority resort to online engagement. It is also revealed that within the district's social network, clusters of relationships have formed in different parts of the district: a characteristic referred to as modularity in social network lexicon. It is induced from these findings is that the weak ties, modularity and online engagement strategies do not strengthen collaborative governance which is an arduous process dependent on dense social networks and commitment from all stakeholders.

The study concludes that if the Vuosaari scenario reflects a generalized trend, then increased urbanization and technology will further weaken social relations which in turn will be detrimental to collaborative governance of the commons in metropolitan areas.

*Keywords: Collaborative Governance, Social Networks, Urban Green Spaces, Commons*

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## Introduction

The upshots of urbanization such as population growth and infrastructure development on urban ecosystems have largely been documented. Rapid urbanization in this age has resulted in the shrinking of available green areas and increased pressure on urban ecosystems in cities around the world (UNEP/UN Habitat, 2005). One of the challenges for urban planners and managers thus has been how to balance urban growth while ensuring that urban ecosystems are resilient, continue to maintain their equilibrium and provide ecosystem services such as outdoor recreational grounds, air purification and aquatic resources for residents. Meanwhile, the conversion of urban lands into residential areas with their attendant alteration of hitherto green spaces has been matched by an amplification of citizen concerns about the decrease of available green space for recreation and other outdoor activities. Such concerns are often motivated by a desire to safeguard the cultural, aesthetic and recreational values of urban green commons such as forests and meadows. These citizen concerns have increasingly been recognized in legislation and policy at local, national and international levels. For instance, Article 5c of the European Landscape Convention in its “landscape quality objectives”, prescribes people-centered landscape-management policies. Likewise, Article 1 of the Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters urges European states to “guarantee the rights of access to information, public participation in decision-making, and access to justice in environmental matters”. Finnish legislation as well, guarantees citizens’ participation in land-use decision-making processes while on its part, the Helsinki City Council Strategy document for 2009-2012 highlights public participation as a key element for attaining its goals (Bäcklund & Mäntysalo, 2010). These assertions mirror the ideals of environmental justice which advocates equity in the distribution of ecosystem services.

Natural resource management (NRM) literature also extensively argues for integrated approaches involving both the planners and the general public in the management of urban green commons (Carlsson & Berkes (2005). Such collaborative governance or participative processes, literature also suggests, ought to harness the potentials of social networks, as these networks can be instrumental in community

mobilization (Crona & Hubacek, 2010) and effecting behavior change. Diertz et al (2003, p 1908) prescribe “dense social networks” within communities as one of the conditions necessary for effective participatory governance of the commons. On the other hand, it has also been pointed out that dynamics within social networks such as high homogeneity can impede collaborative governance by suppressing differing views (Bodin, Crona & Ernstson (2006).

Existing research on the role of social networks in environmental governance has mostly focused on networks of actors bound together by vocation or by creed. Such have included communities of practice such as fishing communities (Crona & Bodin, 2010), landowners (Kueper, Sagor & Becker, 2013), urban gardeners (Krasny & Tidbal, 2009) and social movements (Ernstson, Sörlin & Elmqvist, 2008). The social capital accumulated by actors through their relationships within such groups has been instrumental in participatory processes. However, not much is known about how social networks within often heterogeneous neighborhoods in urban areas may affect responses to participative governance of common green spaces within these areas. Urban residential areas are increasingly becoming diverse with varied ethnic, cultural and occupational groups living side by side (Colding & Barthel 2012). This diversity has implications for the kind of social networks that develop within these residential neighborhoods and how these networks will affect the collaborative planning processes.

This thesis seeks to explore the nature of public participation between the Helsinki City council and residents of Vuosaari district in Helsinki in the light of an on-going controversy about the planned construction of new residential flats on forested land in Vuosaari which residents consider as recreational space. Drawing upon theories of public participation in natural resource management, and social network theories, this study will examine residents experiences of participation and how in their view social relationships among residents has affected residents’ participation in public participation schemes related to urban forests in the district. This may help shed light on how social networks in today’s heterogeneous residential areas in urban areas affect the governance of urban green spaces.

## ***Background***

According to the UN Population Fund, more than half of the world's population resides in urban areas. With projected increases in this trend, the need for energy, water, housing and other urban infrastructure will increase strains on urban ecosystems (UNEP (2005), Corfee-Morlot et al. (2009). At the same time urban development needs to be balanced with the preservation of urban green spaces such as forests, parks and aquatic systems so that cities can enjoy ecosystem services on which urban population centers critically rely. Apart from their important functions such as in carbon sequestration, urban green spaces provide city dwellers with nature escapades which have been proven to be beneficial to human wellbeing (Korpela et al 2010). Moreover, urban ecosystems are usually laden with aesthetic and cultural values which encourage their preservation. For these reasons, urban sustainability has become a policy and operational catchphrase in global and local urban governance processes (UNEP/UN Habitat (2005). As Plummer et al (2007: 39) explain, a major task of government agencies is to "reorient social-ecological systems towards sustainable trajectories". Achieving sustainability in today's expanding urban environments involves cross-scale governance frameworks which amongst other things include "experimentation and innovation" and "participatory governance" that encourages citizen action (Corfee-Morlot et al. (2009). Inherent in this proposition of governance approaches is what is generally referred to as public participation.

Participative governance with its variants such as collaborative management has become a ubiquitous terminology in many areas of urban governance such as urban regeneration, planning and the management of urban green spaces. In a broad sense, public participation may be defined as involving members of the general public in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of public policies (Parry et al, 1992). Inherent in this definition is the understanding that public participation is governance which involves social networks. The effort to include members of the public in natural resource governance systems stems from a realization that top-down technocratic management regimes have achieved little success in managing the complexities inherent in social ecological systems (Armitage et al 2009). Even so, collaborative management initiatives have often become counterproductive because participants' or stakeholders' social networks

and network dynamics were overlooked or not given enough attention (Bodin and Crona, 2009). Social networks have gained increased recognition in natural resource management because they provide a breadth of knowledge of the relationships between various stakeholders and their interactions as individual actors, within different civic organizations and across different scales (Rudd (2000), Adger, (2001). The role of social networks in mobilizing collective action has largely been illustrated by Fukuyama (1999) and Coleman (1988). According to the World Bank, “pre-existing social capital -- networks and norms of reciprocity -- facilitates common property management by providing the social relationships and trust upon which rules and monitoring can be based”. It thus follows that social networks can play an important role in creation and diffusion of new knowledge, rallying commitment to action and influencing behavior. Broadly defined as relationships and interactions among actors in society (Woolcock & Narayan (2000), social networks, when properly harnessed, can be a key element in the governance of socio-ecological systems (Rudd (2000), (Bodin & Crona, 2009). While not a panacea for every natural resource management situation, effective public participation systems could thus be said to be those that appreciate social network dynamics among actors and are alert to the impacts of these dynamics on outcomes of public participation programs.

### ***Problem Formulation and Aim***

According to the Helsinki Action Plan for Sustainability (Agenda 21), adopted in 2002, local residents and neighborhood associations are a key part in shaping the vision for environmental governance of the city in the 21st century. Also, according the website of the Helsinki City Environment Authority, environmental governance of the city requires “the cooperation and commitment of all actors in society”. The Helsinki City Council has also embarked on neighborhood democracy “Lähidemokratiaa” projects as a means of encouraging citizen participation in governance issues. Taken together, these assertions reflect an understanding on the City Council’s part that involving residents in local governance, and in the case of this study governance of urban green spaces, is a constructive strategy given the inherent complexities of socio-ecological systems. But how does this stated objective translate into actual participation between residents and the City officials? This question becomes relevant because there usually is a

discrepancy between official rhetoric and actual practice as pointed out by Arnstein (1969). Moreover a research by Bäcklund & Määntysalo (2010) ranked the City of Helsinki fifth in a comparative study of participative planning in five Finnish cities.

This thesis seeks to explore the nature of public participation in the governance of green spaces in Vuosaari through the lived experiences of local residents. It will also examine residents' perception of how the nature of social networks within the district has influenced public participation.

Vuosaari, a district of about 38.000 inhabitants on the Eastern edge of Helsinki is bordered by shorelines and has a number of outdoor recreational forests including *Uutela* a popular forest for outdoor recreation. Vuosaari has over the last few years experienced two prominent features of urbanization: population growth and infrastructure development. This is evidenced by the new seaport, numerous housing projects and the planned construction of a new power plant. Such urbanization has also resulted in a heterogeneous mix of residents from different socio-cultural and economic backgrounds. Heterogeneity has implications for the kinds of relationships that develop amongst residents and thus the social network structure. Furthermore some residents might consider their stay in the neighborhood temporal while some may be permanent residents. Some may have lived decades while some maybe new arrivals. All these factors could affect residents' networks in terms of the number of relationships they have in the neighborhood or how important they are within the neighborhood's social network. This has implications for collective responses to participative planning initiatives; for instance in terms of information dissemination within the neighborhood or actual commitment to action from residents.

### ***Research Questions***

The following key questions are addressed in this work.

- What are the underlying assumptions driving Helsinki City Council' approach to public participation. What strategies have been put in place to foster public participation?

- What are residents' experiences of the participatory processes and what is their experience of the influence of social networks on public participation in Vuosaari?

## **Theoretical Underpinning**

### ***Public Participation and governance of Common-pool natural resources***

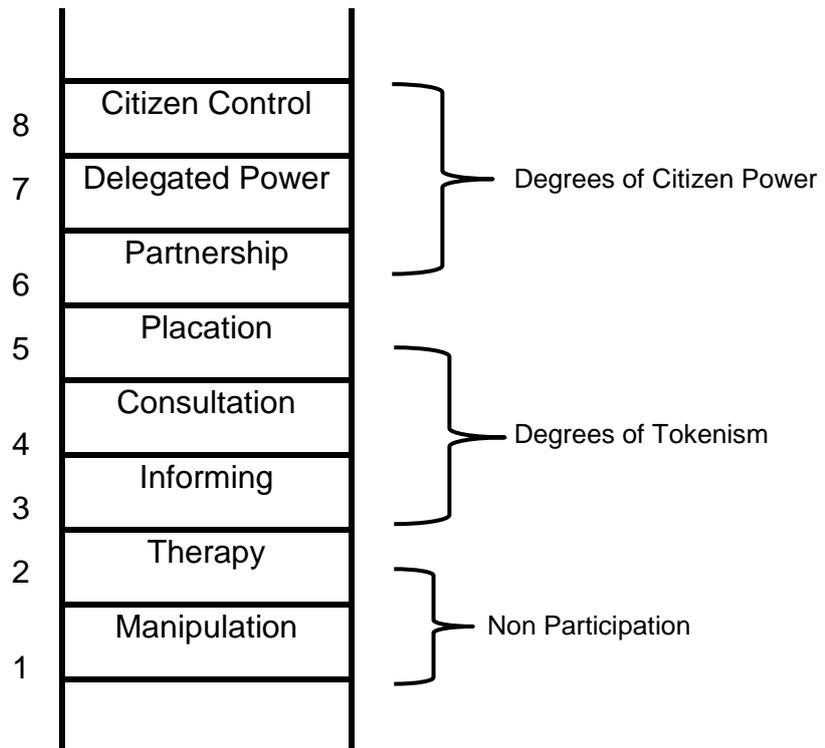
The inherent value-pluralisms in common-pool natural resource areas necessitate management approaches that incorporate different knowledge claims and values (Reed, 2008). Diverging interests and expectations in the social-ecological interface, often lead to what has been commonly referred to in natural resource management literature as “messy” or problematic situations. These diverse interests, what Smith (2003) labels “value pluralisms” often are both the drivers of natural resource use and of problems associated with common-pool natural resource areas. For urban green commons such as urban forests or aquatic resources, the multiple interests of different user-groups and government agencies with management mandates over these areas may sometimes contrast. How to reduce the incidence of these value conflicts has been the focus of a considerable amount of recent research and policy reorientation which has come to recognize the centrality of public participation in natural resource management.

As has been defined earlier, public participation refers to the inclusion of members of the public in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of policies and or programs that will affect the intended public. The need for public involvement in the formulation and implementation of public policy has been the object considerable inquiry. Participative governance as has been used in natural resource management refers to the involvement of all stakeholders, especially local communities in the organization of how decisions pertaining to natural resources in a particular situation will be made. Participative governance implicitly suggests relationships between govern agencies, companies, NGOs and local citizens who all have a stake in a given natural resource such as a

catchment, wildlife or a forest. Increases in calls for democratic governance, the proliferation of information and the dawn of “citizen science” are among some recent developments that have elevated public participation to the forefront of public governance architecture. Furthermore, there has been a realization that top-down technocratic governance approaches involving experts applying scientific solutions to problems that are in-part social problems are ill-suited to manage the multiple perspectives and the intrinsic unpredictability of social ecological systems. More so because public decisions based on scientific rationale often affect social values. This recognition has led to calls for participative modes of management that involve local communities. Public participation is premised on tenets of deliberative democratic principles which argue that people have the right to be involved in public decisions that will affect them (Smith, 2003). Much has been said about the benefits of public participation. Participatory processes, when properly conducted, not only yield better decisions, but also convey legitimacy on such decisions (Reed, 2008). According to the World Bank, participatory governance also ensures that all segments of a community are given a chance to influence decisions and builds trust between the authorities and local population. Other merits of public participation have been said to include the avoidance of costly conflicts, sustainability of projects and social cohesion (The World Bank).

These benefits notwithstanding, public participation endeavors are time-consuming activities which touch on issues of redistribution of power in society (Arnstein, 1969). There is near-universal consensus that in effective public participation schemes citizens ought to have the power to affect decisions. In her seminal paper on public participation, Arnstein (1969) argues that participation without real possibilities for citizens to impact public policy is mere subterfuge by the powerful bent on retaining power while claiming that local citizens are involved in decision making. Arnstein’s 1969 “Ladder of Citizen Participation” attempts to illustrate the various levels of citizen participation, on a continuum from citizen manipulation to the highest form of participation: “citizen control”. Arnstein’s typology includes 8 rungs which according to her, provides a scale against which public participation initiatives could be understood.

Fig 1. Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation.



Arnstein's Ladder of Participation above depicts the different levels of participation. According to this model the higher the rung of citizen involvement, the more clout citizens have to influence the final outcome of participatory processes. According to this typology, the two lowest rungs do not constitute real participative processes because these stages are characterized by uni-directional flows of communication from those in power to citizens. As the level of participation progresses to the 3rd, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> rungs, citizens may indeed be involved in public meetings and their inputs may be requested on major decisions but citizens' inputs rarely get reflected in final decisions. Real public participation, according to Arnstein's model starts occurring in the 6<sup>th</sup> rung when power-sharing partnerships are built between citizens and power holders. Such partnerships may be likened to co-management systems in natural resource management in which stakeholders agree on roles and responsibilities. Since citizens will hardly gain full control in determining and implementing public policy, the 8<sup>th</sup> could be said to be illusory as Arnstein herself agrees.

Arnstein's work served as departure point for other typologies of public participation such as Burns, Hambleton & Hoggett (1994) Ladder of

Citizen empowerment which proposed a more elaborate version of citizen participation. Burns et al's (1994) model expands on Arnstein's ladder by providing some further breakdown of the levels of participation. As with Arnstein's model, the Burns et al's (1994) model suggests that the quality of the participative process increases as the scale increases from the bottom to the top.

Figure 2: The ladder of citizen empowerment (Burns et al, 1994)

<b>CITIZEN CONTROL</b>
12. Independent control
11. Entrusted control
<b>CITIZEN PARTICIPATION</b>
10. Delegated control
9. Partnership
8. Limited decentralized decision-making
7. Effective advisory boards
6. Genuine consultation
5. High quality information
<b>CITIZEN NON-PARTICIPATION</b>
4. Customer care
3. Poor information
2. Cynical consultation
1. Civic hype

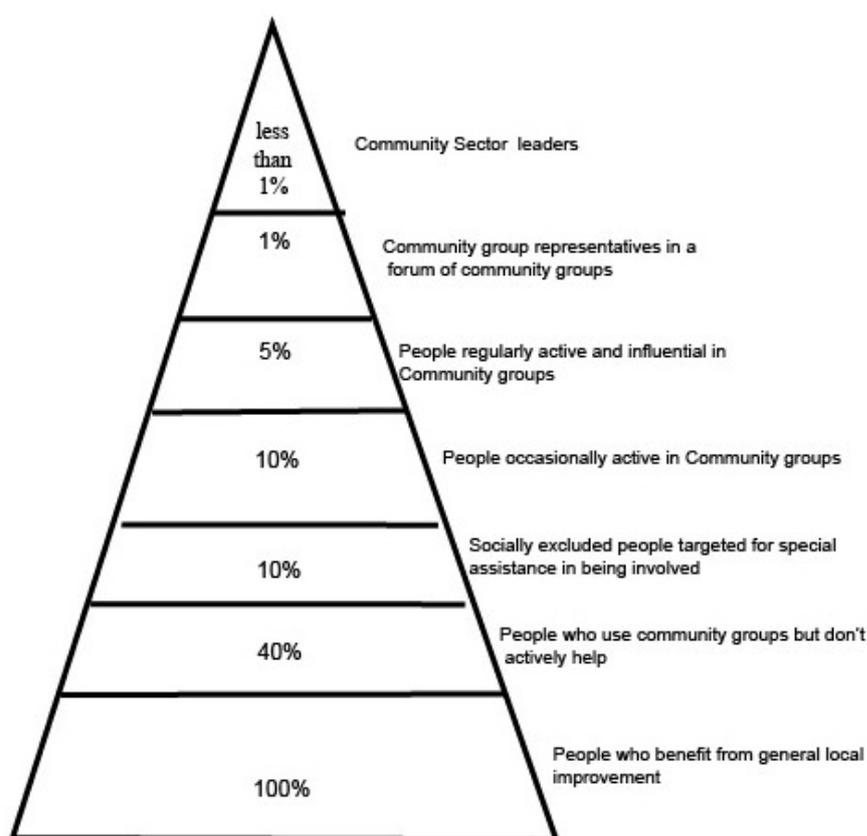
Although both models above provide valuable insights into some of the dimensions of public participation, their oversimplification of the process has been criticized. Tritter & McCallum (2006), for instance critiqued Arnstein's portrayal of participation as a zero-sum power struggle between powerless citizens and powerful bureaucracies. They point out

that her depiction of public participation as a linear process misses the fact that public participation is a complex process “through which individuals formulate meanings and actions that reflect their desired degree of participation in individual and societal decision-making processes” (Tritter & McCallum 2006, p 157). Burns et al’s (1994) model also reflects the linear, zero-sum power struggle between the powerful and the powerless which Arnstein’s typology has been criticized for. Whereas, literature suggests bureaucracies are not monolithic blocs. Administrations are complex arrangements of crisscrossing agencies with different mandates and modus operandi. This characteristic challenges the notion that participative processes are straightforward activities for bureaucracies. Likewise, the terms “public” “citizens” or “community” do not describe a uniform entity as may be construed from the models above. What is generally referred to as “community” is in reality is a heterogeneous mix of people with diverse socio-cultural and economic characteristics connected on several levels with different motivations and capabilities to engage in public participation programs. In view of this, Tritter et al (2006) propose that a “mosaic” rather than a “ladder” best captures public participation in reflecting the complex and dynamic relationships between different entities in society. This characterization of participative processes as *mosaic* illustrates the meshwork of diverse stakeholders both within administrative authorities and communities connected horizontally and vertically in constantly evolving relationships.

The capacity of communities to engage in participatory process has also been cited as an important variable in public participation processes. Ensuring successful participative processes also entails strengthening the capacity for members of the community to participate in such processes (Chanan (1997). Strengthening local capacities may involve issues such as technical support, basic skills training and confidence building (Chanan (1997)). As has already been pointed out, urban areas are populated by heterogeneous populations with diverse motivations and capacities for involvement public participation processes. Owing to these variations and other individual subjectivities, Chanan (1997) argues that patterns of public participation in a given community will take the form of a pyramid. Chanan’s “pyramid” proposition posits that members of any given community will participate in varying degrees even in the most participation-enabling environments. According to him, engaging in public participation will cause some community members to move up the

pyramid of participation as they take up leadership roles within the community either because of their skills or motivation. This according to Chanan (1987) will lead to a small pool of community leaders from various community associations driving the participation process while the bulk of the community remains at the lower end of the pyramid. The challenge Chanan (1987) notes, is for government agencies involved in the participatory process to undertake strategies to ensure that those community members at the foot of the pyramid continue to be involved in the process so as to maintain broad-based participation within the community.

*Fig 3. Chanan's Pyramid of Participation*



Chanan's pyramid of participation depicts the manner in which participative processes initially intended to be community-wide end up narrowing down to a few individuals within communities. An important aspect of Chanan's pyramid maybe its link to social networks in terms the formation of clusters of relationships and how these may in turn affect

community engagement in public participation processes. Social networks are explored in the next section.

These models of public participation submit that the success of participatory processes depend on the “quality” of these processes. According to the World Bank, effective participatory processes depend on the willingness of authorities to genuinely engage citizens in the process. It also cites access to information as a precondition for citizen involvement. Citizens cannot effectively participate if they don’t have access to information on a given program. Reed (2008) cites a number of conditions requisite for effective public participation schemes. According to Reed (2008)

- the process needs to be motivated by a principle that prioritizes [citizen] empowerment, equity, trust and learning.
- Relevant stakeholder participation needs to be considered as an integral part from the conception, through implementation to evaluation of a program
- Stakeholder analysis needs to be performed so as to assess issues such as most affected groups, social relationships, capacity of stakeholders to meaningfully participate etc
- The objectives of the participatory process needs to be defined and agreed upon by all relevant stakeholders from the onset
- Local knowledge must be incorporated into the process
- Participation needs to be institutionalized. This means that public involvement should become part of the decision-making process of administrative organizations

The above preconditions though not applicable in every public participation scenario, are reflected in varying degrees in other conceptual models of public participation. However, even in situations where all the necessary conditions for participation are met, there is no guarantee that participative processes will yield optimum results because ecosystems and social systems are not static. Climate change and social change imply that such public participation programs should as well be dynamic processes as suggested by Tritter et al’s (2006) “mosaic” typology.

### ***Social Networks and Public Participation.***

Participatory management of natural resources typically entails building relationships across different administrative scales, across different social groups for the sustainable management of a given common-access natural resource. The multi-participant nature of this approach differentiates it from the normative definitions of “governing” in the political administrative sense. In other words, public participation schemes involve a network of actors acting to improve the outcome of social ecological interactions. Their inclusive character requires an awareness of social network characteristics within communities, because such social network characteristics can have an important bearing on how collaborative processes will unfold (Bodin et al 2009, Siegel, 2009). Koontz, (2005) also identifies social relationships as important determinants of successful participatory processes.

Social networks have gained ascendance in social science research and practice because of the insight they bring to the relationships between social actors and the consequences of these relationships in shaping social processes such as public participation. Borgatti & Halgin (year unknown p5) theorize social networks to be “the mechanisms and processes that interact with network structures to yield certain outcomes for individuals and groups”. The emphasis on the processes in the network structures and their consequences are contained in social network theories.

Social networks have been defined as entities (individuals or groups) and the relationships (ties) between these entities (Butts, 2008). Its theory is primarily concerned with the ties between social entities and not so much the attributes of the entities themselves. There are significant variations in social network structures and ties depending on the types of relationships among social actors. The strength of the ties among social actors varies and is dependent on aspects such as kinship, geography and creed. Closely linked to social networks is social capital which refers to the value of relations between social actors. Social capital can be assumed to be directly proportionate to the number of existing ties between social actors. That is, the more ties one has to other actors in society, the more social capital he or she can be said to have. Social capital and its attendant characteristics of trust, reciprocity, norms, rules, sanction, networks and groups is the lubricant that facilitate social transactions in society (Pretty & Ward, 2001).

The relationship or “ties” between social actors or nodes are categorized into “bonding” and “bridging” ties. Bonding ties are usually close relationships such as family members and close friends. These kinds of ties are characterized by high degrees of trust, emotional involvement and tend to be relied upon in times of personal crisis. For instance close friends or family members could be called upon for financial assistance or counsel in personal decisions. On the other hand bridging ties are those connections that fall outside an actor’s core group of close relationships. Also known as structural holes between networks, bridging ties connect a network to other networks. These are what Granovetter (1973) referred to as “weak ties”. For instance an individual may have two groups of friends who hardly interact with each other. Such an actor becomes the bridging connection between these two groups. But conversely, these “weak” connections are according to Granovetter more prone to broaden an actor’s network and hence are more conducive for diffusion of information. According to this reasoning, actors are more likely to gain new knowledge from outside their core group of friends than from within their core group of friends.

Broader networks afforded by weak ties therefore imply more social capital that can be drawn upon for information or resources in facilitating collective action (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). Implicitly, large networks comprising fairly unconnected actors are better suited for information flows between different networks. For one thing public participation schemes in natural resource management are action-intensive venture that demand resources and commitment from actors engaged in the process. Single-loop learning or simple knowledge of an issue is often insufficient inducement for action in NRM scenarios. Because NRM for the most part entails experimentation (learning by doing) in the face of complexities and uncertainties in social-ecological systems, social actors need more than just to be informed for them to take action, become fully engaged or change behavior. Thus despite their potential attribute for facilitating information flows and conduits for new knowledge, it can be hypothesized that weak connections are ill-suited to spur the kind of engagement requisite in participatory progresses. In policy networks in which cross-scale collaboration is necessary for optimal outcomes, bridging ties connecting actors to different networks are more valuable in mobilizing resources (Carlsson & Sandström, 2008).

Also connected to the bridging relationships in social networks structure and of importance in this study is modularity. Modularity denotes the

existence of several loosely connected groups within a network. Such groups could also be viewed as clusters with tighter internal connections but loosely connected to other groups within a network (Bodin et al, 2006). In a formal organizational setting modularity would be represented by the different departments such as communications, finance and logistics departments. Within informal settings, modularity could be seen as different user-groups of a recreational area. A network with high modularity implies the existence of many of such smaller groups within the network while low modularity denotes a situation of few of such groups. The inter-group connections afforded by modularity may offer possibilities for actors within a network to tap in to the specialist knowledge of other clusters within the network within co management frameworks. For instance birdwatchers, hikers and landowners may tap into the knowledge or resources of each other if they are part of the same forest governance network. But modularity can also lead to insularity and the formation of “us versus them” mentalities between groups within the same network (Borgatti and Foster (2003). This is a common feature in recreational conflicts in which one user-group becomes antagonistic and unreceptive to ideas from other user-groups in times of conflict (Manning, 1999). This of course limits the possibility for deliberation and learning, and consequently harms the participation process. In relation to this research, the local citizen organizations in Vuosaari, interacting within the local democracy initiative present a fitting example of modularity.

Contrariwise, closely knit networks in which actors are connected to one another can easily draw commitment and elicit action from its members. This can be attributed to the close links between actors and also to homophily which in social network terminology refers to the tendency for individuals with similar worldviews to coalesce. According to Coleman (1988) such networks are able to create and maintain a certain sway over actors’ behaviors because of the risk of collective sanction, if a member is seen as transgressing established group norms. Coleman (1988) refers to this interconnectedness as network “closure”. In other social network terminology tightly knit interconnected networks are said to have high density. Network density denotes the manner in which actors within a certain network are connected; the more connections between actors, the higher the density and vice versa. A network is said to be dense when actors have several connections to other members of the network (e.g. a football team). A highly interconnected network can foster a sense of group identity between actors in a network. High density

can facilitate information flow and learning which can ease decision-making in natural resource management situations because actors can easily coordinate with each other.

On the other hand high density can lead to intolerance whereby the group becomes unreceptive to differing knowledge (Carlsson & Sandström, 2008). This can become an obstacle for natural resource management given that multiple knowledge claims and inputs constitute a hallmark of collaborative natural resource governance. As is evident from above, while structural holes between social networks may increase the social distance of information, increase the availability of new knowledge and facilitate resource mobilization, they are relatively ill-suited for eliciting commitment, action and to some extent effective coordination in NRM. Conversely, while dense networks may facilitate coordination and actor-engagement, they may be disadvantageous to participative processes by limiting access to new knowledge and resources. Carlsson & Sandström (2008) propose that efficient collaborative management schemes ought to harness the opportunities offered by both forms of social networks. The rationale here being that while bridging networks are important for tapping new knowledge and resources, it is the commitment afforded by network closure (network density) that allows the transformation of these tapped knowledge and resources into action at local level.

According to Pretty and Ward (2001), the social capital (the value of social relations) that enables collective action is situated in “strong” connections at local level in the form of community organizations, clubs, and other citizen organizations. However such local connections do not exist in isolation. They usually are connected to other external networks such as government agencies or business, either through formal policy networks or through structural holes. Hence social networks can be viewed as spanning a spectrum from local to global spheres (Pretty and Ward (2001). Social capital in this instance is thus created by both horizontal connections (between local actors or groups) and vertical connections (e.g. between local groups and government agencies). From this characterization, it can be construed that strong local ties and bridging ties to external networks are important enablers of efficient participatory processes. In other words social capital both at local and global levels has the potential of bolstering collaborative governance provided such connections are fully harnessed within participative governance frameworks. This view resonates with Carlsson &

Sandström's (2008) positing above on how structural attributes such as density, modularity and bridging ties within social networks can influence collaborative governance.

However we must guard against being hastily sold on the notion that strong local connections and bridging ties to outside networks will automatically translate into efficient collaborative management regimes. Social capital (strong connections) both local and global is not always necessarily positive. For example groups such as the criminal gangs may have strong intragroup bonds but such social capital is destructive. Similarly, local social capital within some groups will not necessarily translate into positive outcomes for efficient collaborative management in that some densely connected local groups may become resistant to some forms of environmental governance which they perceive as threatening their interests. In his study of public participation in Israel, Alfasi (2003, p 195) for instance notes that NGOs and other civic groups "function according to very specific ideological views and are eager to promote their ideas regardless of the extent to which they represent the people"

Furthermore, bridging connections to external groups may not be fully harnessed especially in situations of power relations between local groups and government agencies. According to Pretty and Ward (2001) it is not uncommon for government agencies to proclaim adherence to integrated governance approaches but fail to develop truly collaborative vertical connections with local groups. In certain cases such integrative policy statements in practice become policy window-dressing while government agencies continue to mostly unilaterally implement techno-scientific "solutions" with narrow leeway for local groups to genuinely contribute to the process of formulating responses to socio-ecological dilemmas. This echoes Arnstein's (1969) "empty ritual" claim. The Helsinki City Council has variously stated its commitment to participative governance both as policy and in practice through its local democracy initiative. The interaction between the Vuosaari citizen associations and the Helsinki City officials within the framework of the local democracy initiative is an example of such local to global connections. Whether or not such external links provide real avenues for citizens in the Vuosaari district to affect participative processes will be examined in the course of this work.

The view of voluntary associations as aggregations of random individual interests and incubators of social capital has been espoused by Putnam (1993). According to Putnam, voluntary associations are not only hallmarks of a healthy civil society but are also key to building mutual trust among actors, facilitating communication, knowledge exchange and collective action. Putnam posits that voluntary associations reduce the incidence of social friction by providing a platform for consensus building that ultimately aids the common good. Echoing the same idea, Glanville (2004) notes that there exist two hypotheses on the manner in which voluntary associations shape social networks. One perspective holds that voluntary associations connect actors from different backgrounds and serves as a melting pot for different ideas, thereby promoting social cohesion and cooperation. While another holds that voluntary associations tend to attract similar actors whose subsequent interactions leads to homogeneity and commonality of worldviews in group members. This in the long run, it is suggested, tends to increase social fragmentation instead of bridging actors in society as a whole. While there may be compelling arguments to support both hypotheses Glanville (2004) notes that available research data has at best presented but inconclusive evidence to support both hypotheses. What everyday observation tells us though is that voluntary associations create and maintain boundaries, albeit shifting boundaries. The concern is how these shifting boundaries link these groups to other networks to enable society-wide action on issues of public interest such common-pool natural resources. The voluntary citizen associations in Vuosaari present an opportunity to examine how membership of some of these associations engenders social capital and the role this social capital plays in connecting these associations to other networks in the governance of urban green commons.

## **Methodology**

Creswell (2003) notes that the nature of the subject under investigation largely determines the methodology used in the study. This research examines actors' subjective interpretations of public participation as they engage with Helsinki City authorities in the particular instance of contesting views on the transformation of forested land for the construction of residential flats in Vuosaari. This study is also a probe into socially constructed perceptions of public participation based on actors' experiences, worldviews and the general socio-cultural context within which these actors' interaction with City Council authorities takes place. Conscious of the fluidity that characterizes different actors' perceptions and experiences; opting for a positivist or rationalist research approach would not have allowed me the liberty of exploring the diverse narratives and experiences of the actors. Going from the standpoint that reality is socially constructed and reconstructed through human action and symbolic interaction, it would follow that, aspects such as "urban green spaces" or "conservation" or "public participation" are social constructs that are defined and interpreted in different ways by different actors in different contexts. Consequently, understanding this shifting reality would best be achieved by a research process that allows an exploration of the actors' perceptions, expectations and experiences of public participation in the district. Such a method should also be able to capture how these perceptions, expectations and experiences influence their interaction as residents of Vuosaari and their interaction with City officials in the governance of the green spaces in the district. For this reason, a qualitative research approach was chosen since the methods afforded by this technique are better suited to capture the actors' perceptions, narratives and experiences. A qualitative research approach would also allow me access other reproductions of actor's experiences in artefacts such as blogs, and newspaper articles. This also echoes Creswell's (2003) assertion that qualitative research processes employ multiple techniques for data collection.

Furthermore, the district of Vuosaari is aptly suitable for this study because as Bodin et al (2006:1) note, studies on social networks and ecological governance should "contain different stakeholders within a fairly well-defined management area and can be used to mobilize and maintain the co-management of common-pool resources". Thus as a research project in social constructivism, the data collection techniques

employed in this study are most suited to understand how the various actors interact, describe their relationships and define governance.

### ***Epistemology***

Philosophically, public participation as a concept suggests the existence of several truths as exemplified by the often different knowledge claims of stakeholders in NRM situations. One of the premises of the participatory approach is the notion that the different stakeholders contribute to the generation and reproduction of knowledge in the process. Hence knowledge is not static or pre-defined but is constantly evolving as different stakeholders create and recreate reality as they interact with each other. This characterization of knowledge as constantly evolving lends itself to the philosophical tenets of constructivist theorists such as Berger and Luckmann (1966) who posit that social reality is constantly created and recreated through human symbolic interaction. In the case of Vuosaari, the fact that actors interact in their various capacities as residents (old and new), citizens, administrative officials, politicians, technical planners etc similarly insinuates different worldviews and thus precludes any assumption that a reasonable representation of the participative process may be achieved with a positivist-inclined approach. Moreover, the socio-cultural and political context within which this interaction occurs most certainly has a bearing on how the various actors perceive and react to the governance process. For instance in the prevailing information-rich environment characterized by active civil society engagement, the truth or knowledge is no longer the preserve of any one group be it technicians or administrators. Thus this study lends itself to interpretative research epistemology which according to Klein and Myers (1999) advances that knowledge is generated through social constructions (e.g. through lived experiences, language and artefacts). As a case study-phenomenological research attempting to explore public participation, social networks and their significance in the governance of green spaces within the district, actors' detailed lived experiences of the phenomenon, narrated in their own words would constitute a firm foundation for inductive theorizing about the nature of public participation in the district. Thus interviewees in this study are regarded not as passive participants but as active participants and co-creators of the knowledge in the process of this research. This strengthens the validity of this work.

### ***Situating Myself as the Researcher in this Study***

Bias is an issue social scientists have to contend with and have to be attentive to in order to give credibility to their research findings. In research, and especially so in qualitative studies, the researcher is part of the process and he or she needs to constantly reflect on his or her own subjectivities and what effect these may have on the research outcomes. In the case of this study I was conscious of my triple roles as an immigrant, a resident of Vuosaari and as a student of Environmental communication. As I an immigrant I was conscious of the fact that I do not necessarily understand the depth of the emotional connection of native Finns to forests. Notwithstanding, I have lived in Finland long enough to know the value locals place on nature and forests as recreation spaces. I was also conscious of the fact that as a resident of Vuosaari, my perception and judgment may be skewed against the Helsinki City officials in favor of narratives in favor of Vuosaari. As a resident I also could be tempted to purposely sample and retain the views of only residents I am familiar with. Thirdly, as a student of Environmental Communication, I was aware that my thinking may be guided by some of the theoretical approaches such as deliberative democracy taught on the program. This self-awareness helped me reflect on my role as the researcher and take steps to avoid bias as much as possible. For instance, I did not interview any of my acquaintances in Vuosaari. In fact I had never met any of my interviewees prior to interviewing them for this study. They were volunteers who opted to participate in the research after I put out a public request for volunteers. The interviews took place at a location of their choosing. Again, as an immigrant from Africa, I do not have the same passion for outdoor recreation as native Finns or other Westerners do. This lack of emotional association between me and the nature landscape of Vuosaari allowed me to maintain a certain emotional distance from the very sensitive issue of land use in Vuosaari. In short I could not feel the respondents' pain; which for me was a positive thing because I was able to rely only the respondents' knowledge and experiences for this study.

### ***Methods/Data Collection***

The reasons for choosing the qualitative approach over others, has been explained above. In this study, I employed data collection methods available for qualitative studies.

### ***Data Collection:***

**Interviews:** In October 2013, I appealed for volunteer interviewees during a neighborhood-democracy meeting between the residents and the Helsinki City Council officials which held in Vuosaari. A handful of residents attending the meeting initially opted to participate in my study, but many later abstained and only three adult females finally agreed to be interviewed. The reason for this abstention was hard to explain but I speculated it had to do with the sensitivity of the land-use dilemma involving the residents and the City council officials. I added two more interviewees (one male and one female) from contacts provided by one of the three first interviewees. One more male resident opted to be interviewed after I posted a request for volunteer interviewees on the Vuosaari Facebook page. In total I conducted five face to face interviews and one email interview. There were four females and two males. The five face-to-face interviews were open-ended with two being in-depth. One interview was held at the interviewee's residence, three took place at the Vuosaari library and one took place at the Café of the Vuosaari fitness center. The in-depth interviews lasted about 1hr 20 minutes each. I had a follow-up interview with one of the in-depth interviewees lasting about 30mins and the other in-depth interviewee sent me supplementary information via email with internet links to mobilization activities she had organized. The three other face-to-face interviews lasted about 45 minutes each. I recorded the two deep interviews and took notes during the three other interviews.

**Participant Observation** I attended a meeting between residents and Helsinki City Councilors in October 2013. The meeting was part of the local democracy project launched by the Helsinki City Council as a way of better involving local residents in deliberating important issues affecting the municipality. The agenda of the meeting was the controversial planned construction of new residential blocks for 2000 people on forested land in Meri-Rastila, Vuosaari. Some residents strongly opposed this project because they felt the new housing project would destroy forest which they valued for recreational and aesthetic reasons. The meeting was one in a series of such meetings called to deliberate the issue before a final decision was made by the City Council. I counted 50 to 60 attendees excluding the city Councilors who formed the panel.

**Internet Sourcing** I also collected information from internet sources such as the Helsinki City Council web site, the Vuosaari Society web site and Finland's Ministry of the Environment's web site. Other internet sources were the web pages of two associations that were formed as pressure groups to protect Vuosaari green areas. I also visited the Vuosaari Facebook page and the blog of one of my in-depth interviewees, who is also a key actor in local mobilization in the protection of green areas in Vuosaari.

During one of my interviews, it emerged that there exists a virtual network of residents on mailings lists which I could reach as potential respondents. I created an internet survey which I sent to the mailing lists which had hundreds of email addresses. The purpose of the survey was to get a general sense of how residents viewed the participatory governance approach of the Helsinki City Council. One of the questions asked was if residents feel they can influence the City Council's plans regarding land use in Vuosaari. But the response rate was very low. Only 10 questionnaires were filled and returned through this method. Consequently, I decided to focus on data obtained through the face-to-face interviews. Qualitative research is a process that is flexible and can be adjusted as the research process unfolds Cresswell (2003).

## **Data Analysis**

According to Schutt (2012) analyzing qualitative data is an attempt to understand the richness of "real social experience". Because qualitative research is for the most part an inductive exercise, I sorted collected data from interviews, notes and other documentary sources under categories which I considered relevant to the research questions. I also noted the significance of respondents' statements, expressions and observed behaviors as a participant observer. I sought relationships between these categories so as to have a sense of respondents' experiences.

- **Interviewee Bio Data** I recorded data on gender, age group, area of residence within Vuosaari and how long the interviewees had lived in Vuosaari.
- **Social Network.** I noted recurring names during the interviews and the nature of the interviewee's relationship with these names. I also considered patterns of information flows and mentions of

online communities and interviewee's relationship with these communities.

- **Participation and Mobilization.** I marked aspects of the interviewees' involvement in public participation activities. I noted the interviewee's role and activities.
- **The perspective held by Interviewee** The expressions and vocabulary was another category that I used to get clues into the interviewees' attitude towards lived experiences.

I compared the data from my interviews with data from other sources such as my internet sources, blogs and participant observation: a technique known as data triangulation in qualitative research.

### ***Constraints***

Respondents' unwillingness to participate in the data collection process limited my access to personal narratives and experiences on how residents interact within the district's social network. Linguistic constraints, the sensitiveness of the issue I believe, also contributed to the difficulty of obtaining more data.

## Results

### *Helsinki City Council's Stance on Public Participation*

The Helsinki City Council owns most of the land within the municipality and the governance of urban lands within the municipality is by and large the preserve of the Helsinki City Council as stipulated in Section 20 of the Finnish Land Use Act which states that “the local authority shall take charge of land use planning and building guidance and control within its territory”. Notwithstanding, the City’s urban land governance policy is based on other provisions of Finnish national legislation which guarantees certain rights of participation to local citizens. Finnish national legislation grants access rights to all regardless of who the owner is. This means that everyone can access a forest for purposes such as recreation or picking berries without seeking permission from whoever owns the said land, as long as such activities do not result in damages to the property. Another significant guarantee provided by Finnish legislation is the public’s right to participate in planning land development schemes. It also guarantees citizens’ right to contest land development schemes provided there are reasonable grounds to do so. Finland’s Land Use Act in Section one stipulates that “everyone has the right to participate in the preparation [of land development] process, and that planning is high quality and interactive”.

The provisions of Finnish National legislation form the basis of the Helsinki City Councils approach to land governance within the municipality. The City Council has variously stated its desire to include local residents in the planning of local land development projects. The City Council views local participation as a key component of its sustainability strategy for the municipality and has over the last decade continually encouraged local participation. For instance the City’s Sustainability Action Plan adopted in 2002 acknowledges the necessity of increasing local citizens’ participation in the sustainability strategies envisioned by the Council. Prior to this, local participation was also a key feature of the City’s sustainability strategy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century as contained in the Helsinki Local Agenda 21 initiated in 1998 which was a devolution process geared towards bringing collaborative planning into the different neighborhoods in Helsinki.

Over a decade after these developments, the Helsinki City Council still is developing strategies to increase public participation the governance of

the city. It recognizes that crafting a sustainable future for the city is an undertaking that calls for “the cooperation and commitment of all actors in society”. With regards to land development within the municipality, the official policy on public participation is stated on the City Council’s web site as follows:

*“Helsinki’s land use is planned in such ways that those interested have the opportunity to obtain information and participate in the planning process. You can assess a project at various stages of the process and express your opinion. You can comment by mail and e-mail, participate in meetings and online discussions, and contact the planner directly”.*

Information on the same website details of the planning cycle and how interested citizens can obtain information and participate in the planning process. Concretely, apart from emailing, interested citizens can participate and contribute in planning process during public discussions and neighborhood meetings involving City Council officials and residents. I was a participant observer at one of such meetings in Vuosaari in October 2013, organized to discuss a construction project in Meri-Rastila in Vuosaari which residents were opposed to. Other avenues for citizens to influence governance include web applications such as the *Kerrokartalla* (Tell-it-on-the-map) website where citizens can see on-going or planned projects on the city’s map and leave comments or queries. The web application also runs polls on planned projects. The *tell-it-on-the-map* tool is based on the rationale that local residents are more familiar with their neighborhoods and may in this manner be able to provide city planners with information that may otherwise not be obvious to the authorities. “*Laituri-Towards Tomorrow’s Helsinki*” is another web application provided by the City Council which offers citizens the chance to comment and pose questions on current and envisaged designs for new parts of the city. *Laituri* organizes meetings, conferences and workshops which are open to all and free of charge. In 2013, The City Council conducted a map survey which requested Helsinki residents to indicate suitable areas for urban development on a map of the city. The survey was part of the city’s 2050 vision. 4700 respondents located about 33000 locations on the map which included residential development and urban nature development proposals. A public meeting to discuss the survey with residents was held in spring 2014.

One of the City's novel flagship programmes for increased citizen participation is the *Lähidemokratia* (local democracy) pilot projects initiated in 2012. The local democracy project seeks to chart new ways of involving local residents in the governance of the municipality. There are currently ten of such projects, of which Vuosaari is one, covering different neighborhoods of the city. These projects serve as a platform to maintain constant dialogue and communication between municipal authorities and the local residents. It in principle gives the citizens better access to influencing governance issues affecting their neighborhoods. The Vuosaari local democracy initiative was established at the end of 2013 and is steered by a committee of forty local residents drawn mostly from the civic associations in Vuosaari. The committee serves as a bridge between residents and the municipal authorities. It works to increase citizens' interest and involvement in local governance issues by disseminating information on issues of importance to the neighborhood. The Vuosaari committee has four working groups covering themes such as the environment, youth, housing, recreation and wellbeing,

As is obvious from the preceding commentary, the Helsinki City Council positively views public participation and has taken steps to encourage public participation in the governance of the municipality. How efficient these strategies are is another issue which would probably require another thesis. It is worthwhile mentioning that matters of land use are decided mainly by two bodies within the City Council: The planning department which draws up the plans with all the impact assessments, and the Councilors constituted from different political parties who make the final decision by voting on major urban development projects. Thus whether or not a plan is executed depends on how the councilors vote.

## **Experiences of Public Participation**

For the purpose of privacy because interviewees have not given their consent for their names to be revealed, I will refer to the five participants in this research as Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2, Interviewee 3, Interviewee 4 and Interviewee 5.

**Interviewee 1** has lived in Vuosaari of 40years. She says she loves living in Vuosaari because of the greenery and the beautiful landscape and thinks that it should be protected. She has been involved in public

participation programs within the district since 1998 when the first public participation initiatives came into being. She is the coordinator of one of the resident forums in Vuosaari and thinks that the opportunity to enter into dialogue with the City officials on issues of land governance in the district is good because public meetings and other channels such as direct emails to City officials, allows interested citizens to be able to express their opinions to the City Council. She however is cynical about the Local democracy project, the latest Helsinki Council sponsored public participation initiative, which she described as a “closed group”. Despite her appreciation of the public participatory processes, she also is cynical about residents’ ability to influence the City officials into changing their decisions on land-use. As she puts it, the Officials

*“always pretended at meetings to understand our demands but never changed anything in their plans” ..... “these city planners make these decisions [about Vuosaari forests] when they have never been here”.*

In the last decade, the City Council and the residents have had two serious land-use disagreements. In 2002, planners from the Helsinki City Council produced a plan to construct habitats for 2000 people on part of an urban forest called *Mustavuori* (Black Mountain) in northern Vuosaari. This area is said to contain pristine forests and parts of it have actually been officially designated as protected areas. In addition, *Mustavuori* is a popular recreation ground for residents of East Helsinki and Vuosaari in particular. Resenting the perceived destruction of this forest landscape and a possible disruption of their recreation activities that the proposed residential apartments would bring, citizens coalesced to oppose and block the plan. Interviewee 1 was the founder and leader of *Pro Mustavuori*, a group which she says was out to “defend” *Mustavuori*. She was active in mobilizing support and raising awareness about the planned construction. Interviewee 1’s leadership is corroborated by interviewee 2 who called her a “pioneer” who has

*“organized many many many many...many things with the people of Vuosaari and then inviting the politicians to come ”*

Interviewee 1 details some of her activities:

*“among many other activities I organized a drumming session on the Mustavuori rocks with a witch, who held there a ceremony according old Finnish-Hungarian mythology”*

She seems to have been frustrated with the City officials' and felt that only some form of activism could make the City Council alter its plans. She used public awareness strategies as a way of drumming up public support, which she thought might be able to influence some politicians (city councilors) more than the planners. She remarks that "*the left and the greens listen to us*" (meaning councilors from left-leaning parties and the Green party). Interviewee 1 helped produce a video of Mustavuori which was shown to the Councilors during a meeting between citizens and Councilors. She sent me a link to the video with following text:

*"here is a very important video of our campaign, only 9 min and from 3 min onwards there is a nice confrontation of city planners and inhabitants!"*

She also invited the Councilors for walk in the said forest. According to her, the forest walk influenced the Councilors to vote against the planned housing project. She promoted *Pro Mustavuori* online with a web page, a blog, email lists and also collected 7000 signatures for a petition calling on the City Council to scrap the project in Mustavuori. Interviewee 1:

*"Of course we used emails very actively and also wrote countless opinions, officially to planning office and to newspapers and much more...."*

Interviewee 1 also organized a public demonstration in front of the City Council and invited the media to the forest. The controversy dragged on for seven years between 2002 and 2009. The construction project was finally cancelled in 2009 by the newly elected board of Councilors elected into office at the end of 2008. On her blog, Interviewee 1 called this a "historic demolition of the Master plan" (referring to the cancellation of the construction plan). In our interview she referred to the shelving of the project as a "victory".

**Interviewee 2** has lived in Vuosaari for 25 years and has been also active in public participatory initiatives. She says she got involved when she read about a demonstration to protest the planned construction of residential flats in Mustavuori. As she puts it;

*"I felt that if I don't do anything, then the politicians will feel it is okay to build in Mustavuori".*

She also feels that it is important that local residents must be consulted by the City officials on important matters regarding land use. As she puts it

*“the politicians are obliged to ask our opinion which we are very happy to give”.*

She has participated in numerous meetings with City officials, signed petitions and emailed Councilors. It appears she views the participative process (at least as concerns land use) as a struggle between citizens and City officials because in our interview she uses confrontational language to describe citizens' engagement. For instance;

*“when we were fighting for Mustavuori”.*

On another occasion she says

[we] *“bombard the politicians with emails”....“Pro Moustavuori is not working actively because now there is a truce”*

But she justifies Vuosaari residents' sensitivity to land-use issues as stemming from the fact that;

*“people feel that we have already given in so much; we have given our share [of land] compared to other areas” [of Helsinki].*

In her view, the Councilors (politicians) are more accommodating to residents' views than the planners as she remarks that:

*“the fighting is not so much against the politicians as it is against the city planners”.*

Interviewee 2 reasons that politicians are more malleable because they are wary of voter backlash during elections. She recounts that during the Mustavuori controversy, the majority of sitting Councilors were going to vote approve the building project, but a municipal election which held before that vote took place brought in new Councilors who voted against the project. Interviewee 2:

*“in Mustavuori no matter what we did the majority of politicians would have voted yes...but the election of new councilors changed that”*

### ***Experiences of the influence of Social Networks on Public Participation in Vuosaari***

**Interviewee 3** is very much involved in the participatory process as well. He holds a position in the Vuosaari-Society and helps organize many of the activities and discussion forums organized by Vuosaari-society. In his view residents have been very active in protecting the green spaces of Vuosaari, especially when such areas “*came under the threat of housing projects*”. Interviewee 3’s perception is that the different associations within Vuosaari have cooperated fairly well in the quest to safeguard the green spaces.

All the groups and associations in the Vuosaari district are affiliated to an umbrella organization called the Vuosaari Society (Vuosaari-Seura). This organization is the largest and open to all residents of the district. Its mission is to promote the well-being of the residents by engaging in areas such as conservation, organizing social activities and ensuring that the increasing urbanization of the district is not done at the detriment of the natural beauty of the area. The Vuosaari Society is the primary contact point for the City of Helsinki in matters of urban development within the district and the Society serves as the voice of the residents; defending their interests and negotiating on behalf of the residents. The Society also runs two projects known as Aluefoorumi (Area Forums) covering the two main parts of the district namely Keski-Vuosaari (Central Vuosaari) and Meri-Rastila. These area forums are essentially platforms for residents of these two vicinities to engage Helsinki City officials (Planners and Councilors) to deliberate on matters affecting them. Interviewee 3 notes that the various associations constitute a network which facilitates the exchange of information, discussion and action. This view is also corroborated by interviewee 2 who maintains that “*Vuosaari is very strong when it comes to the people defending what they think is right*”

But interviewee 4 has had a different experience. Interviewee 4 is a young man who has lived in Vuosaari for 10 years. He says he appreciates the greenery of the district and supports actions to protect the green spaces of Vuosaari. He follows the issues online and signs petitions but says he does not attend any meetings, neither is he very active in any of the protests. When I asked him why he does not attend discussion meetings despite his obvious interest in land governance in Vuosaari. His answer was “*there is a core group of people and I don’t*

*know anyone there*". This seemed to suggest that there were different layers of networks within those involved in public participation. Interviewee 5 also recounted a similar experience. Although in her case she said she had just moved to Vuosaari in the last year and was mostly active on online forums. I indeed discovered that there exists a meshwork of such networks online. Interviewee 3 remarked the new media has changed the way people engage in public participation. Interviewee 2 made a similar remark when she said that there exist several different mailing lists through which information is shared. At the time of writing this thesis the Vuosaari Facebook page had a little over 4000 members. This online platform is one of the ways in which residents connect with each other, exchange information and build momentum for collective action.

Interviewee 1 recounts that during the Mustavuori controversy, she used her connections to tap into a network known as Kaupunkimetsäliike (Urban Forest league), which is a network of civic associations within the Helsinki region acting to protect urban and peri-urban forests from destruction brought by increasing urbanization. This group, according to her, joined them in bringing pressure to bear on City officials. Interviewee 1 also used her contacts in the media to get media coverage of Mustavuori controversy. She proudly says that she got a full page of coverage from *Helsingin Sanomat*, Finland's biggest daily.

Although the district is considered one entity, clusters of relationships have developed among residents in different parts of the Vuosaari. These clusters have developed longitudinally as the district has expanded over time with the addition of new residential areas. Vuosaari has roughly grown in three phases. The older part of the district called *Keski Vuosaari* was developed in the 60s; the second wave of real estate development came in the 80s and 90s in the Meri-Rastila part of Vuosaari while the newest residential area known as Aurinkolähti (Sunshine Bay) was constructed in the last decade. Clusters of relationships have somehow formed along these lines leading to the creation of constellations or mini-networks within the wider Vuosaari network. Thus even though there somewhat is a "Vuosaari identity" among residents, and even though residents collaborate within the umbrella Vuosaari Society organization, clusters of somewhat stronger bonds have developed among residents in Keski Vuosaari, in Meri-

Rastila and in Aurinkolahti. And these divisions seemed to affect the manner in which residents engaged City authorities. When I asked her about cooperation between the different clusters Interviewee 2 remarked that “*the active people in every association cooperate*” but added rather dryly that

*“the people of Aurinkolahti have started to challenge Vuosaari seura because they think they come from higher social status and have a little more money”*

In the Meri Rastila part of Vuosaari, the City’s plan to build residential apartments for 2000 people on forested land which residents considered recreation ground was authorized despite the disapproval of residents of Meri-Rastila. In this instance concerned citizens had mobilized and formed *Pro Merirastila* with same mission as *Pro-Mustavuori*: the defense of forested land on the shorelines of Meri-Rastila. But unlike in the *Pro-Mustavuori* case, the City forged on with its plans to build. According to interviewee 2, part of the reason for the failure to halt the City’s Meri Rastila project was that the residents of Meri Rastila had not developed strong bonds because residents of Meri-Rastila mostly recent arrivals living in City-owned rental apartments. According to Interviewee 2 residents of Northern Vuosaari, where the Mustavuori building scheme was halted, have a long history of collective action. This history, according to her helped strengthen their relationships and probably their resolve in engaging the City officials over Mustavuori. In her words

*“the people here have fought for these areas much longer than the people of Meri Rastila” ...“we want to preserve this architecture”*

## Discussion

In this qualitative study I set out to explore public participation in the governance of public green spaces in the Vuosaari district, known for its beautiful landscape but which has in recent times been the object of significant urbanization; a trend that has caused some controversies between residents and the Helsinki City Council.

It is evident that the Helsinki City council favorably views public participation and has taken steps to include members of the general public in governance issues, especially those pertaining to the green spaces around Helsinki. The City Council's public participation approach fulfills some of the basic prerequisites for public participation as put forward by the Aarhus Convention: e.g the public's right of access to information. It also meets Reed's (2008) suggestion that public participation be institutionalized. For instance it is legislated that the City submit building plans to residents for review prior to construction and the City is required to address and resolve citizens' complaints about such plans. Notwithstanding, despite the fact that an enabling environment for public participation has been established, the extent to which citizens are able to influence final outcomes remains debatable in the light of the experiences of interviewees in this study. Though the residents participate in deliberations with City officials, the fact that final decisions on land development is the preserve of the Councilors wholly precludes citizens from decision making.

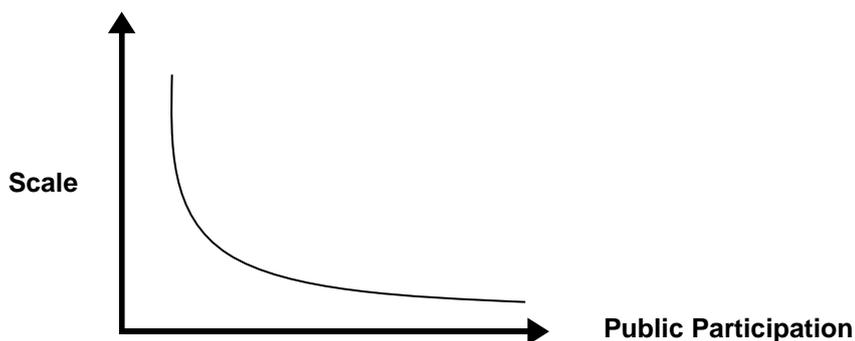
This situation might be likened to the "Consultation" rung of Arnstein's ladder. According to Arnstein this form pseudo-participation is characterized by "neighborhood meetings and public hearings" during which citizens get "to hear and be heard" but their ideas never get incorporated in the final decisions. This resonates with Interviewee1's statement that officials *"always pretended at meetings to understand our demands but never changed anything in their plans"*. May be it is the realization that it would take more than just neighborhood meetings to make their voices heard that prompted residents to resort to activism as a way of making their point on the City's building plan. The fact that they describe their experience as a "fight" may be an indication of their frustration with the intransigence of City officials. Public participation programs are not intended to be "fights". This brings in to the limelight Burns et al's (1994) ladder of Citizen Empowerment. From the narratives of the interviewees, the participative process regarding the two land-use

controversies could fit under the Ladder Citizen Empowerment's "cynical consultation" rung similar to Ansteins's "Consultation" rung which both models define as "non-participation" stages. The citizens are offered a semblance of participation but have no real clout to affect final outcomes.

But on the other hand, Finnish legislation on public participation guarantees full access to information for citizens. This guarantee is as well reflected in the Helsinki City Council's public participation policy. By extension this implies that residents of Vuosaari had access to proper information regarding the land development schemes. In the Ladder of Citizen Empowerment, access to "high quality information" is a measure of genuine citizen participation. Following this logic, the Vuosaari case is simultaneously a case of "non-participation" and "genuine participation". This is an ambiguity which reinforces the arguments that participatory processes are not linear; but rather are complex processes involving dynamic relationships between different entities in society Tritter et al (2006).

It is plausible that the City's purported inflexibility in both land-use controversies has to do with scale. Both housing projects were big investments against which, for the City, it seems, the concerns of residents were minor. Following this thinking, it could be said the scale of issues involved may influence the readiness of officials to accommodate citizens' concerns in public participation schemes. A good hypothesis might be that the higher the scale is for officials, the less accommodating officials will be to citizen concerns. The graph below attempts to elucidate.

*Fig 4: The relationship between scale and Public Participation.*



The graph above explains the relationship between scale and public participation. The higher the scale for officials, the less accommodating it

will be to citizens' ideas. Scale is an aspect which is not addressed in Burns et al's or Arnsteins' ladder. Further research is required to assess the effect of scale on public participation.

From the interviewees' narratives it could be deduced that the structure of social networks in Vuosaari with regards to the governance of green spaces has had a somewhat mixed effect on the outcomes of the two controversial land-use scenarios touched on in this research. In these two controversies, structural aspects of the social network in Vuosaari played a subtle although not determinant role in the outcomes of both cases. In the first instance, the spearheads of the activist were long-term residents, with strong personal relationships with each other. Their in-group solidarity was instrumental in maintaining the engagement with the City officials for the seven years the controversy lasted. In the Meri-Rastila case, weaker bonds between the residents probably contributed to the diminished commitment in asserting residents' interests in engaging City officials. Meri Rastila is a highly heterogeneous part of Vuosaari. In fact it is called "Mogadishu Avenue" because of the many Somalis residing there. This heterogeneous mix of residents living in mostly City-owned apartments certainly had not developed strong enough social relationships. Interviewee 2 explained what she thought could have accounted for the different outcomes in the MUstavuori and Meri Rastila controversies:

*"there is a history.....the people here have fought for these areas much longer than the people of Meri Rastila"*

The more than seventy different civic associations within the district represent what is referred to as Modularity in social networks terminology. Modularity is observable in the clusters of relationships that have formed in the three different parts of the district (Keski Vuosaari, Meri-Rastila and Aurinkolähti). These clusters of relationships seemed to have been strengthened by the formation of exclusive associations in these areas. Residents of Aurinkolähti formed their own residents' association, and called it Helsingin Aurinkolähti Seura (loosely translated as Helsinki Sunshine Bay Association): Interviewee 2 remarked that Aurinkolähti is dissociating itself from Vuosaari.

*“the people of Aurinkolahti have started to challenge Vuosaari seura because they think they come from higher social status and have a little more money”*

This echoes Glennville's (2004) hypothesis that voluntary associations shape social networks by creating clusters of similar individuals which in the long run increases social fragmentation. More ominously as noted by (Borgatti and Foster (2003) modularity can also lead to insularity and the formation of “we” and “them” mentalities between groups within the same network.

A significant trend in the social network in this case study is the existence of virtual networks with thousands of sometimes faceless or anonymous actors connected on social media sites or mailing lists. These networks are alive with discussions on the need to preserve the ecological assets of Vuosaari. The Vuosaari Facebook page counts about 4000 members. This, along with the several mailing lists constitutes online communities where the majority of residents are active. I observed, from the pictures of past protests that the protests were scantily attended. I also observed scant attendance when I attended a neighborhood democracy meeting between Helsinki City officials and Vuosaari residents to discuss the Meri-Rastila controversy. There were less than 60 participants, mostly leaders of the different associations in Vuosaari. This trend of thousands of online activists and few actively participating in meetings echoes Chanan's (1997) pyramid of public participation which posits that public participation will cause some community members to move up the pyramid of participation as they take up leadership roles within the community either because of their skills or motivation. As a consequence a small pool of community leaders from various community associations will drive the participation process while the bulk of the community remains at the lower end of the pyramid, less engaged in the participatory process.

As a concluding remark, while the experiences of the participants in this study do not provide a complete picture of the governance of urban green commons in Vuosaari, they do provide important pointers to some of the dynamics driving public participation in today's heterogeneous neighborhoods. The mix of long term residents and new arrivals, technology, scale, and the constantly changing relationships between entities in society all contribute in rendering public participation a

complex yet vital process best captured, in my opinion by Tritter et al's (2006) mosaic illustration.

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