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Transformation or Stagnation?

Participation in Sustainability Science — a Comparative Case Study

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English Summary

Problem. Expectations regarding participation in sustainability research are high: public participation and knowledge co-production by scientific and non-scientific actors are widely regarded as major preconditions to addressing sustainability problems such as climate change and the transformation of the energy system. Despite these high expectations with respect to participatory processes, and the existence of numerous studies dealing with their methodological implementation, empirically based analyses of the process-impact link remain the exception. Few studies exist that systematically consider which factors lead to discrepancies between ideal-typical planning and the actual practice of participation. On the contrary: criticism is increasing that — contrary to expectations — collaborative formats contribute little to the solution of sustainability problems and offer limited participation options for diverse social groups. As a result, they uncritically reproduce existing power structures.

Research goal. This study offers an innovative contribution to a better scientific understanding of participatory processes and their (in)effectiveness. For this purpose, the study expands the research focus and examines practised participation processes and their results as well as their conceptual level. This thesis provocatively asks to what extent currently dominant participatory approaches in sustainability science and their practice contribute to maintaining the status quo of unsustainable, resource-intensive and environmentally harmful production and consumption patterns. In the context of this critical-reflective work, special attention is paid to accompanying socio-political discourses, because participation is politically and socially constructed. To this end the author develops a literature-based heuristic to characterise four key approaches to participation: emancipatory, deliberative, functional and competitive participation. This study shows that these four approaches to participation are linked to different competing scientific-analytical and normative political ideas of social change and concepts of sustainable transformation, and are therefore linked to inherent concepts of power.

Methods. The thesis combines a comparative meta-analysis and an in-depth analysis in an innovative case study design. The comparative meta-analysis examines 31 participatory sustainability studies covering different areas of study and spatial levels. This provides an understanding of how participation is translated from theory into practice, what challenges occur that contradict initial aims, and how these potentially influence expected effects. The in-depth analysis examines the participation practice for five par-

ticipatory scenario and visioning processes in the context of the project “Innovations for a Sustainable Land Use and Energy Management on a Regional Level” (INOLA). This project adopted a transdisciplinary research approach in order to develop solutions for a sustainable land use and energy system on a regional level through co-produced knowledge.

Results. The results show (i) the dominance of functional and competitive approaches to participation and (ii) stark divergences between planning and implementation: persistent normative ideals in the planning phase, echoing deliberative and emancipatory claims, contrast with an emphasis on effectiveness during implementation. Expectations regarding inclusive, deliberative processes often cannot be met. This leads to a systematic over-representation of experts and an under-representation of diverse societal actors in the studies. The focus is on producing directly measurable results rather than promoting possible (long-term) societal effects.

This work shows that the dominance of functional participation processes is systematic and a result of the numerous and contradicting demands that both funders and society place on participatory processes in sustainability research. Scarce time resources, publication pressure and an implicit trust in established methods and processes reinforce the use of “efficient” approaches to participation. However, questions of social justice as well as alternative ideas of transformation are neglected or marginalised by the focus on efficiency and immediate results. This thesis shows the complexity of participation practice: those who claim to aim for social change through inclusive and broad participation sometimes themselves contribute to the (re-)production of existing realities and power relations.

Outlook. This thesis is for readers from various fields of sustainability research who are interested in participation, in particular in transformation-oriented science-practice participation. The study offers practical advice for future participatory processes. The heuristic developed here enables the implementation of reflective, responsible and diverse participation, taking into account that the process and the results are significantly influenced by conceptual assumptions.