

Negotiating Northern Energy Systems: Finnish energy projects in the context of environmental policy in the circumpolar North

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1 Introduction

This research project, funded by the Academy of Finland, explores the negotiation of Northern energy systems. It refers to a lack of social scientific research in explaining the evolvement of energy systems, and addresses the processes of negotiation on a national and an international level, and especially in regard to local communities.

2 Objectives of the research

It is important to take a closer look at the social processes underlying the use of natural resources in order to understand how local, national, international and global energy systems are constructed and intertwined. Hence, the project aims at understanding the social processes of energy resource development in more than general terms. Its goal is to find out how for instance the Fennoscandian countries, united by a common energy market, but more importantly, united by certain climate conditions and social systems, negotiate their energy system against the background of tackling the growing challenges associated with climate change. For the study, social interaction on the national level is as relevant as the social interaction on a more local, communal level. The social processes of the making, as well as the social impact and social consequences of energy decisions shall be evaluated by studying the legislative basis, governmental strategies, stakeholder views, planning practices, and the final realisation of projects.

Preliminary results of this project focus on the current state of assessment and licensing practices in Finland. During the next two years, a comparative view will be achieved by including Scandinavian and Canadian practices through a literature review and a six-months visit to the Canadian Circumpolar Institute in Edmonton, Alberta.

3 Results

Consensual decision making on nuclear power plants and a successfully negotiated final repository for spent fuel have attracted attention towards Finnish decision making on energy projects. With regard to the history of nuclear power in Finland, however, an easy adoption of Finnish decision making seems unfeasible. In the case of nuclear facilities, a to-date worldwide unique practice is given with the decision-in-principle by the Government, and its subsequent ratification by the Parliament. As part of the licensing procedure, the approving or disapproving decision-in-principle is highly accepted among the public, although other parts of the procedure, such as practices of the environmental impact assessment, are highly criticised. From studying the course of negotiations from the early planning stage, one can state

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that neutrality and representativeness of the decision maker are two important factors in the development of nuclear power in Finland. However, negotiations behind closed doors (Kojo 2006) between industrial developers and municipal leaders threaten the success story.

As part of the licensing procedure, the Environmental Impact Assessment Act aims to encourage public participation in order to satisfy demands for “enhanced democracy”. The act does, however, not specify participatory methods. A strong polluter-pays principle and lacking supervision thus allows developers and consultants to employ methods that suit their goals. Lack of resources does not allow environmental administration to take a lead in facilitating assessments, however, their neutrality would be a prerequisite for successful, i.e. widely accepted, planning and decision making.

The expansion of nuclear power decreases the share of renewable energy in the country’s energy mix, and thereby increases the pressure to further harness hydro and wind energy resources. A trend which is supported by the governmental strategy to construct “financially profitable and environmentally acceptable hydro and wind power plants” (Finland 2008: 5). Since many river sites are protected by law, companies struggle to find loop holes in legislation or strive for the abolishment of legal acts. In addition to the national legislation, European directives are frequently utilised for different purposes, whether for the sake of opposing or promoting a project proposal. Much of the actual debate thus reflects legal requirements, while at the same time it is dominated by scientific reasoning. Political communication and the possibility of norm-building are excluded or predominated by “technoscientific normativity” (Bora 2007).

4 Relevance of the research

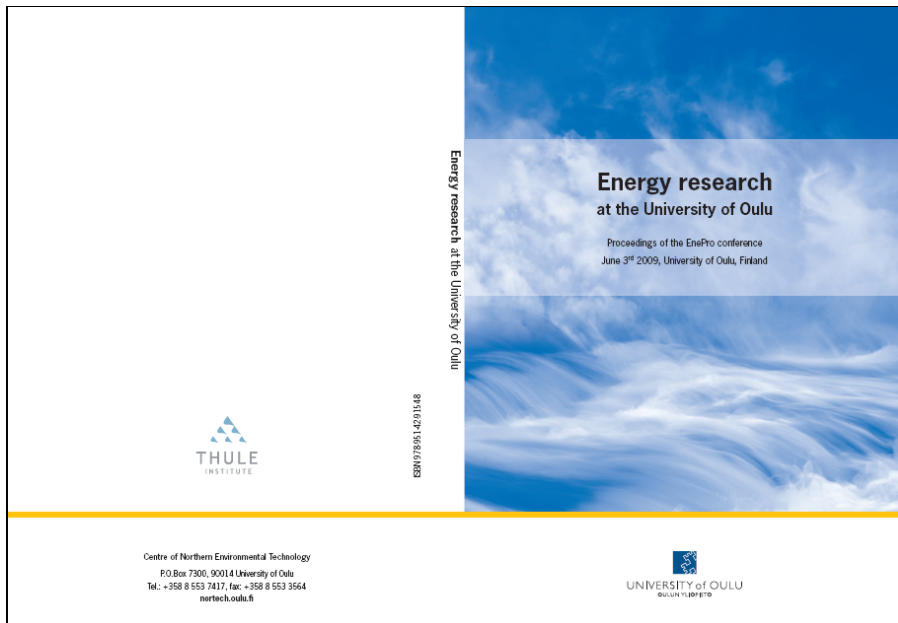
Results of this study suggest a revision of the licensing procedure for energy projects in Finland. Especially the environmental impact assessment, the most accessible phase from a citizen’s point of view, needs stronger guidance. It is recommended to define purposes and outcomes of public participation at different stages of the licensing of energy projects. It is further advisable to restrain the above-mentioned technoscientific normativity and to allow political argumentation at certain stages of the procedure. This may enhance acceptance of procedures and subsequent decisions locally and strengthen trust into authorities generally. An international comparison of licensing procedures will help to depict benefits and pitfalls of different participatory choices.

References

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