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WINS Seminar

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Title of presentation: An institutional approach to participatory environmental governance

Abstract

Participation has always been a central issue for environmental sociology and cognate fields. Public participation and the inclusion of lay people and stakeholder groups have been promoted as the key remedy to technocratic decision-making and environmental degradation and as instrumental for better decisions. But what has participation come to mean when sociologists and scholars from related disciplines have explored, criticized or expressed their commitment to participatory practices in the environmental field? In the related field of science and technology studies (STS) critique has been raised against 'commitments to public participation' in relation to at least three points: 1) Dominating approaches to participation rely on unreflected normative premises that often favour rational, deliberative, and organised forms of participation. Such commitments are not compatible with other commitments by STS scholars, such as the commitment to studying 'practices in the making'. As a consequence; 2) much of the participation research has focused on 'invited participation' (i.e. government-led, organised participation procedures) which takes us away from the relation between issue-formation, publics and material engagement (including engagement with 'natures' and 'things'). In addition; 3) there is a lack of conceptual clarity and very little participatory research attend to the analytical effects of different conceptualisations of participation.

The argument in this presentation is that conceptualising participation as something outside organised, 'controlled' events, does not take us very far (although a conceptualisation of 'publics' as something outside controlled events makes a lot of sense). I will present my approach to an institutional analysis of public participation and discuss why it makes sense to study participation primarily as a relation between inviters and invitees, and as always organised and (at least to some extent) controlled. In this analysis I draw on examples from my own research as well as a review of the literature on participation in environmental governance.

Short bio

Linda Soneryd is associate professor and lecturer in sociology at the University of Gothenburg. During 2016 Soneryd is a guest researcher at IRI THESys, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin. Her research interests concern participatory governance and forms for organising participation, environmental conflicts and decision-making and new forms for governing science, technology and innovation