

Sense-making and Impact Assessment

Sense-making and IA

This PhD project is about SEA implementation in the Danish energy sector. The project aims at facilitating a shift towards a decent SEA practice in the sector.

The Danish energy sector is characterised by many changes and uncertainty about developments. A main challenge to SEA implementation is to identify when decisions are made and how assessments should be framed.

The project integrates knowledge about how we make sense of situations into SEA methodology to strengthen the staging of impact assessments and the process of scoping impacts.

The "sense-making way of talking about IA" is in itself hoped to give new insight and awareness.

Sense-making – what and why?

The concept of sensemaking is well named because, literally, it means the making of sense. Active agents construct sensible, sensible events. They "structure the unknown". (Weick 1995, p. 4)

It is more than interpretation, since it focus on "how the cues were internalized in the first instance and how individuals decide to focus on specific cues". (Weick 1995, pp. 7-9)

"... organizations can be good at decision making and still falter. They falter because of deficient sensemaking. ... Sensemaking is about contextual rationality. It is built out of vague questions, muddy answers, and negotiated agreements that attempt to reduce confusion." (Weick 1993, p. 636)

Nordic sense-making research

Although, sense-making theory is founded by Americans, research on sense-making has been conducted in Nordic business school and universities for decades. This is seen e.g. in the journal Nordic Organisation Studies. Especially business schools in Copenhagen, Bergen and Helsinki are using sense-making theory.

The research on sense-making is seldom related to impact assessment. On of the few examples is Corvellec and Risberg's (2007) study on wind power development, in which they show how impact assessment is part of developers' efforts on influencing sense-making among others "the way in which developers, as meaning managers, stage the project and provide it with direction." (p. 306).

Impact assessment in a Sense-making perspective

Noticing and bracketing

THEORY

Agents enact the context in interaction with "an almost infinite stream of events and inputs that surround any organizational actor" (Weick et al. 2005), and retrospectively select cues to start making sense of the interaction.

We notice and bracket certain elements and unknowingly ignore other. What we bracket is guided by mental models acquired during work, training, and life experience.

Creating meaning

Agents label events that are difficult to grasp and turn selected cues into a story that seems plausible in terms of our identity and experiences. The labelling makes it possible to discuss and act on situations in order to reduce ambiguity.

In contrast to much other theory, plausibility is "the fundamental criterion of sensemaking." (Weick et al. 2005, p. 416) and the basis for creating meaning.

Sense-giving

Sense-giving is "the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality." (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991, p. 442)

Sense-giving is more political and power oriented than the other elements of sense-making theory.

IMPACT ASSESSMENT



Prior to the IA process, we somehow notice – from the flux of input that we face - that a development is going on and that it may be relevant to do an IA. Similarly our scoping is based on what we notice – and what we do not notice.



IA is about labelling and creating a story of cues! We label impacts and significance to make them discussable and create a plausible story of how the development is likely to impact the surroundings.



IA consultations are sense-making forums – but also sense-contests (Maitlis and Lawrence 2007). Consultations can be explained as contests between different 'senses' that different actors try to impose each other by different framings

EXAMPLE

The natural gas storage of LI Torup was to be re-leashed and expanded.



Experience with re-leaching called for focus on xenobiotics. Cues of significance and scope were selected through analysis of samples.

Uncertainty about impacts on a protected area were labelled and turned into a story:



- "Concentration of xenobiotic parts will not exceed maximum permissible value for discharge."
- "Thus, no immediate or permanent effects are expected"

Sense-giving efforts were obvious at public meetings. The mercury discharge was e.g. framed in two ways:

- "2 kg mercury per year is nothing compared to normal intake from sea (800 kg)"
- "2 kg mercury per year is way too much for a fragile and protected natural area"



QUESTIONS

If awareness of how we notice and bracket events improve quality of IA e.g. by avoiding missing important impacts, what is it then that we need to know about noticing and bracketing?

Are we critical about the stories we create – how we construct and explain impacts of developments and relevant alternatives?

Are we reflective about the labels we put on impacts and their uncertainties?

Are we using plausibility as criterion?

Sense-giving may be relevant for improving our communication of meanings

How do we become aware of our framings?

Can we make sure that the audience notices and brackets the most important aspects?

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