Background

The upcoming students’ project is focused on the ‘readability’ of environmental assessment documents (Ryan et al. 2011). Public participation is a central element of environmental assessments and has been discussed by many scholars (cf. Arnstein 1969; Irvin et al. 2004; Sinclair and Diduck 2009; Wiklund 2011; O’Faircheallaigh 2010). It can strengthen democracy, enable citizens to influence decisions, and increase the quality and the legitimacy of decisions (Gluckler et al. 2013). To reach these goals, the public needs to be informed early (BMU 2015) and various types of accessibility must be ensured: The reader must have physical access to the document and the content must be accessible in terms of comprehensibility (Hourdequin et al. 2012). Overall, citizens must be enabled to understand the documents in order to voice their opinion thereon and successfully participate. Knowledge can confer power, especially considering the knowledge gap between expert decision-makers and the public in environmental assessment processes (Hourdequin et al. 2012). To bridge this expertise barrier (Parthasarathy 2010), impact assessment needs to move away from long, technical documents (Partidário et al. 2013).

In an effort to improve public participation, at least the U.S. and European governments and supranational regulations such as the Espoo Convention and the Kiev Protocol require a non-technical summary to be submitted with an environmental impact assessment document (cf. §16, §40 of the German EIA Act (UVPG)). Unfortunately, the summary alone is not always sufficient to fully understand a project or plan and to participate. Often, these summaries are still very technical and hard to read (Möller-Lindenhof 2018). This is part of the well-researched theme of the policy implementation gap (cf. Bennett 1993; Jordan 1999; Börzel & Buzogány 2019). Concerning guidance on creating reader-friendly documents, the U.S. is a pioneer; there is a Code of Federal Regulations\(^1\) on reducing paperwork, and the Federal Plain Writing Act also extends to federal regulations (such as NEPA). Guidance on implementing plain language can be found in the Federal Plain Language Guidelines (PLAIN 2019), as well as documents by State authorities (WSDOT 2008) as well as national and international NGOs (AASHTO 2014; IAIA 2015; Plain Language Association International 2019). In the EU, there are no requirements for reader-friendly documents in environmental assessments. However, there is a publication on how to write clearly (EC 2011). Considering (still) member states, plain language efforts can be found in the UK (Plain Language Campaign 1990). Although the German Environmental Information Act\(^2\) requires understandable environmental information, only few guidance documents on administrative language are available (cf. Bundesverwaltungsamt 2002; Landeshauptstadt Wiesbaden 2011). As of 2018, guidelines for reader-friendly documents in environmental assessments have been published (Grimm et al. 2018).


\(^2\) UIG (Umweltinformationsgesetz) https://www.bmu.de/themen/bildung-beteiligung/umweltinformation/umweltinformationsgesetz/ aufgerufen am 29.01.2019
Project Approach and Outline

In this project, we want to assess the readability of environmental assessment documents in various countries and contexts. The language abilities of the participants of the students’ project will influence the case selection. We want to use this project as an opportunity to apply the steps of planning, structuring and conducting a research project (cf. Sage Research Methods 2019; USC Libraries 2019).

1a) Exploring the background:
   - What is readability? Why is readability relevant for IA?
   - Which national and international requirements for reader-friendly documents exist in general / for environmental assessment? What do these regulations state?
   - What is the state of research on readability (related to environmental planning)?
   - How has it been analyzed (methods, data)? Which methods / tools exist to measure readability (in which languages)?

1b) Setting the stage:
   - What question(s) do we want to answer?
   - Where will we focus our research (geographically)?
   - What kind of documents will we analyze? Where can we get the documents?
   - How many cases will we analyze (sample size)?
   - With which criteria & indicators will we analyze readability? How exactly will we analyze the data (methods)?

Expected result/deliverables: Understanding readability, the state of research and current requirements (the resulting literature review is the first chapter of the final report). Preparing a study design for the remaining project (‘method’ chapter of the final report).
Milestone 2:

The analysis: Students work in groups to conduct the analysis outlined in the study design. Existing guidelines (cf. Plain Language Campaign 1990; Grimm et al. 2018) and online tools (cf. Flesh Reading Ease Index, see Ott 2009) will be used to assess the readability of environmental assessment documents. Steps will include:

- Acquire data (IA documents/reports)
- Conduct the analysis as outlined in milestone 1
- Present the data in appropriate form (e.g. develop charts, graphics)
- Compare cases with each other (in qualitative and/or quantitative way)
- Make limitations and outfalls of your research transparent

Expected result/deliverables: Learning to apply a method in a structured and repeatable fashion, considering possible outfalls / limitations. The completed analysis will comprise the ‘results’ chapter of the final report.

Milestone 3:

Reflection: The last step requires students to reflect the results of their analysis in light of current regulations, practice and existing literature.

- What do our findings mean considering state of research and practice?
- What implications can we draw for practice and for future research?

Expected result/deliverables: Learning to place research findings in current academic discourse and environmental planning practice. The reflection will result in the concluding chapter(s) of the final report (discussion & conclusions).

Organization

The work will be structured in plenary sessions and conducted in student groups. Main topics will be developed by the participants and then discussed in the plenum. The students will moderate the plenary meetings. The language of the plenary meetings and the written results will be English, but research can include countries of the participants origin. Soft skills and project management approaches will be applied. The results will be compiled into a coherent project report. A presentation of project results will take place in adequate forums and a final presentation of results will take place on July 11th, 2019.

The ‘field trip’ will take place during the excursion week (June 3-7, 2019).

First plenary meeting on Friday, April 12th, 2019, 10am in EB 414.

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References


