

ASSESSMENT IS TO ACT – COLLABORATIVE CREATION OF SOCIAL KNOWLEDGE IN ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH ASSESSMENT AND POLICY-MAKING

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Background and aims: This presentation describes a recent doctoral thesis. It presents the research underlying the work at the National Institute for Health and Welfare (THL), and several projects, in developing novel methods and tools to support societal decision making. Particularly the aim has been to improve effectiveness of environmental health assessment by means of increased openness.

Methods: The research question was: “how can scientific information and value judgments be organised for improving societal decision making in a situation where open participation is allowed?”. This question was considered in the context of environmental health, but also in regard to benefit-risk analysis of food and plant-based food supplements, and also beyond these fields. The search for answers built on epidemiology and toxicology as well as different conventions of assessment and risk research. This knowledge was complemented with insights from other disciplines, particularly epistemology, cognition science, collaborative information technology, and industrial engineering and management.

Results: The tendencies towards deeper engagement between experts and policy-makers, broader participation, and more pragmatic, yet multidisciplinary, assessment framing indicate the incapability of conventional assessment approaches to address the complexity of environmental health. Policy-making, assessment, and participation are not separate, but intertwined aspects of a societal process of knowledge creation and use, which should be open for everyone. Recent advances in theories of learning and collaborative information systems provide means to facilitate such processes. Evaluation of these processes and their outputs is meaningful only according to their societal outcomes. These insights are implemented in open assessment method and Opasnet web-workspace (<http://en.opasnet.org>).

Conclusions: Environmental health assessment and policy-making are two perspectives to the same social knowledge process. The former answers questions, the latter explores questions and implements knowledge in practice. Openness in this intertwined process is meaningful and possible. However, the methodological and technical enablers alone are not enough, also a cultural change is required.