Mining through controversies
Public debates, legitimacy and social licence to operate

The economic, social and ecological implications of the extraction of mineral resources have been increasingly discussed under the concept of social licence to operate. In Finland, critical public framings characterised by impressions of failed economic promises, unreliable technology and environmental hazards have dominated the recent mining debate. Operators probing for possibilities to establish new mines have faced increasingly critical public reactions.

We studied media representations and planning documents in order to identify the variety of publicly presented concerns related to the planned mine and mining company’s social licence to operate. Our case study focuses on the planning processes of a gold mine adjacent to an important tourist destination in the Kuusamo municipality, northeast Finland. We highlight the role of public debate for formation and erosion of legitimacy and the fragility of the social licence to operate.

Background
- The concept of social license to operate (SLO) has been increasingly used to understand the formation of local acceptance or opposition towards mining operations, and to manage conflicts between mining industry and local communities.
- We claim that the formation SLO requires legitimation that is a result of many parallel and often non-linear social processes with possibilities of amplification and attenuation.
- Public debates and media representations have an important indirect influence over how various groups and institutions perceive and react upon the legitimacy of a given organization.
- We studied how the legitimacy forming the basis for the social licence to operate is created or eroded during the land use planning processes of a new mine.
- Our case-study focus on municipal level planning process in Kuusamo, northeast Finland.

Results
- The newspaper debate was characterised by several peaks of attention.
- A half of the newspaper coverage had a neutral tone towards mining while 40% had a critical tone and 7% positive tone
- Public criticism was related mainly to the environmental risks of the planned mine.
- Local economic impacts were framed mainly as an opportunity but occasionally also as risk factors.
- The key actors defining the issue were journalists and private persons writing letters to the editor or comments to social media.
- Actors with a strong negative view towards mining industry served relatively often as interviewees.
- Over a tenth of the news items had the representatives of the mining sector as primary actors defining the issue.
- Our case highlighted the importance of active communication and inclusion of local concerns and knowledge into the planning of operations potentially affecting local land use and livelihoods.

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Reference

Fig. 1. The volume of coverage related to the planned gold mine in the local newspaper “Koillissanomat”

Fig 2. Overall tone of the coverage towards mining industry in the local newspaper “Koillissanomat”

The concept of legitimacy helps to connect social licence to operate with wider social concerns