

Zeitschrift: Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Forstwesen = Swiss forestry journal = Journal forestier suisse

Herausgeber: Schweizerischer Forstverein

Band: 157 (2006)

Heft: 10

Vorwort: Participation in forest policy processes : apple-pie, or new mode of governance

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Participation in forest policy processes: apple-pie, or new mode of governance?

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Keywords: Forest policy; participation; governance. FDK 624 : 9

Nobody would deny that «participation» has become a keyword in forest management and policy all over the world.

This concept, already well applied in specific fields of activity (water resource conservation, resource development, land use programmes), has been developed in the forestry field since the beginning of the years 1990 in the framework of the international dialogue on forests, when the focus on sustainable forest management (SFM) became paramount, and brought the idea that no social sustainability could result from any decision which would not be taken through a «participatory» process.

After being spread out in the context of an increasing contesting role of environmental NGOs in the US, then imposed to developing countries by most of the donors as a condition for financial aid, the notion is back now to Europe, where the actors on the political arena are discovering the difficulties in exercising participation, because the diversity of its types greatly depends on cultural and historical contexts.

The more participation has been exercised in forest policy and management fields, the more it has been under debate, although now differently from what it was some years ago. This is why such a special issue is of a particular interest, through presenting the main results from an ENGREF international research seminar held in Gérardmer, France, in June 2005.

After several years of different experiences of participatory processes in many countries, some ideas have been brought up, including the two basic ones: first, that participation will not solve all problems (sometimes, it may even create some); second, that there is no good and bad participation modes to be ranked along a ladder, as far as procedures for participation depend upon the type of democracy and decision making system. Participation in forestry is still questioned, in more concrete and doubting terms than it has been at the beginning.

This does not mean of course that participation should not be an objective or a principle any more; under various forms, it still needs to be searched for, as far as democracy and transparency are concerned. Prof. M. Shannon (USA) introduces the discussion by arguing that only deliberative processes can lead to a relevant public action through social learning mechanisms, when a common public decision is taken as the result from a rigorously constructed consensus of actors (both stakeholders and the public).

In reality, certainly the balance of interests is difficult to be reached. As examples of participatory processes with strong and weak aspects, G. Dominguez and J. Tena (Spain) describe the national forest programme formulation procedures in Catalonia, and L. Secco and Prof. D. Pettenella (Italy) show the role of stakeholders in designing certification schemes in Italy.

Why and how participatory processes are developed, certainly differ from a place to another one, with direct implication on who participates. Which stakeholders are associated in a process, and which are not? Dr. V. Luyet, Prof. R. Schlaepfer and Dr. I. Iorgulescu (Switzerland) propose a rationalist

ranking procedure to be used in selecting the people involved in a consultation initiated by the techno-structure. But only the stakeholders may not be enough for justifying decisions. How is the public concretely involved into public choices? Dr. A. Finger-Stich (Switzerland) mentions the example of the forest management in the French and Swiss Alps, where local actors feel poorly concerned.

Since several years also, participation is not seen any more as an idealistic paradigm destined to solve all problems of democracy. J.M. Samyn (Switzerland) reviews some hard critics addressed to participation in recent books with a large readers' audience. Dr. P. Mitchell-Banks (Norway), from his experience of introducing negotiated management plans in difficult conditions in Canada, draws some guidelines for monitoring sound participation procedures based on a fair exchange of views.

As a kind of provisional conclusion, I. Kouplevatskaya (France) shows how the development of a participatory process of forest policy reform, as it is going on in many countries in the world, necessarily tends to redefine the respective power of major stakeholders and the public authority, often resulting in a consolidation of the stronger actors.

From this composite mosaic of reflections, a more realistic and critic view on participation emerges. From a passive consultation to a constructed concertation resulting from a negotiation, many situations co-exist, corresponding to so different contexts and finalities.

Maybe one of the main results from the present researches in social sciences on participation in forest policy, is that, in this evolving context, «participation» is a broad abstract wording merging various constructed concepts which depend on the context, the stakes in presence, the processes and procedures, thus with no global significance as such. Whilst listening to the word «Participation», let us be careful and ask for more specification before making an opinion.

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