

Experiences with participatory approaches in the forestry field in Flanders

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Abstract

Participation into the forestry decision making is in Flanders not to be considered as a real new fact. A number of important forestry topics can be mentioned; whereby participation played a role: (1) forest legislation and forest policy; (2) management plans; (3) National Forest Plan; (4) criteria for sustainable forestry; (5) the Spatial Structure Plan Flanders; (6) establishment of urban forests.

The Forest administration, the Flemish Supreme Forestry Council, forest owners, forest associations and scientific institutes are well known internal actors, whereas the agricultural sector and the nature conservation sector are the most salient external actors.

However, a distinction must be made between participation and external pressure. Real participation supposes that it is institutionalized and that it is considered as a normal fact. Today, the pressure behind the screen is very great and the real decision making obviously occurs there. At least the impression exists that external actors such as the economic sector, the nature sector and the agricultural sector, which are often not directly involved in the forest decision making, presently more determine many forest policy topics than the forestry sector itself. Besides, participation is not a priori a basis of success.

Key words: *forestry, participation, forest regulations, forest policy*

1. Introduction

The concept "participation in the decision making" is in forestry circles still very young. It was developed during the follow up processes of the Earth Summit in Rio 1992 by the IPF (International Panel of Forests) But actually this concept was already used by FAO procedures, a.o. for the drawing up of Tropical Action Plans (FAO, 1996). NGOs too were already using such procedures, e.g. with the formulation of the FSC principles for sustainable forest management.

The concept participation was stressed for the first time during the discussion of NFPs (National Forest Plans). The IPF underlined that all concerned actors should be invited in the decision making process as well as in the implementation of actions jointly decided (UN-CSD-IPF, 1996). Participation can be made possible to different degrees, ranging from providing people with information to involve them in decision making (Rametsteiner, 2000). The possibilities of considering in various interests, of reconciling competing interests and of raising awareness on

forests and forestry issues are identified as the most relevant aspects of participation (Buck, 2000).

Participatory approach is in Flanders not to be considered as a completely new concept. Internal participation, within the forestry sector, was mostly used for the drawing up of acts and regulations. However, an important change occurred around the 1970s, when different actors from outside the traditional forestry sector started to involve in forest policy and management.

The forest administration, forest owners, forest associations and scientific institutes are well known internal actors in the forest sector, whereas the agricultural sector and the nature conservation sector are undoubtedly the most salient external actors. The administration of Rural Order is to some extent also an important actor, although it shows only little attention and interest in the forest. The attitude of the economic and industrial sector is dubious: they hardly discuss publicly about forest, but exert a very strong pressure behind the screens. Politicians, whose part could be very important, were in the past almost not interested at all in forest matters. Consequently forest problems hardly come up in the political debate. This situation, however, changed slightly during the last years. Youth organisations, though they are in some cases great users of the forest, play hardly a role as forest actor. Other recreational groups can practically be neglected.

1. Examples of participatory approach

In Flanders a number of important forestry topics can be mentioned, whereby participation played more or less a role.

1.1. Forest legislation and forest policy

Legislation, although it clearly belongs to the competence of the legislative power, is in most cases to a large extent prepared by the executive power (ministerial cabinets and administrations). Herewith interest groups can have a different influence.

The Flemish Forest Decree of 1990 was initially prepared around 1980 by a small group of internal experts of officials and scientists. Even Forest owners were not involved in this process. Then, the draft text was discussed by all kind of interest groups for a period of 10 years. A large number of amendments were introduced, in the last phase also by politicians, but almost no significant changes were present in the final approved text. On the contrary, when the decree was revised in 1999, by participation and under pressure of the nature conservation group, remarkable changes appeared.

Forest legislation, however, is not only determined by the Forest Decree. A lot of other regulations also deal with forestry topics (nature conservation decree, land tenure act, rural order decree, etc.). So, most interest groups have a unilateral impact on forest legislation, without a clear form of participation.

Implementing orders have mostly to be submitted, according to the Flemish Forest Decree, to the Flemish Supreme Forest Council and in a certain number of cases also to the Flemish Supreme Council for Nature Conservation. In some exceptional cases The Flemish Supreme

Council of Hunting must be involved. So, the Flemish Supreme Forest Council can, at least in theory, participate to a large extent in the decision making. Since 50% of the members of this Council have to be representatives of forest owners, this group has clearly a participation right. Partially as a consequence of that, a small group of forest owners have organized themselves much better the last years. By far the greatest number of forest owners is not interested and also not involved in the decision making.

2.2. Management plans

In former times it was usual that management plans for public forest were established by the forest administration. This happened without any form of participation. The Forest Decree of 1990 determined that the management plan of public forest was a public document, which can be consulted by everyone. In order to organize participation for the drawing up of management plans, the intention was made to set up management plans commissions. Today, however, such commissions are not yet existing, except for management plans of forest reserves, wherefore multidisciplinary commissions were established.

Management plans of communal forests were in former times usually made by the forest administration, almost without any participation of the commune itself. Since 1999, however, each public forest owner has to make himself his own forest management plan. In practice this mostly means, that it is made by consultants, the local authority eventually imposing some constraints. Interest groups (e.g. nature conservation groups) can, in some cases, have an important impact on the decision of local authorities.

Private forest owners also have to make themselves their management plan. Only in exceptional cases they take into consideration the wishes of interest groups such as nature conservation group or recreational groups. According to the Forest Decree of 1990 the owner could decide whether the management plan was a public document or not. This article was deleted at the revision of the Forest Decree in 1999.

Generally, participation concerning management plans is obviously very restricted.

2.3. National Forest Plan

The Forest Decree of 1990 determines that the Flemish government has to draw up a long term forestry plan and the implementation plans (action plans). Together both documents can be considered as the Flemish NFP and are therefore very important.

In order to prepare the first long term plan a scientific study was carried out by the university. The plan itself was one-sidedly drawn up by the forest administration. Afterwards it was, as legally foreseen, submitted to different advice commissions. Finally, although all commissions had given a positive assessment, the NFP was never approved by the Flemish government. The reasons why were not exactly known. In 1998 new plans were made. This time also they were unilaterally prepared by the forest administration and only afterwards presented to the advice commissions. This time the plan had to be submitted also to the MINA council (environment and nature council), in which representatives of all involved sectors participate. The plans were very ambitious and their execution required a lot of money. These plans too were positively

assessed, but nevertheless they were also not approved by the Flemish government, officially due to a lack of finance.

As a conclusion, there is no official NFP in Flanders.

2.4. Criteria for sustainable forestry

As a consequence of the Helsinki conference criteria for sustainable forest management were elaborated also in Flanders. This process took place simultaneously with the certification process of forests. In a first stage it was tried to set up common criteria for the whole of Belgium. Therefore a national working group was established with an important representation of forest owners. That initiative could be considered as an example of a bottom-up process of participation. Many meetings took place, but soon it appeared that only very few forest owners had some interest in FSC criteria and, in general, in criteria of sustainable forest management.

In a second stage the process was further elaborated in Flanders. After many meetings and compromises a document about criteria for sustainable forestry was approved by the Flemish Supreme Council of Forestry, thus including private forest owners. The MINA council simultaneously prepared and approved an analogous document. However, neither the Flemish government nor the Flemish parliament have yet legally approved any document. The implementation of this policy has also still to start. Private forest owners ask for important financial compensations, in case they will be obliged to apply these criteria.

In the mean time a not official working group has elaborated a document concerning FSC criteria. Actually they are very similar to the criteria for sustainable forestry. Private forest owners have not collaborated in this project. The document also has no legal character. For the rest, the FSC process has hardly any success at the moment. The interest for certification of forests is at the moment very low in Flanders.

5. The Spatial Structure Plan Flanders

The Spatial Structure Plan Flanders has also for the forest sector an extremely high importance. It specifies the destination zones for land use.

It determines that the forest area must be extended strongly, on one side in the agricultural area and on the other side in an ecologically friendly way. It also states that a great number of nature areas must be foreseen. Although forests, at least according to some provisions, cannot be classified in these nature areas, it becomes more and more clear today that an important share of the forest area will be taken up in these nature areas.

The fundamental decisions of the decree were taken by the planning administration, even without some appreciable participation of the forest administration and certainly not of the involved interest groups.

The programme of forest extension is, due to several reasons, but especially the unavailability of lands, not realised. However, this is apparently not the concern of the forest owners. Much more important for them is the destination, which will be given to their forest areas, inclusive the constraints and the restrictions. The designation of nature areas is occurring in this time and obviously mainly by the nature administration. The forest administration and certainly the forest

owners are hardly involved. These plans will be submitted afterwards to the whole Flemish population as a global regional plan. At that moment everyone is allowed to raise objections. The past, however, has shown that such procedures hardly take into consideration the individual wishes of the involved small citizen. Consequently, the forest owners try, as already mentioned, to be compensated as much as possible for the imposed restrictions.

2.6. Establishment of urban forests

The forest area in Flanders is very restricted, in average less than 10%. In some areas it is extremely low, less than 5% and even less than 2%. There is mainly a lack of large urban forests with a recreational function.

Forest extension was up to recent days not a priority for forest policy. Last years, however, things have changed very quickly. Around 1995 it was started with a scientific study of a pilot project and in the year 2000 forest extension, and in the first place the establishment of urban forests, was one of the main purposes of forest policy.

To this a major question is: where can new forests be established? Space is so limited and population density is so great, that conflicts about land use are normal. Therefore, participation looks to be a necessity to solve such problems.

From questionnaires it appeared that the majority of the population is in favour to the establishment of urban forests. The big problem, however, is the choice of appropriate locations. In theory these forests can only be established on agricultural lands, which are normally intensively used. It is obvious that almost all farmers wish to maintain their lands. Furthermore, next to the forestry sector, there are still other sectors which have a great interest for these sub-urban lands, e.g. the industrial sector, building companies and partially also nature conservation. Due to the always increasing pressure, mainly under impulse of forestry side, in 1995 a first pilot project started for the establishment of an urban forest of 200-500 ha around Kortrijk, a city with some 100.000 inhabitants, located in a region almost without forest, very strongly industrialized, but at the same time with still much agriculture. In order to justify the project as well as possible, first a scientific study was carried out with as main objective to find the most suitable location. The order was given by the forestry administration and executed by the Association for Forest in Flanders (VBV), an association pleading very strongly for forest extension. At that time the process "participation in the decision making" was hardly known in Flanders. So the study was mainly carried out without involving the interest groups. On the contrary, they were deliberately excluded. There was only an intense collaboration between the Association for Forest in Flanders, the forestry administration, and a local administration dealing with rural order. Finally the results of the study were published by a press communication. The reactions were very various. Most people were surprised. A great part of the local population was certainly in favour, but rather indifferent. However, the reaction of the agricultural sector was very strong. Economic circles too reacted negatively, but happened rather in a silent way. At the same time they tried to take profit out of that situation, by claiming their own new requirements. Amazing to some extent was the initially very negative attitude of the nature sector, although the project was strongly oriented towards nature objectives. As a consequence of all these reactions a small group of strongly motivated supporters launched a large campaign and a political debate started. Within a

short time all interest groups were involved in the matter, albeit in an unofficial way. After five years of a varying situation the preliminary result is, that the establishment of an urban forest is legally approved and the necessary juridical adaptations and financial provisions are taken in order to realise stepwise the establishment of an urban forest.

In 1996 a second pilot project for an urban forest was set up, viz. a forest around Ghent, a city with some 250.000 inhabitants, in a region with hardly some accessible forests. At that time one could already take profit of the knowledge and the experiences gathered in the previous project. So, it was concluded to apply a total different strategy and for the first time the principle of participation was really applied, even to a very large extent. Meanwhile the general circumstances for the establishment of urban forests were already much improved. The recent Structure Plan for Flanders included explicitly forest extension, the term participation got familiar in the involved circles, financial support for the project was much larger and there was apparently already a general consensus about the necessity of an urban forest. The order for the study was this time given not only by the forest administration, but also by the Administration of Planning and Nature Conservation of the involved provincial government. The study was assigned to the Seminar for Survey and Rural Planning of the Ghent University and to the Association for Forest in Flanders (VBV).

Participation was officially organized by the creation of two kinds of commissions:

- a scientific supporting commission; it was intensely involved to the setting up of the multi-criteria analysis and existed of representatives of:
 - the Institute of Nature Conservation;
 - the Institute of Forestry and Game Management;
 - the administration of rural order (Structure Plan Flanders)
 - administration of agricultural economics;
 - Laboratory of Regional Geography and Landscapes

- a steering committee, existing of officials and scientists; in all 19 offices (persons) were involved in it, divided as follows:

- provincial government:	1
- Ministry of the Flemish Society:	7
- city of Ghent:	3
- Ghent University:	3
- Association for Forest in Flanders	3
- Flemish Land Agency	1
- Regional Development Agency	1

Moreover, during the execution of the study there was an intense collaboration with the office of rural order of the city of Ghent and with experts of urban and regional offices about nature and landscapes.

As a result of this study a comprehensive and motivated report was submitted, which was largely supported by all members of the supporting committees. Local media spent much attention to

the subject. Agricultural organizations were obviously the only public opponents. But probably a similar great resistance came from the economic sector, albeit in a less remarkable way. At the next local elections in 2000 the establishment of an urban forest was an important topic for several political parties, or at least for a number of candidates. However, after the composition of the new local government and the approval of the policy plan there is hardly talk of the urban forests. The necessary juridical adaptations to the regional plan are, at least preliminary, not executed. Apparently the large participatory approach has not led to concrete results.

3. Discussion

Participation into the forestry decision making is in Flanders not to be considered as a real new fact. It is usual, since a long time, to consult the Flemish Supreme Forestry Council with the decision making of forest legislation and forest policy. However, this can only be considered as a first step in the participation process. Real participation supposes that it is institutionalised and that it is considered as a normal fact. Nevertheless it is not always clear when can be spoken of participation. Who must be involved in it? For which subjects or themes does participation be applied? And to what extent should one take into account the meanings and the points of view of interest groups?

The Flemish Supreme Forestry Council is, according to some provisions, very regularly consulted. As the council represents several interest groups, this leads to an important form of participation. A number of points, however, are remarkable:

- the activities of the council are so frequent, that the presence rate of the members is limited;
- the members receive so many documents, of different nature and complexity, that it is impossible to formulate a thoroughly motivated advice; advices are mainly determined by the secretary and the president;
- many advices of the council are hardly taken into account.

A distinction must be made between participation and external pressure. A number of interest groups, which actually do not belong to the forestry sector and which therefore are only very seldom asked for advice, have nevertheless a great influence on the forestry decision making. It is obvious, that the economic sector, the nature sector and the agricultural sector exert a great pressure on the forestry decision making. At least the impression exists that these sectors presently more determine forest policy than the forestry sector itself.

Participation in forestry assumes also, that the forestry sector is involved in the decision making of other sectors. However, this occurs almost never. It is remarkable how little the nature sector, though a very related sector, involves forestry into nature policy, even into nature policy in forests. The result of course is, that the relations between both sectors are certainly not to be considered as optimal.

Participation is not a priori a basis of success. A good policy can also be pursued without a far-reaching form of participation. Moreover, policy cannot and may not always take into account the

recommendations of several interest groups. The Flemish forest owners were initially not consulted with the drawing up of the Flemish Forest Decree and they were not happy with the approval of it. Some years later, however, many of them were already convinced that it was a very positive and worthwhile document for the owners.

Actually, there are still very few examples of real participation in Flanders. The urban forest project Ghent was undoubtedly by far the best example. The result however is negative, at least at this moment. The pressure behind the screen is very great and the real decision making obviously occurs there. On the contrary, a positive result was obtained with the urban forest project of Kortrijk, where participation was initially deliberately avoided.

Anyway, today it is clear that the forestry sector will have to apply better the principle of participation in its broad sense. Internal participation, with several interest groups within the forestry sector, is obviously quite satisfying. However, there are still a lot of subjects whereby progress has still to be made. Two typical and very important cases are the setting up of management plans and the certification process of forests.

However, participation has to be a mutual process. The external interest groups have to take into consideration the vision of the forestry sector.

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