Envisioning future forested landscapes in Sweden – Revealing local-national discrepancies through participatory action research

Ida Wallin [a,*], Julia Carlsson [b], Hans Peter Hansen [c]

[a] *Southern Swedish Forest Research Centre, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, P.O. Box 49, SE, 230 53, Alnarp, Sweden*
[b] *Department of Forest Resource Management, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Skogsmarksgränd, SE, 901 83 Umeå, Sweden*
[c] *Department of Urban and Rural Development, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, P.O. Box 7012, SE, 750 07 Uppsala, Sweden*

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ABSTRACT

Governance of forested landscapes must account for multiple interests and perspectives through public and stakeholder participation. In the context of Swedish forestry, participation has mainly been implemented as a top-down venture, without adequate integration of all interests. Linking local interests to national policy-making through participatory action research and future-oriented methodologies has not yet been tried in Sweden. We develop and implement a participatory action research model with the objectives to (i) facilitate a discussion among local stakeholders about their common future in relation to their forested landscapes and, (ii) to connect the local level with the national, institutional level. First, local stakeholders are brought together to create commonly desired visions in case studies of two forested landscapes in Sweden. Second, national policy-makers are engaged in a discussion on how to achieve the locally-desired visions. The ability of the two-step participatory action research model to achieve these objectives is then evaluated based on norms of Communicative Action and criteria of participatory planning. The results demonstrate the positive opportunity to engage local stakeholders in a constructive discussion about their common future, but also show some practical constraints of participatory methods, in particular the risk of institutional authorities disregarding local knowledge and claims.

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1. Introduction

Forested landscapes are central to the sustainability challenge. They sequester carbon, support biodiversity and supply renewable materials for human livelihoods, to mention just a few functions. Here, we recognise forested landscapes as multifunctional and dynamic systems integrating both social and ecological dimensions (Mikusiński et al., 2013; Selman, 2012; Svensson et al., 2012). The different uses of forests are a source of multiple, interlinked and often conflicting interests and values. Governing forest resources and landscapes is the act of handling these conflicts and trade-offs through policy measures (Krott, 2005). The turn from government to new modes of governance during the last two decades has put more emphasis on stakeholder and public participation in decision- and policy-making concerning forested landscapes (Berlan-Darqué et al., 2008; Jones and Stenseke, 2011; Secco et al., 2013). The basic notion of participation is that agenda-setting, policy- and decision-making should be inclusive of external opinions and interests, especially when addressing complex problems which influence many groups and individuals (c.f. Appelstrand, 2002; Arnstein, 1969; Rowe, 2004).

Participation can take many forms; it can be either *instrumental* (a mean to an end) or *transformative* (an end in itself), or indeed combine these forms (Buchy and Hoverman, 2000; Nelson and Wright, 1995). In its instrumental form, participation is a top-down venture where the implementation of participatory elements is made by governmental institutions, often as a requirement. Here participation is described as a process of motivating and mobilising people to use their human and material resources in order to shape their lives and hopes by themselves (OECD, 1999). Transformative or bottom-up approaches regard the participatory process as an end in itself (Buchy and Hoverman, 2000; Nelson and Wright, 1995). In this perspective, participation is not an element of institutional processes but an integrated part of the social transformation process that is democracy (Nielsen and Aagaard Nielsen, 2016). Empowerment of citizens and communities through personal and social learning, thus generating democratic societal change, is one main aim of transformative participation (Buchy and Hoverman, 2000). The '*commons*' and the '*common third*' are concepts central to this type of participatory processes when dealing with the future aspects of natural resource management and transcending the boundaries between the private sphere and the commons (Nielsen and Aagaard Nielsen, 2016; Hansen et al., 2016a). The 'common third' is an expression of the social responsibility necessary for the living conditions of all members of society and crucial for the common third is the jointly created knowledge combining lay and expert knowledge for the sustainable management and planning of landscapes (Tolnov Clausen, 2016).

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: Ida.Wallin@slu.se (I. Wallin), Julia.Carlsson@slu.se (J. Carlsson),
Hans.Hansen@slu.se (H.P. Hansen).

This paper highlights the challenge of developing participation in the Swedish forest sector where private property rights are strong and economic interests are influential. Forests cover 69% of Sweden and forestry is an important economic sector accounting for 11% of the total export value in 2013 (SFA, 2014). The present governance model features 'freedom under responsibility' for private landowners and the entire sector (Beland Lindahl et al., in press). Implementation relies on soft policy instruments, and as a consequence promotes the production-oriented, economic side of sustainability while marginalising social dimensions. Representation of interests in policy-making forums is limited to a few traditional forest actors; other interests and less powerful forest user groups usually cannot influence policies to the same degree (Beland Lindahl et al., 2013; Beland Lindahl, 2008). In addition, sectors related to forestry, like rural development, transport infrastructure, water regulation and wind power generation are planned in isolation from each other (Andersson et al., 2013; Beland Lindahl et al., in press; Mikusiński et al., 2013; Sandström et al., 2011). Locally, forest management planning is typically executed at the estate level and based on owner preferences (Brukas and Sallnäs, 2012). Only a few forums for discussing common issues in multifunctional forest management exist and connections to national-level policy-making are weak. The overall result is fragmented planning and management of the forested landscape, where decisions are made in isolation from one another, marginalising ecological and socio-cultural values (Andersson et al., 2013; Mikusiński et al., 2013).

Participatory processes offer a possibility to integrate wider interests, values and perspectives into policy-making, management and planning processes in the Swedish forest sector. Thus, they could encourage a more multifunctional perspective on the use of forested landscapes (Appelstrand, 2012; Sandström et al., 2011). However, the form of participation and methodology to facilitate the deliberation are crucial for the outcome of the process. Among the many difficulties encountered in practice are lack of skills, training and expertise among organisers, limited willingness to participate and political unwillingness to change according to the outcome of the participatory process (Secco et al., 2011). Participatory processes also risk becoming tools in the hands of already powerful actors to advocate their interests (Winkel and Sotirov, 2011).

Transformative participation is an attractive approach in the context of the Swedish forest sector. A bottom-up perspective recognises the localised management of the forested landscape, and aim to empower the local level and thus the social dimension of forestry. More importantly however, it aims to create a common third, a shared knowledge base and sense of common responsibility for the landscape that cuts across different knowledge and value systems, expanding beyond conventional solutions of regulations and privatisation (Tolnov Clausen, 2016). One form of transformative participation where researchers take a central, facilitating role is participatory action research (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). Action research is a scientific methodology involving actors in the creation of knowledge, effectively both creating and investigating the potential for change (Aagaard Nielsen and Svensson, 2006; Hansen et al., 2016b).

Facilitation methodologies of interest here are future-oriented methodologies which aim to activate participants' imaginations to think beyond the existing state and thus engage participants in the very essence of the democratic idea - the question of "how do we want to live?" (Hansen et al., 2016a). In vision-making processes, people are brought together to discuss and jointly decide on long-term requirements and development objectives (Borch et al., 2013; Hermans et al., 2011). Exploring the desired future enables participants to distance themselves from current conflicts and concerns, changing focus to the *commons* (Andreescu et al., 2013; Nassauer and Corry, 2004). A shared future vision and commitment to action can help redefine problems and establish new policy networks (De Smedt, 2013).

In Sweden, there is a need to bring together a broad range of local stakeholders in the forested landscape to discuss common issues and link local desires for the future to national policy-making. Fulfilling this need through combining participatory action research and future-oriented methodologies has not yet been tried in this context. A successfully-implemented process should facilitate fair communication towards a common vision among local stakeholders regarding the future of the forested landscape and influence policy-making at the institutional level.

1.1. Objectives

We develop and implement a participatory action research model encompassing future-oriented methodologies and then evaluate it for its ability to reach our two objectives: (i) to engage participants in constructive communication regarding their common future in relation to the forested landscape, and (ii) to connect the local level with the national, institutional level and thus influence policy-making. It is noteworthy that we are not aiming to develop a specific decision-making process, but to create a common third, a social institution and a local platform for on-going co-operation from where the outcome should be transferred into existing institutions and on-going societal transformational processes.

Rather than focusing on the specific visions created by the local participants, this paper aims to evaluate the performance of the developed model. This is done based on responses in two local case studies, one each in southern and northern Sweden, and a national-level workshop following up on the local case studies.

2. Theoretical and methodological underpinnings

2.1. Critical Utopian Action Research

Within the field of participatory action research there are several future-oriented methodologies. One of the best-developed with a substantial theoretical foundation is *Critical Utopian Action Research* (CUAR). CUAR builds on the work of Robert Jungk and on critical theory in the tradition of Theodor W. Adorno (Nielsen and Aagaard Nielsen, 2016). *Future Creating Workshops* (FWC), a methodology primarily developed by Robert Jungk, take a radical stand in relation to the democratic aspects of participatory processes (Jungk and Müllert, 1984). "How do we want to live?" is a question central to any vision-making processes, but it is also *the* question of democracy. FCWs were developed from the notion that democracy is not an end in itself but a continuing societal process (Aagaard Nielsen and Nielsen, 2016). Through facilitating personal and societal learning, citizens could start creating their own future through social inventions or other means. In CUAR the facilitation of social learning and imagination are the direct inheritance from FCW, but what sets CUAR apart from the original format is its scientific endeavour and theoretical conceptualisation.

Within CUAR, workshop participants investigate alternatives to the present, emerging from what they, as members of society, experience as problematic in everyday life and within contemporary society (Drewes Nielsen et al., 2004). The basic idea is that by critisising existing conditions and creating utopian ideas, participants are empowered (Aagaard Nielsen and Nielsen, 2006; Drewes Nielsen, 2006). The focus lies in future images carried by people's dreams and visions (utopias), which are seen as concrete ideas and a way to avoid making projections of existing conditions and circumvent the TINA-syndrome (There Is No Alternative) (Tofteng and Husted, 2011).

Drewes Nielsen et al. (2004, p. 36) describe the successes of the CUAR research methodology as (1) the ability to handle complexity and insecurity in present postmodern societies, (2) stimulating the creation of visions and utopias in order to handle this insecurity by discussing future values, and (3) providing tools and strategies based on common shared values produced through transdisciplinary methodologies in a collaboration between science and stakeholders. Workshops are facilitated through certain rules of communication aiming at a relative evening of power in among the participants (Drewes Nielsen et al., 2004). After initial workshops, CUAR adds a meta-structure to the visioning process by inviting external researchers or experts to discuss the visions