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The formulation of the National Forest Programme in the Czech Republic: A qualitative survey

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ABSTRACT

National Forest Programme (NFP) is a comprehensive social and political framework to achieve an effective sustainable forest management developing a spirit of cooperation among national and sub-national social actors. In this study, the participatory process adopted in the formulation of the second NFP in Czech Republic (NFP II) was analysed considering four aspects: (1) structure of the participatory process; (2) level of participation and social actors involved; (3) role of facilitator; (4) skills and knowledge of participants. The data were collected through in-depth interviews to a sample of stakeholders (44% of total stakeholders involved in the decision-making process). The results of this study show that the participatory process for Czech NFP II was designed considering representativeness, early involvement, independency, influence, transparency, and resource accessibility criterion. The participatory process was structured in two stages: in the first stage the Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of the Environment identified 17 experts to involve in the definition of a first draft of NFP II; in the second stage the two Ministries identified and involved 18 organized groups of stakeholders in order to discuss the key issues previously identified by experts. The main weakness of participatory process in the formulation of NFP II in Czech Republic is the low level of participation of citizens and the different level of skills and knowledge among participants.

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1. Introduction

The National Forest Programme (NFP) is a comprehensive social and political framework to achieve a sustainable forest management (SFM) in a country in accordance with their respective national conditions, objectives and priorities (MCPFE, 2000). The cooperation among national and sub-national social actors is fundamental in the formulation and implementation of NFPs (Egestad, 1999; Winkel and Sotirov, 2011).

In the Pan-European process, several political documents have established the rules of NFPs. The first European Union (EU) Forestry Strategy (1998) considers the national and sub-national forest programmes as an instrument to implement international commitments, principles and recommendations in a country (Hogl, 2002). As a consequence, the new EU Forestry Strategy (2013) emphasizes the role played by the stakeholders in addressing and integrating the environmental, economic and social dimensions of sustainable development (Balest et al., 2016). The Ministerial Conferences on the Protection of Forests (MCPFE) have repeatedly focused on the importance of NFPs.

In particular, the fourth MCPFE - held in Vienna in 2003 - formalized the principles of NFPs (MCPFE, 2003). The fifth MCPFE - held in Warsaw in 2007 - emphasized the importance of NFPs in coordinating forest and water resources, while the sixth MCPFE considered the development and implementation of NFPs in all European countries as the first goal of forestry for the year 2020 (Lovrić et al., 2013).

The specific COST Action E19 (1999–2003) on NFPs was important to define NFPs' framework. It aimed to increase the common knowledge on SFM and NFPs, and provided means to policy makers for formulating and implementing NFPs (Humphreys, 2004). This COST Action focused on four core variables of a NFP such as participation, collaboration, inter-sectoral, and long-term iterative adaptive approach (Mayer, 2004). The main output of this COST Action was the Interim Report "Making NFPs Work: Supporting Factors and Procedural Aspects" (Glück et al., 2003). The Report provides the guidelines for the implementation of national and sub-national forest programmes. These strategies, conferences, and the outputs of the COST Action E19 established the key principles of NFPs.

The key principles of NFPs are (Pülzl and Rametsteiner, 2002; Ollonqvist, 2006): appropriate participatory mechanisms to involve all interested parties; empowerment of sub-national governments; recognition and respect for traditional and customary rights, local

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communities, forest dwellers and forest owners; holistic and inter-sectoral coordination; and long-term iterative process. Accordingly, the involvement of several stakeholders (national and regional governments, groups of interest, local communities, and all affected parties) should be considered as an indispensable characteristic of NFPs (Elsasser, 2007; Sarvašová et al., 2014).

The stakeholders can be involved in the formulation and implementation of the NFPs in different ways that ranges from information to empowerment (IAP2, 2007). Consequently, the level of inclusiveness and the participatory mechanisms which are adopted change country by country in accordance with the national conditions and peculiarities (Primmer and Kyllönen, 2006). In Eastern European countries, stakeholders' involvement in the formulation and implementation of the NFPs is particularly interesting due to the influence of the Velvet Revolution (1989). In fact, the Velvet revolution influenced the land management and the spread of participatory approaches according to Western European countries' rules. Several Eastern European countries (e.g. Poland, Serbia, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic) adopted participatory processes that involved both experts and stakeholders. In particular, the government of the Czech Republic organized a participatory process for the formulation of the NFP which consisted in two steps: in the first step, experts defined the key issues related to the NFP; in the second step, the stakeholders discussed the key issues previously identified by the experts. Therefore, the Czech Republic was chosen as case study for a deep investigation of participatory processes in the formulation of the NFP.

In the Czech Republic, the first Forest Act (No. 289/1995) – formulated after the geopolitical changes which occurred in 1989 – highlighted the necessity to find a compromise between property rights and the protection of public goods. This Forest Act regulated forest practises, general use of forests, forest management planning, forestry licencing and subsidies (Vančura et al., 2004). Subsequently, the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of the Environment have jointly prepared the first National Forest Programme (NFP) for the period 2003–2006, adopted by the Resolution No.53 of the 13th January 2003. The first NFP was developed in order to propose specific solutions aimed at solving the main problems of the national forest policy. Considering the dynamic targets of national forest policy in Czech Republic after the restitution process the first NFP has been provided for a short period of four years. The formulation of the first Czech NFP followed the principles of participatory approaches and, therefore, it involved different groups of interest in the forestry sector and in other connected sectors such as nature conservation, tourism, agriculture, and rural development (Ministry of Agriculture of the Czech Republic, 2008). A second NFP was formulated for the period until 2013.

Following the first NFP, the Government of the Czech Republic ratified the second NFP for the period until 2013 (NFPII) with the Resolution No.1221 of 1st October 2008. The NFPII was formulated through a participatory approach which was started, coordinated and organized by the Ministry of Agriculture in collaboration with the Ministry of the Environment. These two Ministries identified - with the support of a team of experts - 17 key issues subdivided in four main objectives: "Enhancement of long-term competitiveness - economic pillar", "Environment enhancement and protection - environmental pillar", "Enhancing the quality of life - social pillar", and "Enhancing coordination and communication - communication pillar". Furthermore, the government of the Czech Republic adopted the "Principles of State Forest Policy" (Decree No.854 21th November 2012) with the goal of defining the most important propositions in the forestry sector (Ministry of Agriculture of the Czech Republic, 2013). The main long-term objectives established by the "Principles of State Forest Policy" are the following ones: (1) preserving forests and forest land for future generations; (2) enhancing the competitiveness of forestry; (3) enhancing biodiversity in forest ecosystems, their integrity and ecological stability; (4) reinforcing the role of forests and forestry in rural economic development; (5) highlighting the importance of education, research, and innovation

in forestry. The Decree No.854/2012 focused on state forests because they cover around 60% of the total forest area in the Czech Republic. Therefore, this type of forest ownership is the most appropriate one to apply the principles of forest multifunctionality. Conversely, private owners and municipality manage their forests according to the forest management plans (FMP) established by the Forest Act No.289/1995 Coll. The long-term objectives identified by the "Principles of State Forest Policy" largely resume the key issues identified in the NFPII. Probably, this Decree can be considered as the starting point for the formulation of the third NFP in the Czech Republic.

Starting from these considerations, the aim of the paper is to analyse the participatory process in the formulation of the last National Forest Programme (NFPII) in the Czech Republic in order to highlight the main strengths and weaknesses. The usefulness of this research is to improve participatory processes in future NFPs and forestry programmes.

2. Materials and methods

The qualitative analysis of the participatory process in the formulation of the NFPII in the Czech Republic is part of a larger study on participatory processes in NFPs in Europe that involved 21 countries (Balest et al., 2016). The qualitative research approach was applied in the Czech Republic as a pilot country in order to investigate in more detail the participatory process for a future comparison with other countries.

The qualitative research approach included in-depth and semi-structured interviews. The interviews were administered to 10 stakeholders representing 8 organizations, which accounted for 44% of the total organizations that were involved in the formulation of the NFPII (Tables 1 and 2).

The first version of the semi-structured interview was pre-tested with two members of the Czech University of Life Sciences in Prague who were involved in this study. The framework of the semi-structured interview was prepared with the aim of analysing four main aspects of the participatory process: (1) structure of the participatory process; (2) level of participation and social actors involved; (3) role of the facilitator; (4) skills and knowledge of participants. These aspects are also the issues which are addressed during the interviews (Table 3).

The data collected with the in-depth interviews were analysed using the social methodology proposed by Krippendorff (1987) and with the support of the ATLAS software. The interviews were analysed through a content analysis using keywords and their synonyms (e.g. "participation", "weaknesses", "advantages", "participants"). The content analysis is an analysis of the interview transcript which is based on a concept framework. In particular, the content analysis looked for the evaluation criteria of participatory processes outlined by Rowe and Frewer (2000). These authors established the theoretical evaluation criteria of participatory processes that influence the level of participation (IAP2, 2007). The criteria to evaluate participatory processes can be summarized as follows (Rowe and Frewer, 2000):

- 1) Representativeness: a sample of public affected by the forest issue should be involved in the participatory process;
- 2) Independence: the participatory process should be conducted in an independent way. Therefore, who conducts the participatory process should be independent from all affected interests and should be perceived as independent;
- 3) Early involvement: the affected parties should be involved in the early steps of the decision-making process. An early involvement enables them to influence all the decisions, starting from the identification of the problems;
- 4) Influence: the participants should have an influence on the final decision. Sometimes, the influence is linked only to the output of the participatory process. However, it should be connected to the concrete final decision;

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