



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Forest Policy and Economics

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/forpol

The participation of stakeholders in the policy processes and their satisfaction with results: A case of Estonian forestry policy

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Forest policy
Decision-making
Participation
Advocacy
Stakeholder
Forestry scientist

ABSTRACT

The article explains the stakeholders' interactions and satisfaction with their participation in the forest policy processes in Estonia. The interactions during the policy formulation and decision-making stages are observed with special attention to the role of scientists. Representatives of three target groups were interviewed: forestry officials, stakeholders and forestry scientists. The stakeholders tend to believe their main form of participation in policy processes is decision-making, not realising that the final decisions are made by forestry officials or by politicians: the minister, government or Parliament. Consensual proposals or decisions are important because these usually form the basis for final formulations in policy documents. The policy processes are mostly facilitated by forestry officials whose mediation skills need improvement. There is a major conflict between stakeholders representing timber production and environmental protection. In policy discussions, the environmentalists should provide more analysis, otherwise their viewpoints are ignored. Forestry scientists fall short in their most important role as honest brokers; they must learn how to integrate themselves into policy processes. Very often scientists act as observers, but other participants expect them to actively bring scientific information and knowledge into discussions. In addition to the face-to face meetings, new communication tools (e-consultation and e-participation) are available, but they are underused in the policy formulation processes.

1. Introduction

Public participation in environmental decision-making was internationally addressed by the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm and by the UN General Assembly through the adoption of the 1982 World Charter for Nature. The Earth Summit, the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, was the base for further development, setting up new norms and perspectives encouraging a broad-based, bottom-up approach in the sustainable forest management (Appelstrand, 2002; Glück et al., 1999). Therefore, the forest policy formulation of today entails the involvement of stakeholders in many European countries (Balest et al., 2016; Harrinkari et al., 2016; Johansson, 2016; Winkel and Sotirov, 2011) and is based on stakeholder interactions while participating in policy processes. Participation is considered to promote social sustainability, contribute to effective decision-making and finally produce better policies (Kangas et al., 2010).

In the academic literature, many definitions or explanations of 'participation' in policy processes can be found. Maier et al. (2014) (based on the book by Dietz and Stern (2008)) compiled five dimensions of participation: participants, level of involvement, intensity,

timing and goal. Here we will focus on two of them. The level of involvement describes how much influence a participant should have on the decisions, e.g. information sharing—little influence; consultation—some influence; co-decision-making—much influence; negotiated agreement—highest level of influence. The timing of participation refers to the stage of the policy process at which participants should be involved.

There are also various definitions of stakeholders, for instance Friedman and Miles (2006) described 55 definitions. Most of these definitions are on firm level and management driven, e.g. 'It is generally accepted that a stakeholder is an entity with some form of claim on the focal organization and with sufficient power to influence that organization' (Jonker and Foster, 2002). According to MCPFE (2002), there are no objective and generally acceptable criteria for the definition of a stakeholder, because it depends on the context and characteristics of the participation process. The MCPFE (2002) report is a synopsis of the report *Public participation in forestry in Europe and North America* (ILO, 2000), which uses the 'generic term of stakeholders to describe all individuals or organized groups interested in the issue or opportunity driving the participatory process'.

In his review of literature, Reed (2008) analysed the stakeholder

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.forpol.2017.05.007>

Received 15 March 2016; Received in revised form 18 May 2017; Accepted 25 May 2017
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participation for environmental management and, describing histories and typologies of participation, came to a conclusion about best practices for stakeholder participation. Currently, we will focus on two of them:

- Highly skilled facilitation is essential. The results of participatory processes are more sensitive to the manner of how participation was conducted than to the tools used. Highly skilled facilitation is especially important while dealing with possible conflict issues, e.g. environmentalists vs resource users. The facilitator needs to be impartial, open to multiple perspectives and approachable.
- Local and scientific knowledge should be integrated. In participatory processes an essential element is the need for scientific information and analysis, required for stakeholder deliberation. The information must be carefully balanced to avoid biases in decision-making. The scientific knowledge is expected to be explicit, systematised, decontextualized and, thus, widely transferrable. The local knowledge, aka practical knowledge, is primarily tacit, implicit, informal and context dependent. It results from the collective experience of various observations and practice. Combining this knowledge with scientists' different understandings and interactions, local stakeholders might produce more relevant and effective environmental policy and practice (Reed, 2008). In several cases, Estonia has launched focused research projects to analyse forestry problems on the agenda of potential policy changes. Often the same researchers or other scientists participate in policy processes.

Forest management practice and development of sustainable forest policy are a complex of technical, scientific, social and political issues (e.g. rural development, biodiversity conservation or carbon sinks), where parts must be integrated; thus, it depends on building collaborative partnerships among scientists and policymakers (Nagasaka et al., 2016; Shannon et al., 2007). To evaluate scientists' participation in policy processes, we use the idealised role models of Pielke (2007). According to the interpretation by Pregernig (2015) the roles are:

- Pure Scientist – does not respond to policymakers' questions or needs. He provides scientifically exact, but often politically useless, results;
- Science Arbiter – gives specific answers to policymakers' specific questions, but does not actively pick up relevant questions on his own;
- Issue Advocate – tries to advocate for political convictions by the means of specific arguments;
- Honest Broker of Policy Alternatives – develops alternative policy options based on scientific analyses, tries to increase the policymakers' scope of action, tries to make transparent value judgements and avoids detailed discussions of all scientifically relevant parameters.

The first two options leave the science or the scientists 'apolitical', but the roles of Issue Advocate and Honest Broker emphasise the strategic role of science in policy making (Pregernig, 2014). Some weaknesses of Pielke's model in analysing scientists' role in forest policy processes are pointed out by Nagasaka et al. (2016), e.g. the scientists' contribution to research and their independent status from all other actors remains unanalysed.

Policy development as a cycle of the policymaking process has the following stages: (i) agenda setting, (ii) policy formulation, (iii) policy decision-making, (iv) policy legitimisation, (v) policy implementation, (vi) policy evaluation. The results of policy evaluation lead to (vii) policy termination or setting an agenda for a new or updated policy (Jann and Wegrich, 2007; Janse, 2006). The studies of policy formulations from the 1960s and 1970s were targeted towards improving practices within governments by introducing techniques and tools for more rational decision-making; the crucial role in policy formulation

was given to the ministerial bureaucracy and top civil servants. In later studies, the role of scientists became more important, which was related to the role of communicating knowledge within the public debate on political issues. 'Policy formulation, at least in Western democracies, proceeds as a complex social process, in which state actors play an important, but not necessarily decisive role' (Jann and Wegrich, 2007).

The final stage of the policymaking process is policy evaluation. Normally it is content related, where the results may lead to the modification of policy or its termination (Ellefson, 2000; Jann and Wegrich, 2007). As a minimum, the evaluation of stakeholder collaboration in policy processes should include an assessment of whether or not the mission, goals, output and outcomes were achieved. Quantitative data can include different figures, e.g. the number of participating stakeholders and discussed proposals. The tool of qualitative assessment may be a survey targeted to the stakeholders and government officials' opinions about stakeholder activities (e.g. facilitation) and to find out what worked, what did not work and what can be improved. Additionally, stakeholders might be asked

- if they felt their views were heard;
- if they learned anything during this process;
- if they were satisfied with their own level of participation;
- if they achieved what they hoped to (Orr, 2014).

The abovementioned questions were considered when preparing and conducting the survey to obtain information on stakeholders' opinion about participation and mutual interaction.

Stakeholders and policymakers working with each other might be frequently reluctant and, thus, be a key factor for policy failure, while appropriate stakeholder collaboration techniques can both improve policy outcomes and facilitate the policymaking process (Orr, 2014). The aim of the current paper is to describe the main forest policy processes in Estonia and explain the interaction and satisfaction of stakeholders with the policy processes of participatory democracy. Communication throughout policy formulation and decision-making stages is observed; however, some activities of agenda setting and policy implementation stages are also briefly described. We will explain why some core stakeholders are not satisfied with participation in policy processes and describe tools that are currently still not widely applied, although they would allow the public to participate in the policy formulation process. Understanding the participants' mutual expectations should help to better design the process and enable the facilitator to integrate the competence and interests of stakeholders.

2. Overview of Estonian forest policymaking

Forests cover about 50% of Estonia's territory—around 2 million hectares. According to the 2010 national forest inventory, the forest ownership was divided as follows: state-owned forest, managed by the State Forest Management Centre (37%); other state-owned forest land (3%); privately owned forest land (34%); commercially owned by firms (11%) and forest land subject to privatisation (15%) (EEA, 2014). According to the changes made in the Land Reform Act (2013), the land reform must be completed by the end of 2016; after that the public–private share in the forest ownership will be between 40:60 (current situation) and 50:50.

Since regaining independence in 1991, Estonia has approved the forestry policy (1997) and two national forestry programmes (until 2010 and until 2020). Due to the historical background and particularities of a society in transition, legislation has been and still is the most important policy instrument. During the transition period the pace of socio-economic development was tremendously faster than under normal conditions and there was a demand for changing legislative acts. At the end of 2015, the forest acts had been changed 35 times (three different forest acts: in 1993, 1998 and 2006, and the rest are amendments). In addition, there have been numerous changes to

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