

Social learning, active citizenship and policy making: The case of urban forest planning in Flanders

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Active citizenship and social learning

The complexity of present society confronts the authorities with their limits. In times of reflexive modernization (Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1997) policymakers have increasing difficulties to control social, economical and ecological risks and problems. Therefore they are in search for ways to improve the decision making process and to regain citizen's confidence. Both objectives imply that authorities have to redefine their starting points and strategies. Traditional pathways and clear cut problem solving procedures have lost their legitimacy. The conviction gained ground that the complex and dynamic problems of present day society cannot be solved by one (or a few) central 'control rooms', but that instead the solution for such problems is situated within the unpredictable dynamics of interaction among different stakeholders.

In various domains of society increasing attention goes to 'active participation' of the actors involved. Emphasis is laid on the competences, responsibility and self-activity of the actors, who are considered as capable and invited to participate in all kinds of problem solving, decision making and learning processes (Baggen, Masschelein & Wildemeersch, 2000). We see that governments and policy makers increasingly invite the public to come to a common understanding of things to be done and about the role of each partner involved. It is important for such 'interactive' policy making processes, that citizens are actively involved in all stages of policy making: the stage of agenda setting, the stage of developing the frameworks used to make policy choices and the stage of making policy choices.

By emphasizing mutual interaction between all actors involved, authorities aim at meeting better the expectations of target groups and at improving the quality of policy planning processes. Debate and discussion are essential in view of inventing alternative futures, of discovering common interests and of creating mutual purposes, of challenging their belief when confronted with other points of view and of constructing competing visions of community, to transform conflict into consensus (Fiorino, 1997).

To describe the (non-formal) learning processes that take place in these interactions and debates, we use the concept 'social learning' (Wildemeersch e.a., 1995, 1997; Wildemeersch e.a., 1998). Social learning is about the learning processes of participatory systems which make use of the competencies of the stakeholders. It enables participatory systems such as groups, networks, organizations and communities, to cope with new, unexpected, uncertain, conflictual and unpredictable circumstances. Central to the concept of social learning is the emphasis on the optimal use that should be made of the problem solving potential of the participatory system (a group, a network, an institution, a community...). Innovative learning by competent actors is therefore a common (central) characteristic of social learning. Learning in this approach is a process of 'actively giving sense' and is not longer based on pure 'expert based' objective knowledge. This learning process is an open-ended process: all actors together are faced with the never-ending task to search for new answers and new solutions again and again.

A lot of initiatives of interactive policy making which are a response to reflexive modernization, can be characterized as social learning. Also the practice of 'city forestry planning' in which our research group is currently involved is an attempt to combine policy planning with learning processes.

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A model of social learning

In our opinion social learning takes place in relation to four dimensions: action, reflection, communication and negotiation (see figure in appendix). Each of these processes is characterized by particular tensions. Social learning therefore is about finding optimal and dynamic balances between these tensions, in accordance with the peculiar conditions and needs of concrete contexts and challenges.

The first dimension, the *action dimension*, is about the actual planning that takes place. Groups of different stakeholders negotiate with each other about what ends they want to achieve and what means are to be mobilized. This action or planning dimension reveals a tension between the (often contradictory) needs in a community and the competencies available to meet those needs.

The second dimension is about *reflection*. In the first place interactive policy making relates to the development of adequate strategies to reach the goals of the planning. This activity mobilizes the traditional rational reflectivity. Next to that, such participatory processes need other forms of reflectivity which have to do with the identification of the stakeholders with the planning, the group, the subject of policy. This identification is reinforced by various symbols, rituals and narratives which emerge from the planning process. We call this part of the reflectivity 'aesthetic reflectivity'. The reflection dimension thus shows a tension between rational reflectivity and aesthetic reflectivity.

The third dimension is about *communication*. On the one hand, all actors in the communicative planning process operate with their own hidden agendas and try to (unilaterally) control the debate. On the other hand, participatory planning presupposes the input of different perspectives and a close cooperation between 'experts' and 'laymen' (multilateral control).

The last dimension is about *negotiation*. Participatory systems are continually trying to reach agreement about the goals to be achieved and the means to mobilized. Yet, on the other hand, all groups are conflictual in nature: they deal with differences in perception, interpretation and interest among group members and among the group and external actors. Processes of social learning result from coping with tensions and contradictions rather than neglecting them, and consider conflicts as opportunities for learning. They balance between consensus and dissensus.

Creativity, power and responsibility

Inherent to social learning is that the actors involved develop creative answers to the challenges they cope with. In doing so, they face issues of power and responsibility.

Participation and social learning processes do not imply a power-free dialogue. Power interferes with the processes; both insiders and outsiders try to manipulate and to act strategically (Leeuwis, 2000). The actors involved have different capacities to act related to the sets of social and organizational relationships they represent in the interaction. These differences of 'power' affect processes of action, reflection, communication and in particular negotiation. Power is not given or taken away: it is always being negotiated.

Social learning is incomplete when issues of responsibility are not taken into consideration. With respect to both the outcomes and the process, the participants share a responsibility as to whether what they do is right, just, human etc. (Cervero & Wilson, 1994).

The public debate on the environment

We currently apply the concept of social learning in a research project that deals with participation in the public debate on the environment. The basic assumption is that active citizenship and sustainability are inseparable. The solution of environmental problems requires a continuing effort of all people. Holemans (1999) argues that the model of a dialogical democracy offers the best chances for a more democratic approach to ecological problems. This requires the strengthening of the role of the citizen. Only by making citizens co-participants in the policy making process, a social support base can be developed to realize environmental changes. This can be made possible by the creation of 'public

spaces' where individuals have the opportunity to share and validate their stories, experiences, opinions and arguments. Only when citizens are involved in the debate, there are opportunities for the necessary change of attitudes.

Social learning and the planning of new urban forests in Flanders

The research project we are involved in is about including different stakeholders in the planning and implementation of new urban forests in Flanders. In the research project we investigate how the planning process for new urban forests in Flanders can be enriched by a social learning process.

The basic assumption is that participation of all actors involved (like forest managers, farmers, local inhabitants, vacationers, environmental activists...) will reinforce the public support for - and reduce the resistance against - urban forest planning processes.

Background

On the European as well as on the Flemish level, the importance of forest extension is increasingly part of politics of sustainable development. The presence of green areas in general and of urban forests in particular, becomes increasingly important for the livability of the cities. Therefore, the Flemish Government aims at realizing 10.000 hectares of forest extension on its territory. The creation of new recreational forests in the surroundings of the cities has the highest priority.

During the past five years the Flemish authorities examined where and how city forests could be inserted in different regions in Flanders. Studies were conducted concentrating on finding the best sites for large-scale, recreational urban forests in areas that lack forests. By now several 'localisation studies' have been finished. In these studies a systematic methodology has been developed to select the most suitable locations, aiming at the highest chance of successful implementation. This methodology is a stepwise *multicriteria approach*, that works with objective criteria defined by experts. The systematic approach of these studies ought to result in an actual extension of the forest area.

Yet, in reality it seems that this is still a problem, due to the lack of a strong social demand for afforestation and due to strong tensions among different stakeholders such as the agricultural sector, the economical sector, the vacationers, the local inhabitants, the government, local politicians, environmental activists, and so on. An adequate social support base is expected to be the result of the participation of all target groups and stakeholders involved.

The research project

Although the importance of people's participation for sustainable development has become increasingly acknowledged, there is insufficient information about the multiple dimensions of such participation. With our current research project² we attempt to gain insight in the way in which this participation can be realized and can contribute to policy processes with regard to afforestation projects. We rely on the conceptual model of social learning. A social learning approach could be an interesting complement to the multicriteria approach used in the localisation studies. The intention of our research project is to examine how the model of social learning can play a complementary role with regard to the multicriteria approach and with regard to the implementation and management of afforestation projects (and other projects of nature development).

Research stages

The research project consists of three research stages. In the first stage of the research project (2001), we examined some 'good practices' and 'bad practices' with regard to the planning of new urban forests. In the second stage (2002) we will conduct an action research in two locations, to experiment with an integrated model of a technical-rational approach and an approach of social learning. In the third stage (2003) we will optimize the integrated model and examine to what extent it can be applied to other projects of nature extension and other domains of sustainable development.

² The research project "Enlarging the public support base for the planning, implementation and management of urban forests in Flanders - Development of a communication model" is conducted by the Centre for Research on Adult and Continuing Education (University of Leuven) and the Flemish Forest Organisation and is supported by the Flemish Government.

Main preliminary findings

In the first research year we examined some ongoing urban forest planning processes in Flanders. We did three in-depth case studies: the city forest of Kortrijk, the city forest of Gent and the city forest of Roeselare. In these three cases, a localisation study for a new city forest has been going on or has been finished. These case studies taught us that policy makers and planners are often reluctant to take participation seriously and that opportunities for social learning are often not utilized.

In all three case studies, the planning process (the search for a location for a new city forest) was limited to the level of administrators and policy makers. In the best case there was some consultation of important target groups but no sound, active involvement of interest groups and citizens. In each of the three cases it was a relatively small club of people who were leading the project, deciding about the agenda, about the phasing, about who was involved and who not, and so on.

The planners have good arguments to limit the negotiations to a small group of 'experts' and administrators. To be able to justify the final decision, they want to prove that it is based on a good and systematic planning process, including objective criteria and rational considerations. Experts and administrators, who have no local interests, consider themselves capable of such an objective decision. But they are convinced that stakeholders and citizens have too many local interests and are emotionally too strongly involved, which entails the risk that the debate will be polarised. The planners are also afraid that active involvement of citizens and interest groups would end up with chaos, which would make the planning process unpredictable and unsystematic and would cause a loss of time. For this reason, in all three projects citizens and interest groups were not actively involved in the localisation of a site for a new city forest.

When we look at the research findings from our case studies, all of the examined planning projects had to deal with resistance, especially from farmers who live and work in the area, but also even from nature conservation groups or local inhabitants. Especially the first city forest planning process in Kortrijk, which started in the early 90's, was very difficult. As time and projects went by, the planners became aware that communication and participation of all actors involved was necessary. As a consequence, some (one-way) communication started towards target groups (farmers, nature conservation organisations...) and in a very limited way consultation, but still no genuine involvement.

So we notice a severe dilemma with regard to the planning of new urban forests in Flanders. On the one hand, politicians and policy makers are aware of and strive for a sound and open-ended communicative approach (public debate) from the start of the planning process. On the other hand, we experience some reluctance to take participation seriously. Policy makers don't treat citizens and interest groups as competent and equal partners in the decision making process. They fear the emergence of uncontrollable power mechanisms. They are afraid of the questions, uncertainty and resistance that an interactive planning process would evoke. Therefore, the debate is actually often limited to the level of administrators and to carefully selected partisans.

This dilemma risks to end up with a self-fulfilling prophecy. Policy makers are disappointed by the prospect of resistance, emotional reactions and chaos and choose the easier way of negotiating with more or less like-minded actors, while communicating their plans to the outside world as soon as they have developed a solid and polished concept. They give up searching for scenarios for early and interactive involvement, because they believe that such an approach is deemed to fail.

Yet, we believe that this dilemma is not unsolvable. In a next stage of our research project we want to experiment with an integrated model of an expert approach and a social learning approach. We hope to show that it is possible to debate intensively and constructively with citizens and stakeholders from an early stage of the planning process. However, this will always remain an exciting and vulnerable process, that requires a continuously balancing between a lot of tensions and dilemmas.

Conclusion

To really value interactive policy making, it is necessary to deepen the democratic debate. Citizens and communities should be encouraged to engage in particular policy planning processes that affect their own lifeworld. We therefore recommend a social learning approach of participation, involving various societal groups in the analysis and the solution of problems and developing multidimensional and transparent interaction and communication patterns between the diverse actors of policy making processes. The creation of opportunities for social learning is crucial to enhance the engagement of citizens in the civil society.

As more parties gain influence and have an impact on the process of policy making, their interdependence also increases, resulting in an even greater degree of complexity. This may imply that the traditional agents of power (politicians) feel helpless as their direct impact on the decision making process declines. The openness of interactive policy making processes might be threatening because it is uncontrollable and immeasurable. Policy makers therefore should learn to loosen control and to cope with the unpredictable and heterogeneous aspects of the public debate. The inherent dynamics of the public debate must be shown to full advantage. It is typical for the public debate that it is unpredictable and that the structure of responsibility is often unclear. Experiments with such an interactive approach are hard to fit into a formal frame. They tend to float a little. The rules of the game are developed and adjusted in the course of the interaction process. Hajer (2000) is right when he describes interactive policy making as 'a public adventure with an uncertain end'. Yet, an open public debate - even a conflictual one - seems the only approach that offers the chance for a socially supported and sustainable outcome (Holemans, 1999).

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