



Dialogue seeds in a top-down approach

A study of the County Administrative Board civil servants
perspectives on communication and participatory
approaches to nature conservation

Tania Graciela Monsalve Durán

*Faculty of Natural Resources and Agricultural Sciences
Department of Urban and Rural Development
Uppsala*

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Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences

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Sveriges Lanbruksuniversitet, SLU
Faculty of Natural Resources and Agricultural Sciences
Department of Urban and Rural Development
Uppsala

Author: Tania Graciela Monsalve Durán

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Supervisor: Lars Hallgren: SLU, Department of Urban and Rural Development

Examiner: Lotten Westberg: SLU, Department of Urban and Rural Development
Hans Peter Hansen; SLU, Department of Urban and Rural Development

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Abstract

This study explores the perspectives of the County Administrative Board civil servants working for Nature Conservation in relation to communication and with a focus in participatory approaches. The institution itself with its traditional top down hierarchical framework and its Nature Conservation focus in natural sciences, constitutes an important reference group for the employees, and also acts as a constraining factor limiting their learning experiences and thus the possibilities for achieving the environmental goals it seeks. In this situation attempts that aim for an institutional change towards a more dialogical nature conservation approach such as the Dialogue for Nature Conservation training program, risk to go to waste unless there is a shared understanding of this epistemology followed by a coherent structural change in the institution that will allow for the theory to go hand in hand with the civil servants actual practice.

Introduction

Background:

Sweden comprises 21 counties, and each of them has its County Administrative Board (CAB). The CAB is a government authority led by the County Governor, which acts as a link between the people and the municipal authorities on the one hand and the government, parliament and central authorities on the other. The CAB is a coordinating national and public service authority with supervisory responsibilities, on multiple areas and issues that extend across the whole of society. Among its responsibilities ensuring that the Government and the regional environmental objectives are implemented in each county is also included. This is done through the Nature and Environmental department.

The CAB as an institution has a top down hierarchy that involves various levels. Starting from the bottom are first the different units, which are inside a department, in this study the environmental department, and all the different units and departments with their respective bosses, and the Governor as the head of the institution. The environmental departments are under the advice and coordination of the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) an independent body of government.

The SEPA key tasks are to present proposals for environmental policy and legislation to the Swedish Government and ensure that environmental policy decisions are implemented. The SEPA also supplies expert knowledge and proposals to central government in its national, EU and international work on environmental issues. Nationally the Agency regulates, sets standards and acts as a guide, coordinator and evaluator.

All the civil servants working in the nature and environment departments from the different CABs in Sweden have recently started on demand from the SEPA the Dialogue for Nature Conservation (DNC) training program. This program has been produced by SEPA in cooperation with the Department of Urban and Rural Development at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU). It aims to develop the civil servants skills for dialogue, participation and conflict management, by providing the officials and directors a theoretical background and practical tools to spur dialogue, for creating democratic processes and acquiring basic knowledge about conflict management with the belief that dialogue is needed for nature conservation agencies to be successful in conservation and sustainable use of nature.

The people I interviewed have all participated in the DNC training program and work in different units within the Environment Department in the CAB headquarters either at Uppsala, Stockholm or Västerås. Their range of activities is quite different, as well as their level of interaction with people outside the CAB. Nevertheless, whether they are in charge of more administrative, scientific or management duties,

all of them at some point in one way or another have to communicate with people, stakeholders, or landowners.

Aim:

In a conversation with a CAB civil servant, during an Environmental Communication Congress, I realized that regardless of all the recent discussions involving participatory approaches that took place during the congress, this person seemed to believe that their duty in relation to stakeholders was to impose into them the CABs agenda that was planned from the start.

This observation triggered in me a series of thoughts and curiosity about how the civil servants view participatory approaches, is it as tools to help them accomplish their environmental agendas or perhaps as a new perspective towards nature conservation. I assume that Dialogue must be a priority for the institution especially now that they are receiving the training program Dialogue for Nature Conservation. Whatever the case may be I grew interested in learning the reasons behind their perceptions.

As a result, the aim of this study is to explore the CAB civil servants perspectives and understandings about participation and dialogue on Nature Conservation and to see to what extent this are taking place at the moment in their practice.

Method:

Based on my aim I elaborated a semi-structured interview with open questions regarding a general view on their communication with people (stakeholders, landowners), and with a focus on dialogue and participation. I tried to make the questionnaire in an easy vocabulary avoiding communication terminology. Nevertheless I found that some of the questions still were not easily understood. During the interviews I had the questions handy in case of need, and I tried to be flexible adapting them to the interviewees. This meant that depending on the person each interview was different. I interviewed 8 people in total and recorded the interviews in order to go over the information again.

I did a transcript of the recordings, which helped me to listen very well to their answers and to have a general view of things that might have slipped off my memory since the time of the interviews. In order to analyze the information I first tried to categorize it, but it seemed to be a never ending task that took too much time, so I decided to do it according to the main patterns that called my attention while I was transcribing. Last but not least my interpretation of this data and the literature.

Theory:

Normative theory on Participation

The normative theory is based in a strive to integrate natural and social systems for environmental problem solving. It suggests things that can be done in order to better this processes and explain why and how to involve all stakeholders. The central arguments of normative theories for participation are:

Learning: Natural resource problems are complex. Each actor has different interest and perspectives on them, as well as unique understandings and experiences to provide; no one included has complete knowledge and control over the issues, therefore there are no single answers to them. Participation presents the possibility to solve these issues through mutual learning.

Democracy (participation): Participation is a more ethical way to solving problems since it allows those affected by the situation to have the opportunity to influence how to solve them. Since decisions take into account the knowledge that the different people involved have, this results in “better and more effective decisions” which consequently are accepted and easier to implement.

Power: All people affected should have some influence over the formulation of the problem and the decisions that are taken are not based on power advantages.

Dialogue and collaboration

Dialogue and collaboration are approaches that can be used to solve environmental issues, which regardless of the differences between them share the same central arguments of participation.

Although we should be aware that each environmental issue is unique and there is no such a thing as a recipe for having a dialogue or a collaborative process, still some important things to consider are:

A coherent, well designed and managed process that is neutrally facilitated and tailored to the needs of stakeholders; power is balanced between different agendas; stakeholders have a real say in decisions; there is an equal emphasis on speaking and listening; process fosters mutual respect between all stakeholders and builds shared responsibility.

Dialogue seeks to maximize what can be accomplished while managing the expectations of what is achievable; the process starts by building on common ground; a common information base is established; mutual learning is fostered and no one has a monopoly on wisdom or truth; solutions are taken on merit not on the status of any particular person; feelings, interests, needs and fears are valued; solutions are sought that everyone can live with and most support; understanding, trust and new relationships - invisible products are valued – as much as the visible documents or agreements. Consequently, a dialogue process has beneficial implications on the quality of the decisions, its implementation, the relationships between those involved and the community.

<http://www.dialoguematters.co.uk/principlesofbestpractice.htm>

<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/dialogue/what-is-dialogue.html>)

The core requirements for successful collaboration involve:

Relevant stakeholders are at the table; participants adopt a problem solving approach; all participants have access to necessary resources and opportunities to participate on discussions; decisions are usually reached by consensus; relevant agencies are guided by the recommendations of the collaboration.

(Nitsche, U. p. 218), (Walker, 2004,p.123 in Cox, R. p.126), (Cox,R. p.129).

Empirical Discussion and Interpretation:

“If we are to understand what humans do, we must understand each individuals unique perspectives, for they are the basis of what the person takes for granted and how the person defines situations. But we must learn in addition the social world in which the individual is participating in a given act.” (Shibutani in Charon, J.2007.p.39)

In order to understand the CAB civil servants perspectives about participation in their work, here I explore the circumstances in which their work is developed, and present some excerpts of the information they provided to me and my interpretation of it.

Views on communication in the CAB

In general it seems that a communication strategy is lacking at two levels:

Inside the CAB itself, between the different departments and also within its units, each person seems to work to accomplish their tasks mostly on their own, without much communication with their colleagues.

This situation is mirrored when it comes to communication from the CAB towards stakeholders. Apparently at the moment each civil servant works in their own particular fashion according to their experience, preference or capacity. Thus, very different approaches can be found depending on the situation, with some people who have tried to work in a unified way within their close group, while others have managed as best as they can on their own, and in some cases having a third party to do these tasks.

However, their communication with people is mainly the classical type, characterized by a one way linear communication, sender to the receiver, and allowing for some questions. This is usually done through letters, phone calls, and sometimes meeting people directly either one on one or in groups. Sometimes when their aim is to reach a lot of people, depending on the case, they may do information campaigns using the newspapers, brochures, posters or organizing special events

aimed for the general public. Either way it appears that what they mainly do is transmit information about the natural values in an area and what the people involved can do.

Their Communication Strategy if we can say that there is one, seems to be built on the traditional assumption that:

information → knowledge → change in attitude → change in behavior

This represents the old school way of communication, which is a simplistic way of seeing the communication course of action, that views the process in a linear way, and audiences as highly susceptible to manipulation, assuming that individuals would respond in predictable ways to the information provided (Cox, R. p. 183). Perhaps this could be seen as dissemination, which Peters describes as a 'suspended dialogue'. (Peters, 1999 in Linell, P. p.32)

"We try to do a lot of information campaigns and so on, and this directed to all of the public not just landowners, and I don't know how well that works but its something we try. We hope that then maybe we can reach a lot of land owners at the same time and maybe some of them who have learnt what would be good for a species ... maybe they will start to think about how to manage it in the right way... We can have brochures, talk to people, and have distinct posters about the special thing that we have chosen...so that's one way. Then we go through the newspapers sometimes they want to do an article about something that we work with..." NS
"... Now is the time to start the information... we know there is a strong opposition or has being, but that is maybe because they have not had the information, so we hope this is going to change now.... I think it is necessary that they get the information, ... There are small groups who are opposed to this NR. Our job will be to find them, inform them and make them see that this is not so bad.

ET

"The goal with the information is to make them understand. Some people understand it and can accept it but others don't accept. Then you have given them a chance to get the information and in some cases is as far as we can get." AE

"When we visit landowners we have this brochures with us. This is about large trees (oaks), so they can read something about the species that are involved here and what they can do. " EO

One thing in which they all seem to have an agreement when it comes to approaching landowners, is praising them for the values they have in their land, by saying that they most have done a good job for it to be so valuable.

However, as I interpret, the classical communication model is perhaps simply the result of the institutional framework. A hierarchical structure that mostly uses a top-down traditional way of working, in which the main decisions are taken in the higher levels. This structure goes hand in hand with a traditional approach to Nature Conservation that focuses in Natural Sciences as the source of knowledge, and the base for their decisions. Thus, one thing leads to the next, and then under this believes it seems logical that they as the recipients of knowledge should be the ones making the decisions and informing about this to the rest.

But this way of working disregards other important sources of knowledge that could

contribute to a better understanding of situations such as the knowledge the different stakeholders may have.

“All knowledge is situated and partial, embedded in social position, place and time... privileging the partial knowledge produced by the scientific method is likely to preclude partial knowledge produced in other ways and therefore, keep it from contributing to better accounts of the world.” (Haraway, D. in Fortmann, L. 2008.p. 5)

“...I have come to understand that science can answer some questions, people with other kinds of knowledge answer other equally important questions, and that some questions are best answered in collaboration...” (Fortmann, L. 2008.p.2)

The CAB civil servants in this department work in the middle of a tricky situation since they are not only representing the voice of the Government but also the voice of those without a voice (extra humans, Nature), which implies in one hand power and in the other its absence.

“Our goals are very clear, we have this I call it mission from the government: you will protect so many square miles of beautiful nature this year and so many next year. So in a long term the goal is something else of course, is to protect wildflowers and animals living in Sweden so that all species will still exist within 200 years or so...” BF

“It is the Swedish government who sets the percentage, that some percent of each type of nature should be preserved. ... We are going to make a NR of this area, because here is where the species are, we can't move them somewhere else. ... There is so little left to preserve and that's a growing problem, every year it's a smaller area shrinking.” AE

The fact that natural resources in general are increasingly facing more pressure from the demands of society implies also a growing risk for very valuable natural areas, and thus the urge from the government to protect what little is left of them.

There are according to priority, several levels of Nature Protection, which involve different degrees of power use from the CAB towards people. In the case of Nature Reserves (NR), if a place qualifies as such, the CAB has the possibility of creating the NR despite of what the stakeholders may say. Nevertheless, now they offer the stakeholder some other alternatives upon which to decide, like money or land substitutes, commitment contracts, or buying only the forest and not the land (provided that the forest will be left untouched and the landowner will follow some regulations).

In contrast some newer programs like the Action Plans, and the EU Water Directive, which respectively aim to protect threatened species and water quality, are in quite a different situation at least at the moment. These programs are totally dependant on the stakeholders will, with the CAB having no legal grounds or power to impose anything to the landowner and counting only on the skills of the civil servant to convince them to cooperate.

These alternatives are maybe born from an effort to reduce and avoid the rejection produced in the more impositive situations.

Regarding decision making, it depends on what sort of issue it is about, for in the management of NR or in smaller programs like the Action Plans, the civil servants in charge can take the decisions. But when it comes to bigger issues like creating NR the decisions are taken higher up in the hierarchy.

Another consequence of the institution structure is that historically the CAB in order to achieve its goals in conservation, has many times put its decisions into practice through imposition, when not accepted by the stakeholders. This not surprisingly has produced a sense of rejection and distrust from people towards the institution and possibly also towards the protected areas.

*"There is a problem, the history is not so good for the workers here in some way. A lot of landowners don't like CAB, that is something that you know, you will understand quite far. They don't like to go with people working for the government...you heard about someone coming there and stealing their land...But I think it has changed a lot how you do it. " FS
"In that case I had to make my case clear, I am going to do this whether you scream and shout or not... I offered her another area but that was not good enough... I felt very bad. She said that I was trampling on her as a person, because I did not listen to her arguments. I said sorry, but I cant do it your way, it has to be done like this..." AE*

Directly connected to the level of power use involved in an issue is the level of difficulties the civil servant most confront with the stakeholders. Some civil servants depending on their type of work are more exposed to this situation. In case of conflicts some might naturally know how to handle the situation, but many times they have to face uncomfortable moments, not knowing well how to handle them. Given the institutional focus in natural sciences, most civil servants have a lot of knowledge regarding environmental issues, but not as much in communication matters. Regardless of their particular situation, most of them acknowledge this need, which could imply the need for a change in their approach to nature conservation.

The civil officers mentioned that each situation with stakeholders could also be very different depending on their interests. Some are willing to cooperate, others see it all from an economic point of view and there are also those who are very connected to their places, have a lot of feelings involved and simply will not accept to loose or change their land for anything.

" A lot of farmers are very economic... money, money, it solves everything. Just that they get enough money...But then if it is feelings, it's their ancestors house or farm...then it is much harder." FS

"He at first was interested in the species ... We discussed what we could do, and ...he was willing to do those things, but later when I called him he wanted a lot of money... then another landowner in the same environment was very interested, and happy to have this species ...and willing to do anything to keep it for free." EO

"I believe many landowners are very fond of their land and they don't want to destroy it... But ... there also are land owners who would destroy everythinga catastrophe." BF

"It is different from one landowner to another how deep in his heart is to be separated from his ancestors area." AE

Lack of time, was mentioned by many as an important issue that is very connected with their communication within the institution and in relation to stakeholders. People have too much to do and there is hardly any time left for other things within the institution itself, not to mention having a dialogue process with the stakeholders.

"...The first time you meet people out there, you have to build up...what you call it? The true in them... you have to get to know each other first, before you can make big things. ...So we can take the time, don't rush it. That's the problem sometimes with my colleagues, they want a lot of things to be done now, immediately. Maybe a good work is done if you let it take some time instead of rushing it." AE

"...It takes time this dialogue, but I think we all should use that way of working... I think the government wants us to have more dialogue than what we really have time to." CL

"...One problem is that we need to work a lot more within the county council. We do that very little. The problem is that no one has the time, because we need to do all this things, so we don't have time to communicate within the CAB, and then it is very difficult to visit a farmer because he has questions about everything that we do." EO

"...That's usually the biggest problem here, that's why we sometimes don't do so well when we meet the landowners, because we have so little time to prepare and follow up." NS

Views on Participation

Not surprisingly when it comes to participation, there is a lack of a clear and shared view on the subject. This is just the logical result of what the institution has usually allowed its employees to experience in their practice.

Each interviewee showed different levels of understandings regarding participation and its implications, however, all of them acknowledged its importance. I am aware that their responses may have been influenced by what they interpreted as my interest, as an environmental communication student, which I informed them prior to the interviews. Thus, they probably tried to find an easy answer by- using for their response a script- following the conventional guidelines about participation and dialogue (Alvisson, M. 1999/3.p.8,10,13).

When presented to the questions on participation - in some cases I sensed some discomfort and confusion in the interviewees. Thus, sometimes in order to make the questions clearer I had to use interchangeably participation, dialogue, and collaboration. However at some point by going around and around in the subject, their answers revealed somehow their understandings.

Participation is seen as involving people, but the answer changes very much depending on what the involvement refers to.

"I think it is the only way to work. The way with big letters, absolutely. It takes time, lots of

time...perhaps sometimes people here think that it takes too much time to have this dialogue, so we go the fast way.” CL

“We can involve them at protected areas to manage the land...” BF

“I think it is the communication, we need to communicate with them. And there has to be discussions about the best way to take care of things. We have one opinion and they have another one, we have to agree.” EO

“I think it is about information.... I think that’s very important, to understand what is important for them. I can understand that if I take the questions to the level of their day by day management in their situation, then it is a lot easier to find ways to get things done in the NR that I want, than if I come and say, do this, fix this.” AE

“...This national goals leave very little room for those discussions, whether we should take this or this... “ AE

“...My colleagues who make the NR, they should listen to a lot of people living in the area. To try to understand how we could make the plans based on the information we get from them. Because they know how the land has being managed before, and we can learn a lot from them.” AE

“The best way for me to get things done ... someone in the local community who can take care of it. Then they understand...it is money NR, someone comes and buys my services. That’s a very good way to get a good management of a NR, to use the local knowledge... Not getting someone from far away...” AE

“...I think it is good, because usually they have a lot of good ideas. They are so used to manage their land so usually they know how things can be done in the best way. But of course I have to be careful and think about what I think is best... as long as I remember my ideas, then its really good to take their ideas into account.” NS

“Our mission in the CAB is to do what the government tells us ... and we have perhaps possibilities to have small ideas of our own but mostly we are just fulfilling what the government decides... So we don’t have much freedom at the CAB, to involve people.” BF

“...I see Nature conservation issues as a production branch...side by side with timber, milk, and cereal... we have to buy this work from the landowners, of course. ...So they get paid for managing...you can produce meat, milk, cereals and also Nature Conservation.” CL

“I guess is necessary if you want people to understand ...cause if you are more involved you will also learn more about it and then you maybe will also understand why decisions are taken, even if it is not all the time going your way.... It is important to discuss, to talk about things. Its always easier if you get time, so you really can describe why also. So its not just decisions without any knowledge...” FS

“... Usually I also learn from the landowners all the time...they know a lot of things.” FS

“It is definitively necessary, because they are in power of doing the things to make it better. We can’t make everything out there. They have to be involved...” EO

Whatever their understanding about participation might be and even in the seemingly best cases, a common factor among all is that it does not mean the stakeholders having much of a saying in the decision making.

Additionally, there were different levels of awareness about the government mandates and regulations on participation, with some civil servants not knowing with certainty about this demands. I interpret this as a non very strong reinforcement

policy inside the institution regarding these matters.

Is participation a requirement in the CAB?

"I would say that it is very important for the CAB as a whole... Surely there are some guidelines somewhere, although I can't show them to you right now." AE

"Yes, the government has this regulations... every year they tell us what to do and we have to work a lot more and be better on participation." EO.

"I don't know.... I think it is, in someway. In my case it is, because it is in the theory of how this should work." FS

"Yes, that is the way. But this is so big... so we decided we have to make it in another way." ET

"... We know that it is necessary to involve the landowners to make the project work." NS

"The government has this regulations... every year they tell us what to do and we have to work a lot more and be better on participation... I think the SEPA... wants us to work more in that direction but we haven't come that far." EO

According to what an interviewee said, they have a Collective Nature Conservation Policy, from the government writings 2001- 2002:

"...It is not so much about what we should achieve, it is more about how we should work to achieve our goals. Here they talk much about regional development, that nature conservation should be integrative dialogue. So these is the cornerstone in our work for a sustainable society... they talk about.... local dialogue, participation and nature conservation closer to the citizens... we can say this is a mandate, a rule. The government ... says in the letter to us, that it is a condition that we should use this way of working. So of course this is our "green bible." CL

"The Swedish Environmental Objectives ... take care of the landowners knowledge and motivation. Its important to try to understand each other, the CAB and the landowner..." CL

Participation in Practice

When it comes to practice regarding Participation, their perspectives about how things should be handled, were quite opposite but consistent with their understandings and awareness of the subject:

Only one person claimed to actually work in a constant basis involving active cooperation from the stakeholders, which could be so, but could also be a case of moral story telling by the interviewee trying to create a good impression of him/ herself and his/ her occupation (Alvesson, M. 1999/3.p. 12).

"...It is more important to have this dialogue when there are complex issues to solve. When there are conflicts between different goals. ... The more complex an area, the more important to have this dialogue so you have the same way of thinking on the values, the same picture of the goals all the members in the partnership should achieve... We focused in the farmers in this area and we said we will use the perspective from the ground, their perspective. We would inform all the stakeholders, so they could understand what all this Natura 2000 is about. We started by establishing cooperation groups... On these meetings, this group had invited all the landowners, and on each meeting the landowners selected a few representatives... What we did was to elaborate Conservation Plans together with the representatives of the landowners. Then we had to send it to all the landowners to get their feedback. ...It was a new way of having

dialogue between the CAB, farmers association and the landowners.... There was a Dialogue for discussions with this selected group, for working together in the draft... to throw questions, identify management needs and threats against their site and ideas on how to manage.... When we have worked with other projects afterwards, we have used this same way." CL

But, in this case when I asked the interviewee to what extent the stakeholders could influence the decision making, the answer was: "*It is uncommon...*" so this casted doubts on how much of a dialogue has really taken place in this cases.

A case that called my attention during the interviews is the one about a second attempt to create a Marine Reserve, which the first time a few decades ago had failed. The interviewee, who was one of the persons in charge of the new process, did not seem to know with certainty what the reasons for the previous failure were, other than apparently the strong rejection of the locals. All he said was that it was inappropriately done and guessed about the causes, saying that people there were not used to having anyone telling them what to do. Therefore I can only make assumptions about what happened then, but I believe given the rejection of the locals, that probably it was related to the very same way of working the institution presently has.

In the new case, although they had instructions to have an open and transparent process and to let people say what they want, in the end, they are anyways using the usual methods of working which involve among other things: hierarchical decision making based in scientific knowledge only, imposition, communication as dissemination of information, and the stakeholders not having a real saying in the process. Have they not learnt from their previous experience? What is avoiding the learning?

" We decided early we can't have a dialogue with a 1000 people, it is almost impossible. We can have a dialogue of course, but they cannot tell us you can't do this, you can't do that... They will have a chance to say what they want, but they can't have a role in the process. The contact group (which was chosen by them) does, but only as consulting. I get response from them now, they send me e mails and call me, and tell me their opinions and I try to at least consider what they say." ET

This case perhaps portrays the words of Long:

"Institutionalization enacts both the promise and the threat inherent in our nature as social beings- that is, the promise of interpreting, protecting and holding experience for learning and the threat of rigidly censoring and fossilizing experience so that learning cannot occur and only a stale repetition of the past is available". (Long, S. 2004.p.108)

More questions than answers

All this process has left me with more questions than answers.

How does SEPA understand dialogue? What is their aim with this training program?

Is SEPA trying to work in a more decentralized way and this are the first steps of the process? Why are they promoting Dialogue? Are they willing to put this perspective into practice? Is it just a matter of portraying that image? Does the government speak the same language as SEPA? Does the government really want dialogue? Does SEPA speak the same language as SLU staff or is this simply a big misunderstanding in which the two sides think quite differently about the aim that has brought them together? What are their agendas? How does SLU view the Dialogue training program? How do stakeholders see the CAB?

But, unfortunately I have not interviewed anyone in SEPA, nor in SLU to be able to find some answers to this puzzle and all I can do is only assume.

So, in the end all I can count on is with what the interviewees shared with me. Each of them, regardless of how their contributions were, allowing me to perhaps have a better understanding of their perspectives.

The CAB civil servants work immersed in a top down institutional hierarchy (power) and a nature conservation approach focused in scientific knowledge. Under this scheme the civil servants duty is to accomplish the government environmental laws, mandates and decisions. Their work takes place among increasing pressures on natural resources with the consequent growing need to protect what little is left of very valuable areas; a lack of a communication strategy inside and outside the institution; communication understood as transmission of information; lack of time; imposition of certain decisions on stakeholders that result in rejection towards the institution, with some recently established alternatives to soften this situation; powerlessness in programs that are not a priority and national and international demands for a participatory approach to their work.

The institutional framework constitutes a significant reference group (Charon, J. 2007.p.78) for the civil servants perspectives towards participation and influences to a great extent the way in which their practice in relation to stakeholders takes place. However, it is interesting that the SEPA is recently offering the civil servants the training program in dialogue. So, we can see that in one hand when it comes to practice the institution is de-authorizing the civil servants to experience dialogue processes, while simultaneously in the other hand authorizing the learning about the subject.

“Institutions authorize or de-authorize experiences for their members. The legitimacy of ones experience is not merely founded upon a personal power to assert that experience. At an unconscious level, authority to access experience, to give it form and meaning and to learn from it, is derived from the group.” (Long, S. 2004. p.106)

In practice, regardless of the mandates for participation they may have, their way of working is not very conducive for democracy, learning, and power leveling - the

central arguments of participation. This can produce a series of consequences at a social level that in the end affects the environmental goals that the institution is seeking.

In this context, the Dialogue for Nature Conservation Training program, as much as it constitutes an opportunity for learning and reflecting about their practice, is also a contradiction to the civil servants reality especially when it comes as a demand from high in the hierarchy chain.

“ ... It is the disruptive influences of the other which introduce tensions; the other brings in extra (‘surplus’) knowledge other than you had before or you had expected to encounter, she may see things from points of view that are so far strange or unfamiliar to yourself, which forces you to reflect and try to understand, thereby possibly enriching your (and our) knowledge and language”. (Linell, P. p.24)

“A social learning approach provides a context for a dynamic local decentralized process. The epistemologies of social learning approaches are grounded in the assertion that knowing occurs with the act, or the process, of ‘constructing’ an issue and seeking improvements, whereas traditional policy instruments are built on an epistemological foundation of fixed forms of knowledge.” (Collins, K. & Ison, R. 2006)

But, unless this training program is only the first step of a long process of change, it appears that the reasons behind it are not based in a common understanding of what dialogue implies. As Collins & Ison (2006) have asserted, in a global scale, participation has increasingly become a very important aspect and a demand in environmental policy making, nevertheless the will and capacity to engage in a critical way with its epistemology have not grown accordingly. This epistemology is what frames how participation is understood and conceptualized, and sets the context in which decisions about process, tools and techniques are made. This situation can affect how participation is being put into practice and could imply the risk of using tools, practices and techniques inappropriately, resulting in unwanted policy development and outcomes. If SEPA had a shared epistemology about dialogue, there would also be concerted efforts from the government towards structural changes in the institution that would allow for the theory to take place in the practice of the civil servants.

“New ways to think about the nature of environmental issues require commensurate inquiries about the meaning, not just the means of participation in policy making process.” (Collins, K. & Ison, R. 2006)

In the actual circumstances, the civil officers have their hands more or less tied and cannot fully apply this new perspective. The DNC training program may risk being a waste of valuable resources, if not implemented under a shared understanding of the epistemology of dialogue. Only this will make possible a coherent change in the CABs institutional framework towards a more decentralized and democratic structure that allows for this perspective to take place in the civil servants practice.

“... Whatever the consciously formulated values, missions, purposes and aims of an institution or its management representatives, however they are expressed and promulgated, they will be nothing more than rationalizations or ideologies if they are not present in the organization’s structure and specific work practices.”(Long, S. 2004.p.107)

From a symbolic interactionist point of view, nothing is fixed and immutable in society, and this applies also for the structural framework in which the civil servants are presently working. Despite the institutional limitations, and out of the experience gained through their own practice, the civil servants have become aware of their need for a better communication inside and outside the institution. This fact, together with the Dialogue for Nature Conservation training program and the national and international demands on participation, may constitute fertile ground and an opportunity that could trigger important changes for Dialogue to take place.

Conclusions:

The aim of this study is to explore the civil servants perspectives about participation and dialogue on Nature Conservation and to see to what extent these are taking place in their practice.

The civil servant perspectives and practice towards participation are very much influenced by the CAB top down institutional framework and its natural science focus. Their views and way of working reflect this influence and show that in spite of the personal views they could have -which may favor or not participation- their practice towards stakeholders as it is, is not conducive to democracy, learning and power sharing - the base arguments of participation. As a result this could affect the achievement of the environmental goals the institution seeks.

Real participation cannot be undertaken only as a result of external demands nor through isolated efforts such as the Dialogue for Nature Conservation training course, despite of its valuable contributions. Participation demands should go hand in hand with opportunities for experiencing and learning.

A shared understanding of the epistemology of Dialogue between all involved is needed first, followed by coherent and concerted efforts to change the institution framework in various levels. This will allow for participation to take place in the civil servants daily practice.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

What do you do in your work?

How is your job related to people (stakeholders, landowners)?

How is dealing with them?

Do you have some strategy or method to approach stakeholders?

If so, how is it? If not, do you feel the need to have it?

How are your meetings with stakeholders usually held? What happens in them?

How are decisions regarding stakeholders taken in the CAB?

Who makes the final decisions?

Do stakeholders have a saying in these decisions?

How and to what extent?

What do you think about involving people in decision making?

Out of all the projects you work with, is there one that has being particularly successful?

What do you think made it work?

What is participation for you?

Is participation a requirement in the CAB?

Is participation compatible with government mandates?

What do you think about how the CAB works in relation to stakeholders?

What would you change about it?

Why did you take the Dialogue for Nature Conservation course?

What have you learnt from it?