

Struggling for an ideal dialogue

An analysis of the regional dialogue processes under Sweden's first National Forest Program

Iris Maria Hertog

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Supervisor: Sara Brogaard, LUCSUS, Lund University

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Abstract

In May 2018, a strategy for Sweden's first National Forest Program was launched. As part of its implementation, County Administrative Boards are now initiating dialogue processes for drafting regional forest strategies and action plans. Previous research shows that Swedish forest policy has so far been unable to resolve the tensions between its production and environmental goals. I aim to investigate to what extent the regional dialogue processes offer a way forward.

I use Habermas' ideal of communicative action as a theoretical framework to analyze the initiation phase of the dialogue processes in two case study regions: Västra Götaland and Gävleborg. This framework portrays some preconditions for a fair and effective dialogue. Within each region, I use document analysis and semi-structured interviews to understand the design of the dialogue process, the factors enabling and disabling the ideal of communicative action, and the relationships between them.

In both case study regions, my results show a clear effort to include a variety of actors and to let everyone be heard. Although dissimilar choices were made related to process design, the two regions faced similar barriers to reaching the ideal of communicative action. As the initial funding (autumn 2018) was limited in time and further funding of the dialogues unsure, the dialogue processes had a somewhat unclear organization and were insufficiently institutionalized. Furthermore, project board members had a hard time pinpointing the exact role of the National Forest Program. Additionally, distrust amongst stakeholders hampered the process in Gävleborg.

I conclude that the funding and function of the regional dialogue processes need to be clarified at the national level for the regional dialogue processes to deliver meaningful results. Additionally, my analysis suggests that unaddressed goal conflicts should be handled by the national government, who has the power to adjust relevant legal, economic and administrative systems.

Keywords: stakeholder participation; Sweden; forestry; National Forest Program; communicative action; Jürgen Habermas

Word count: 14,000

Sammanfattning

I Maj 2018 lanserade regeringen en strategi för Sveriges nationella skogsprogram. Som en viktig del av skogsprogrammets implementering initierar Länsstyrelserna nu regionala dialogprocesser för att jobba fram regionala skogsstrategier och handlingsplaner. Tidigare forskning visar att den svenska skogspolitiken hittills inte har lyckats hantera målkonflikterna mellan produktion och miljö. Därför vill jag i denna studie utreda till vilken grad de regionala dialogprocesserna kan bidra till att hantera dessa målkonflikter.

Jag använder Habermas ideal för kommunikativt handlande som ett teoretiskt ramverk för att analysera uppstarten av den regionala dialogprocessen i två pilotlän: Västra Götaland och Gävleborg. Ramverket skildrar några förutsättningar för en jämlik och effektiv dialog. I de båda länen använder jag dokumentanalys och semistrukturerade intervjuer för att 1) förstå upplägget av den regionala dialogprocessen, 2) identifiera faktorer som gynnar och hindrar att idealet för kommunikativt handlande uppnås, och 3) analysera relationerna mellan upplägget av dialogprocessen, externa hinder, och idealet för kommunikativt handlande.

I båda länen är det tydligt att man strävar efter att få med ett brett spektrum av aktörer och att låta alla få komma till tals. Även om man har valt olika vägar i upplägget av dialogprocesserna, stötte man på liknande hinder för kommunikativt handlande i de båda länen. Då den första delen av finansieringen (hösten 2018) var begränsad i tid och den fortsatta finansieringen ovisst, ledde detta till en otydlig organisation och otillräcklig institutionalisering av dialogprocesserna. Även den exakta rollen av det nationella skogsprogrammet verkar oklar för styrgrupperna. I Gävleborg utgjorde dessutom en misstro bland intressenterna ett hinder för processen.

Jag drar slutsatsen att både finansieringen och rollen av de regionala dialogprocesserna bör tydliggöras nationellt för att dialogprocesserna ska ge meningsfulla resultat. Gällande målkonflikten mellan produktion och miljö antyder min analys att denna bör hanteras av regeringen och riksdagen, eftersom dessa har makten att justera relevanta lagliga, ekonomiska och administrativa system.

Acknowledgements

It's a sunny day in Swedish spring and the birds are twittering outside of my open window while I am wrapping up four months of thesis work. It is not hard to be thankful in such a moment. Thankful, first of all, towards Lukas – my steadfast companion in thesis writing, with a smile and sparkling eyes. From before the time when the “magic hazel” started to bloom until the end of the magnolia's flowering period, we met every morning at 9 o'clock to start another day of reading, writing, and drawing mind maps. Thank you, Lukas, for sharing these past months – including both silent working and enriching conversations about life and identity. Thesis writing would have been a lot lonelier and less enjoyable without our shared routine. Furthermore, I would like to thank you, Victoria and Paula, for coming up with the idea of a “weekly goals group”. It was fun to support each other and to slowly but surely see our work progress.

Letting my thoughts wander from social support to the content of my work, I am thankful for the LUMES program and for all the inspiring courses that we got in the 1,5 years before this thesis started. The foundations that were patiently laid there formed a rich array of perspectives to draw from in my thesis – even though I ended up using only a fraction of it. And thanks also to you, Sara, for your support and thoughtful comments throughout the thesis process. I appreciate how you gave me absolute trust and freedom to follow my ideas, while also being ready to offer help when I needed it. What else can one hope for in a thesis supervisor? Furthermore, I am thankful towards you, Thomas and Sanna, for your enthusiasm and support for this project from within the *Swedish Forestry Agency*. Doing research becomes so much more meaningful if one knows that there are people out there who actually want to make use of one's findings!

And doing research also becomes meaningful when it entails listening to people... Therefore, I would like to thank all my respondents for your time and openness, for sharing your stories, and for letting a foreign student into your worlds. Conducting interviews with you all was certainly the most rewarding and engaging part of my research, and I hope that you will recognize yourselves in these impersonal codes “R1-R12”... Furthermore, thanks to the InnoForEst project for financial support of the data collection for this research. And finally, let's not forget about everyone who made my thesis possible without even knowing about it: train and bus drivers, library staff, manufacturers of paper, ink and pencils, cleaning personnel, publishing agencies, internet operators, and all others that act behind the screens and whose importance I don't even know about.

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Preface

During the past two years in Sweden, numerous people have asked me what I study. “Sustainability science”, is my answer. In close to 90% of the cases, I got a reply along the lines of: “What a great topic! Sustainability, we really need that!” This enthusiasm was often accompanied with a sense of hope: if only some young and energetic students study sustainability science, perhaps they will be capable of solving the environmental mess we created. Although everyone has their own idea of what sustainability is and how it should be reached, there seems to be a widespread understanding amongst the Swedes I met that *we need it urgently*.

Within the fields of sustainability science and natural resource management, a similar shared enthusiasm exists for the practice of participation. Giving stakeholders, citizens, and marginalized groups a voice in the decision-making process is viewed as a means of empowerment. Furthermore, participation holds the promise that it can build trust, facilitate social learning and ultimately lead to better, more sustainable outcomes. Could it be true, that dialogue is the solution to all problems?

On the one hand, I would love to believe so. It makes a lot of sense intuitively: If we would just talk with each other, shouldn't we be able to organize society in a way that is good for all of us, and for the planet as well? I desperately want the answer to be “yes”. The idea is strongly linked to this other conviction that I try to cling to: that all human beings have the capacity for love and understanding.

But on the other hand, there are many examples within the sustainability science literature where participation and dialogue didn't work. Maybe it is naïve to assume that people will work for mutual understanding in a world shaped by power relations, economic interests and systemic short-sightedness.

I don't know. I don't know whether it is my hope or my fear that is closer to the truth. But I do know that this is an important question to ask.

Swedish glossary

Association of Local Municipalities	Kommunalförbund
County Administrative Board	Länsstyrelsen
County Council	Region
Department for Rural Development	Enheten för Landsbygd och Tillväxt (Länsstyrelsen Gävleborg)
Department for Rural Development	Enheten för Landsbygdsutveckling (Länsstyrelsen Västra Götaland)
Environmental Protection Agency	Naturvårdsverket
Federation of Swedish Farmers ¹	Lantbrukarnas Riksförbund (LRF)
key biotopes	nyckelbiotoper
Swedish Forest Agency	Skogsstyrelsen
National Food Strategy	Livsmedelstrategin
Nature Department	Naturavdelningen (Länsstyrelsen Västra Götaland)
Rural Development Program	Landbygdsprogrammet

¹ This federation includes different types of land users, including foresters.

1 Introduction

Swedish forests make up less than one percent of the world forest cover (Global Forest Watch, 2010), but produce about 4% of the world's paper and board (Worldatlas, 2017). Sweden is thereby globally the third largest exporter of wood products, after the US and Canada (Worldatlas, 2017). So it is fair to say that Swedish forestry – despite its short growing season – is hugely productive. According to the Swedish Forestry Act of 1993, timber production and environmental protection are equally important goals for the sector (Lindahl et al., 2017). However, protected areas cover only a small fraction of Swedish forests; about 4.5% of Swedish forest land lies within protected areas, compared to an EU average of 11.5% (own calculation, based on Table 1.1 and 1.7 in Eurostat, 2011).

Against this background, several scholars have argued that Swedish forest policy has so far failed to address conflicts and trade-offs between its environmental and economic goals (Lindahl et al., 2017). This is at least partly due to how powerful actors (state, forest owners & forest industry) seem to have closed down around a policy framing along the lines of ecological modernization, which is resistant to change (Lindahl et al., 2017; Sandström and Sténs, 2015). The discourse of ecological modernization is characterized by a belief in economic growth and a focus on win-win situations. This focus often entails a reluctance to acknowledge ecological limits and trade-offs (Langhelle, 2000). While goal conflicts have remained unaddressed at the level of discourse and policy, disagreement between the forest industry and environmental NGOs is ongoing (Sandström and Sténs, 2015). According to Sandström & Sténs (2015), the gap between the forestry industry and environmental NGOs is “too wide to expect any joint contribution to the development of the Swedish forest policy” (p 156).

Perhaps trying to find a way out of this situation, the Swedish government decided in 2014 to involve a wide variety of forest stakeholders to a participatory process that formed the start of the country's first National Forest Program (NFP) (Regeringskansliet, 2015a). The strategy document for this NFP was released in May 2018, and as a first step in its implementation, regional dialogue processes are now being established with the goal to create regional forest strategies.

The government's focus on participatory processes fits well within a wider stream of thought (also clearly present within the field of Sustainability Science) that portrays stakeholder deliberation as a way to deal with goal conflicts. More specifically, stakeholder deliberation is expected to promote trust and mutual understanding, as well as to lead to more robust decisions and smoother implementation (Luyet et al., 2012; Reed, 2008). These expectations can be traced back to the theory

on communicative action of the German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas (born in 1929) (Reed et al., 2009). The essence of his theory on communicative action is put into words nicely by Lasse Thomassen:

“We cannot say what the right decision or a valid law is independently of the procedure we have followed in order to arrive at it; it is the rationality of the procedure that determines if the outcome is fair: has everybody potentially affected been included? Did everybody have an equal say in the process? And so on.” (Thomassen, 2010, p. 129)

If indeed a legitimate and inclusive outcome can only be reached through a legitimate and inclusive decision-making procedure, one can easily see why many sustainability scientists press so hard for stakeholder participation. Also the Swedish government follows this logic when placing national and regional dialogue processes at the center of its National Forest Program.

However, some authors have warned that deliberative processes – if not designed very carefully – tend to favour vested production interests and powerful stakeholders (Klenk et al., 2013; Lindahl et al., 2017). This risk might be substantial for the regional dialogue process, as the Swedish forestry sector is not only characterized by a reluctance to acknowledge trade-offs, but also by strong private property rights and influential economic interests (Wallin, Carlsson, & Hansen, 2016).

While there is a desperate need to resolve goal conflicts in the Swedish forestry sector, we might ask: Do these circumstances leave any room for fair and inclusive participatory processes? The current emergence of regional dialogue processes throughout Sweden makes this question even more important. The aim of this paper is to analyze to what extent the current regional stakeholder dialogues will be able to reconcile goal conflicts in Swedish forestry through Habermas’ ideal of communicative reason.

Therefore, I will focus on the following research questions:

1. How are the regional dialogue processes currently undertaken as part of the National Forest Program designed, and why in this way?
2. What factors enable and/or prevent these regional dialogue processes to live up to Habermas’ ideal of addressing trade-offs through communicative action?
3. How do choices in process design, barriers to the ideal of communicative action, and the extent to which the ideal of communicative action is reached influence each other?

The counties of Gävleborg and Västra Götaland will act as case study regions to answer these research questions.

In the next sections, I will sketch the context of my case studies by presenting Swedish forestry (section 2), and the policy context in which the regional dialogue processes take place (section 3). I will then describe my theoretical framework in section 4, covering both Habermas' theory of communicative action, as well as its further exploration within the participation literature. Based on sections 3 and 4, I will come to my operationalization of the ideal of communicative action in section 5. Then, I will describe my methods in section 6 and introduce the case study regions in section 7. Well-equipped with this background information, we will dive into the case study of Gävleborg's and Västra Götaland's regional dialogue processes in section 8 and 9. Finally, I will conclude my thesis with a discussion and conclusion in sections 10 and 11.

2 Background: Swedish forestry

Throughout the 20th century, Swedish forestry has been characterized by state regulations and subsidies that were meant to increase industrial timber production. Starting from mandatory forest regeneration in 1903, more detailed prescriptions were added over the years until they covered all silvicultural stages in the 1980s. In the 1950s, the government took the lead in introducing a forestry model based on clear-cutting. Biomass harvested from intensively managed even-aged stands of Scots pine and Norway spruce formed the basis for the Swedish welfare project, and the legacies of this management style are still visible today (KSLA, 2015; Lindahl et al., 2017). In 1993, a major revision of the Forestry Act occurred; environmental protection was added as a policy goal and given equal weight to the already existing goal of timber production. Silvicultural regulations were relaxed and “freedom under responsibility” became the leading principle of policy implementation (Lindahl et al., 2017). According to Sandström & Sténs (2015), the Swedish forestry sector is still struggling with this transition towards a new forestry model.

More specifically, the Swedish forest sector has been critiqued for failing to reach its environmental goals. Environmental NGOs claim that the production goal is given far more weight than the goal of environmental protection (Protect the Forest, 2016; Sahlin, 2011). According to monitoring data from the Swedish *Environmental Protection Agency*², the environmental goals “Sustainable Forests” and “Rich diversity of plant and animal life” are not going to be met by 2020 (Naturvårdsverket, 2019a). The majority of the forest habitat types listed in the EU Habitat Directive has an inadequate or bad conservation status in Sweden (Naturvårdsverket, 2019b). And although the Swedish government committed to establish protected areas on a representative 17% of its land surface by 2020, only 4% of Swedish forestland was subject to some kind of formal protection in 2016 (Naturvårdsverket, n.d.).

Economically speaking, the forestry sector seems to be doing well. Timber prices have been steadily decreasing since the 1950s, but this trend has stabilized over the last two decades. Furthermore, Figure 1 shows that the forestry sector has managed to keep up profitability (net value) by strongly reducing harvesting costs (Skogsstyrelsen, 2017a). At the same time, logging has steadily increased since the 1940s (see Figure 2).

² The Swedish name of organizations marked in italic can be found in the Swedish glossary (p. 2).

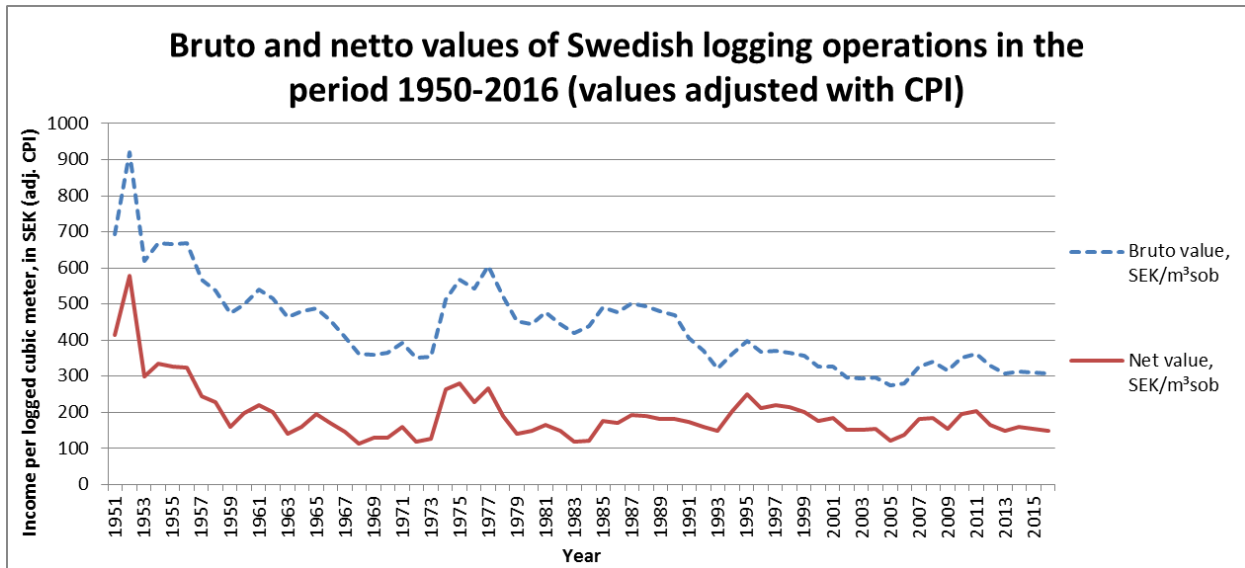


Figure 1. Bruto value (market price) and net value (market price reduced with costs of harvesting and management, which is the income of the forest owner) per cubic meter wood solid over bark harvested in Sweden over the period 1950-2016. All values are expressed in real value, indexed with the consumer price index with 2016 as a reference year. Own figure. Data source: Skogsstyrelsen, 2017a.

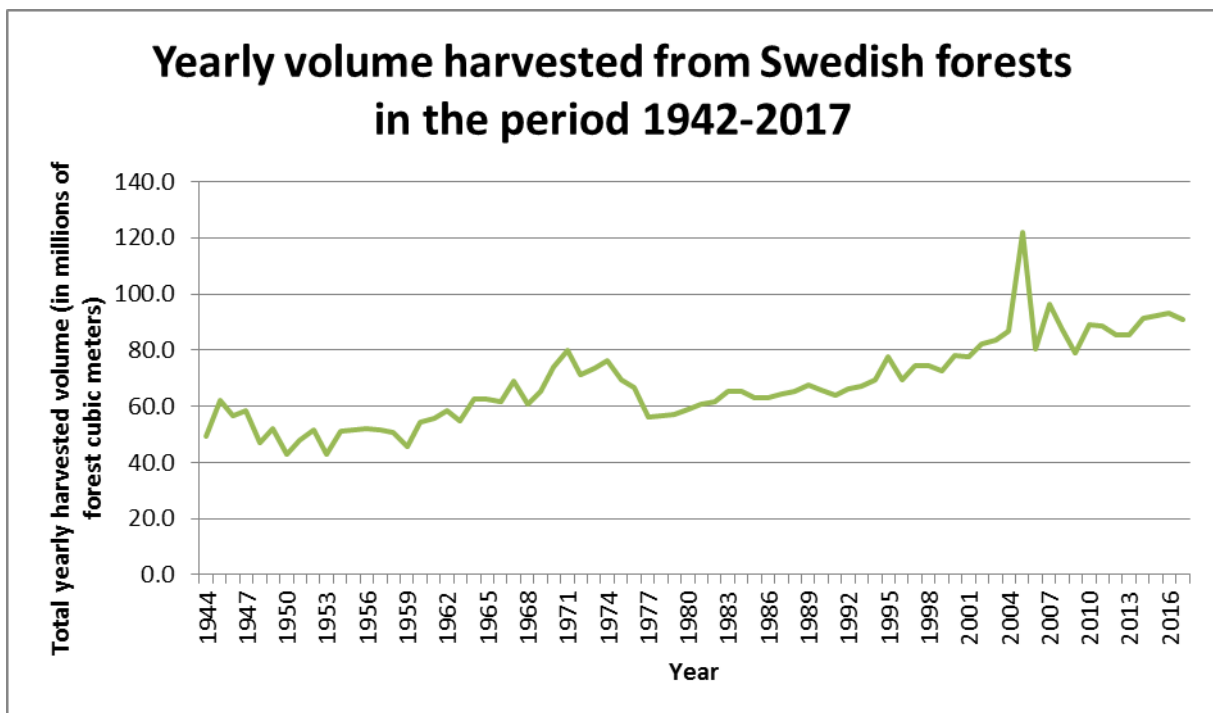


Figure 2. Yearly volume harvested from Swedish forests over the period 1942-2017, expressed in millions of forest cubic meters (measure of timber volume including bark but excluding branches and roots). The peak in 2005 is due to the storm Gudrun. The maximum sustainable yield is estimated to be between 95 and 100 million forest cubic meters (Skogsstyrelsen, 2018). Own figure. Data source: Skogsstyrelsen, 2017b

However, there is more to contemporary Swedish forestry than the conflict between production and environmental goals. Nilsson (2018) has argued that the Swedish paper, pulp and timber industries are subject to harsh international competition that is expected to become even harsher over the

coming decades. He points especially to the decreasing demand for paper and sawn timber and competition from fast-growing plantations in the Global South as risks to the Swedish forest industry. Also climate change brings along threats to the forestry sector in the form of increased storm damage, forest fires, drought, insect and pathogen outbreaks and impacts of biodiversity (Keskitalo et al., 2016). At the same time, forests have been identified as an important resource in mitigating climate change, because of their potential both as carbon sinks and as a source of alternatives to fossil resources (e.g. biofuels, bioplastics, etc.) (Lindahl and Westholm, 2011). These issues add several new layers of complexity to the dual policy goal of production and conservation.

According to Lindahl et al. (2017), there is a tendency within Swedish forestry and forest policy to address these new challenges through intensifying production. So, instead of shifting away from the historically dominant (and environmentally damaging) practice of intensive forestry, an increased productivity is presented as a solution to multiple problems, including international competition, climate change, and the need to shift towards a bioeconomy. Because of this approach, goal conflicts between production and biodiversity conservation remain largely unaddressed (Lindahl et al., 2017).

3 Policy context: The National Forest Program

3.1 Background and preparation phase (1995-2013)

In 1995, some years after the influential Rio-conferences of 1992, the term “National Forest Program” (NFP) was first coined within the International Panel on Forests³. It was promoted as a tool for sustainable forest management. In 2003, also the Pan-European Ministerial Conference on the Protection of Forests in Europe (MCPFE)⁴ started to promote the use of NFPs. Responding to this international pressure, the Swedish government asked the *Swedish Forest Agency* in 2013 to carry out a feasibility study for establishing a NFP in Sweden (Skogsstyrelsen, 2013).

In this feasibility study, a National Forest Program is defined following the definition of the MCPFE:

“A national forest program constitutes a participatory, holistic, inter-sectoral and iterative process of policy planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation at the national and/or sub-national level in order to proceed towards the further improvement of sustainable forest management and to contribute to sustainable development” (MCPFE, 2004, p. 3)

So, a NFP is not a specific product, but rather a broad and ongoing participatory process to agree upon, carry out, evaluate, and adapt policy measures in a cyclical manner (Skogsstyrelsen, 2013). Inspired by the MCPFE resolution, the Swedish feasibility study lists some criteria that a NFP should live up to: it should be inclusive and transparent; there should be long term political commitment to the process; its outcomes should be able to cause policy, institutional and legal reforms; and it should be implemented through public-private partnerships. In a NFP, participation is both a goal in itself and a means to an end. The *Swedish Forest Agency* thus concluded that ensuring both real participation and meaningful impact are necessary to prevent the NFP from only being a symbolic process (Skogsstyrelsen, 2013).

As a part of the feasibility study, the *Swedish Forest Agency* organized an open hearing in August 2013 in which a variety of forest-related stakeholders discussed the risks and opportunities of a possible NFP process in Sweden (Skogsstyrelsen, 2013). There was broad agreement that a NFP could be useful to counteract policy fragmentation and to resolve conflicts and trade-offs. However, there

³ This UN-body is now called the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF) (Skogsstyrelsen, 2013).

⁴ This European collaboration, to which 46 European countries and the European Union are signatories, is also called Forest Europe (Forest Europe, n.d.)

was also concern that a NFP would become too much talk and too little action, that the NFP might be unable to significantly change forest policy and that it might be difficult to come to agreements. In order to avoid these pitfalls, hearing participants listed a number of preconditions for a NFP to be successful. These included neutral and skilled facilitation, financial compensation to resource-poor participants, continuous reflection on whether all relevant stakeholders are included, clear mandates and decision-making mechanisms, realistic expectations, transparency, and active spreading of information on how one can become involved in the process. Finally, it was suggested that, after a first phase of dialogue at a national level, regional and local platforms should be created to gather local perspectives and strengthen implementation (Skogsstyrelsen, 2013).

3.2 Creating a first strategy and action plan (2014-2018)

Following the feasibility study, the parliament decided to initiate a NFP in Sweden in June 2014, aiming to *“contribute to the development towards a sustainable society and a growing bio-based economy”* (Johansson, 2016, p. 142). In 2015, the Minister of Rural Affairs invited stakeholders to the NFP project board (Regeringskansliet, 2015a) and established four working groups (Regeringskansliet, 2015b). He also presented the vision for the NFP: *“The forest – the green gold – shall contribute to jobs and sustainable growth in the entire country and to the development of a growing bio-economy”* (Johansson, 2016, pp. 143–144).

The program board and working groups consisted of a wide variety of stakeholders, including the forest industry, forest owners’ interest organizations, environmental NGOs, recreation providers, hunter associations, representatives of the Sami indigenous people, research institutes, and forest certification providers (Regeringskansliet, 2015b). However, throughout the entire process environmental NGOs have expressed doubts regarding the unclear mandate of the NFP and the difficulty to provide to equal participation and true consensus (Johansson, 2016).

In May 2018, just before the elections, a strategy document for the NFP was released by the government (not ratified by the parliament) (Näringsdepartementet, 2018a). Here, the NFP is portrayed as a tool to work towards the Sustainable Development Goals. Within the above-mentioned vision, the following five focus areas are identified:

- Sustainable forest management with improved climate benefits
- Multiple use forest for more jobs and sustainable growth in the whole country
- Innovations and world-class processed raw forest products
- Sustainable forest use and conservation as key issues in international cooperation
- Knowledge creation for sustainable forest use and conservation (Näringsdepartementet, 2018a, p. 13, own translation)

In July 2018, the NFP strategy document was followed by an action plan (not ratified by the parliament). Here, both existing and new policy measures are outlined that fit within the NFP vision, ranging from creating educational material on moose management to promoting industrial building in wood. It is stated that all measures will be taken *within* the existing policy framework that builds on the equal goals of production and environmental protection, ownership principles and the principle of “freedom under responsibility” (Näringsdepartementet, 2018b, p. 2).

One of the measures is the provision of funds to support regional dialogue processes that can contribute to the NFP vision and focus areas (Näringsdepartementet, 2018b). The *Swedish Forest Agency* got the task to divide 17 million SEK in 2018 and 9 million SEK in 2019 amongst the *County Administrative Boards* for this purpose. The regional dialogues should include collaboration between the *County Administrative Boards* and *County Councils*, create enabling conditions for long-term cooperation amongst stakeholders, and lead to regional forest strategies or action plans (Näringsdepartementet, 2018c). Figure 3 shows a timeline with the different steps leading up to the regional dialogue processes.

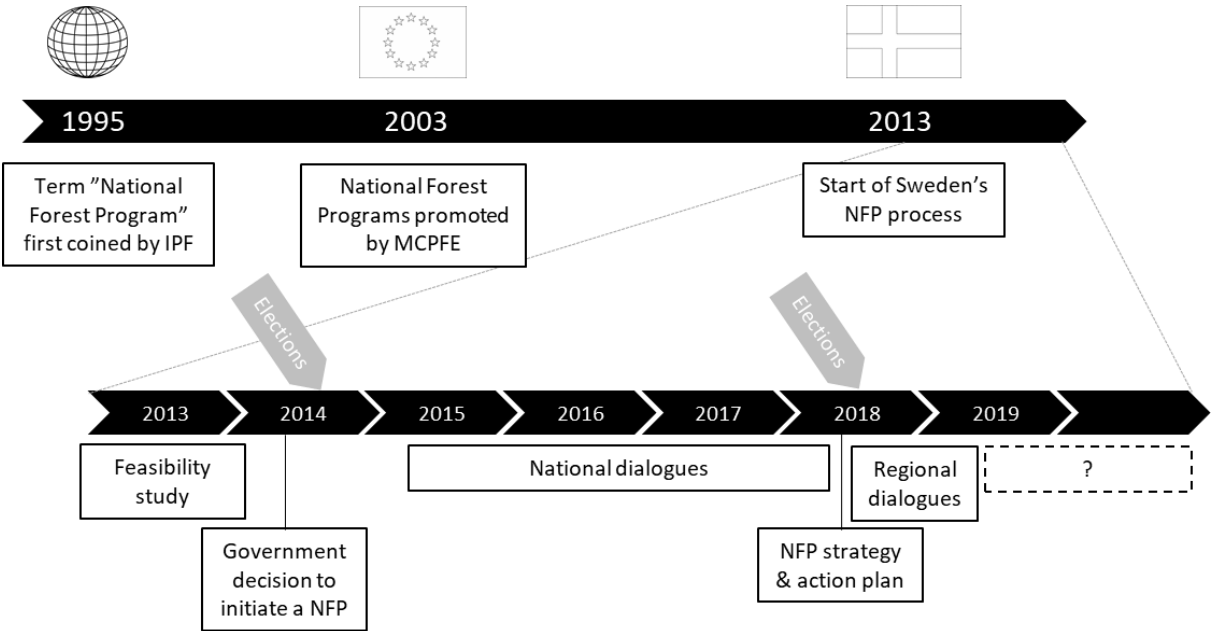


Figure 3. Timeline showing the historical context and progression of Sweden’s NFP process (own figure).

3.3 Future directions (2019-...)

Four months after the general elections in September 2018, Sweden got a new cabinet in January 2019. It is a minority government that consists of the same parties as the 2014-2018 government (the Swedish Social Democrat Party and the Green Party) and is led by the same Prime Minister, but

now supported by the Centre Party and the Liberals instead of by the Left Party (Regeringskansliet, 2019). Because of the prolonged government formation process, the state budget for 2019 was set before the government was formed. The unstable political situation in this period has contributed to uncertainty about how and whether funding of the National Forest Program would be continued.

In the January agreement on which this new minority government is based ("Januariöverenskommelse. Sakpolitisk överenskommelse mellan Socialdemokraterna, Centerpartiet, Liberalerna och Miljöpartiet de gröna," 2019), it is stated that the private property and use rights of forest owners should be strengthened. In this context the NFP is seen as a tool to promote sustainable forestry and favorable business conditions in the forest sector.

4 Theoretical framework

4.1 Habermas and the ideal of communicative action

The main goal of the work of Jürgen Habermas was to develop a theory that could explain the nature of modern society and its pathologies. He grounds his social theory in theories of language, as he believes that language and communication contain the key to understanding humans as social beings (Thomassen, 2010). According to Habermas: *“Our first sentence expresses unequivocally the intention of universal and unconstrained consensus”* (Habermas, 1987, p. 314). In other words, the very act of communicating with another person implies a belief in the possibility of mutual understanding and agreement.

Central to Habermas’ theory is the opposition between communicative action and instrumental or strategic action. *Communicative action* is oriented towards mutual understanding. Whenever saying something, the ideal of communicative action assumes that we would be willing and able to defend the truth, normative rightness and truthfulness of what we say through providing reasons and arguments. In other words, we only say things that we sincerely believe to be true, right, and truthful, and we are willing to change our statements if we are proved wrong by a better argument. In contrast, *instrumental or strategic action* is centered on finding the most effective means to a given end. In instrumental and strategic action, no claims to normative rightness or truthfulness are made, and this carries the risk of leading to manipulation and violence.

According to Habermas, communicative rationality is essential for societies to function well. As Thomassen (2010, p. 87) put it:

“In the long run, no society can exist on the basis of strategic action – including lies, deception and violence – alone. So, there is no alternative to communicative action in the long run if we want something like a stable and peaceful society, or if we want to explain how this is possible”.

Furthermore, Habermas identifies the loss of communicative action as the root cause of the pathologies of modern society. Through the spread of administration, law, and economy into ever more intimate spheres of life, a process of rationalization occurs on personal, societal and cultural levels. This rationalization process consists of the replacement of communicative action with the logic of efficiency (strategic and instrumental action) and leads to a loss of meaning, a breakdown of social norms and a spread of psychopathologies. So, Habermas situates an emancipatory potential in communicative action.

For a group of people to reach communicative action, the following idealized conditions should be realized:

- Full and equal inclusion of everyone affected
- Only the “unforced force of the better argument” (Habermas, 1993, p. 163) matters
- Participants are sincere

As I will discuss in the next section, much of the literature on participatory decision-making is inspired by the ideal of communicative action and concerned with identifying ways to approximate it in practice.

4.2 Review of the participation literature

In the area of natural resource management and policy, participation is often pursued for both normative and pragmatic reasons (Reed, 2008). Normative reasons for participation include the need to empower marginalized stakeholder groups and to include a broader range of values into the decision-making process (Reed, 2008). Sometimes participation is also seen as a democratic right (Reed et al., 2009). On the other hand, pragmatic reasons for participation include its potential to deliver more robust knowledge, better adapted policies and overall higher quality decisions. Furthermore, participation is expected to contribute to trust-building amongst stakeholders, to increase trust in institutions, and to develop a sense of shared ownership that will lead to long-term support and a smoother implementation (Luyet et al., 2012; Reed, 2008).

But what exactly is participation? According to the World Bank (1996, in Luyet et al., 2012, p. 213), participation is *“a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over (...) the decision and resources which affect them”*. This can take different forms, which have been categorized in a number of ways. In Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation, for example, the different rungs represent a scale from non-participation (manipulation and therapy) over tokenism (informing and consulting) to citizen power (partnership and citizen control). Although higher rungs of participation are often deemed better, different degrees of participation can be appropriate in different situations (Reed, 2008) and for different stakeholder groups (Luyet et al., 2012).

Although participation is generally seen as desirable for both normative and pragmatic reasons, there are potential risks and pitfalls. Firstly, participatory decision-making is a time-consuming process, and a lack of resources is one of the common reasons for project failure (Luyet et al., 2012; Sterling et al., 2017). Secondly, unaddressed power differences between stakeholders, non-negotiable positions, and the exclusion of relevant stakeholders can all be detrimental to the legitimacy of the process (Luyet et al., 2012; Reed, 2008). Finally, although a wide array of tools and techniques for

stakeholder participation exists, Reed (2008) warns that a “toolbox approach” to participation (focused on simply choosing the right tool) is bound to fail.

Instead, participation should be grounded in an appropriate philosophy (Reed, 2008) and be sensitive to the stakeholder values and the cultural, political and historical context (Luyet et al., 2012; Sterling et al., 2017). Other best practices include to consider participation early on in the process and continue it throughout (Reed, 2008; Sterling et al., 2017). The selection and appropriate inclusion of all relevant stakeholders is also key (Luyet et al., 2012; Reed, 2008; Reed et al., 2009). Furthermore, clear goals, rules and expectations for the process must be agreed upon at its outset, and skilled facilitation is essential (Reed, 2008; Sterling et al., 2017). Finally, the participatory process should be institutionalized, so that its decisions can be translated into actions, policies or institutional changes (Reed, 2008).

5 Operationalization of the ideal of communicative action

I operationalized Habermas’ ideal of communicative action through a short list of criteria (see Table 1). This operationalization is the result of a synthesis of (1) Habermas’ theory on communicative action, (2) the scientific literature on participation in natural resource management, and (3) the NFP policy documents (especially in the feasibility study of 2013). I will use this operationalization as a framework to analyze the regional dialogue processes in my case study regions.

As this operationalization is informed by both theory and policy, the analysis of my case studies can be seen simultaneously as external and immanent critique⁵. In fact, the academic literature and the policy documents that I studied show great overlap in their criteria for a good dialogue process. This convergence gives me confidence in the robustness of my operationalization. Furthermore, with a framework based in both theory and policy, this study should be relevant for both academics and policy makers.

Table 1. Operationalization of the *ideal of communicative action*, as it is used in this study. The columns to the right show in which arenas the criteria have been mentioned. Specific references to policy documents and the participation literature can be found in sections 3 and 4.2 respectively.

THE IDEAL OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION	Habermas	Participation literature	Policy documents NFP
Full inclusion of everyone who is affected by the decision / related to forest			
Tool: Financial compensation to resource-poor stakeholders if needed			
Equal inclusion			
Tool: Address power imbalances			
Dialogue based on the “unforced force of the better argument”			
Tool: Skilled and neutral facilitation			
Participants are sincere and show mutual respect			
Transparent rules, goals, and expectations			
Long-term political commitment, enough time and resources			
Dialogue process is institutionalized and can lead to real change			
Dialogue process is sensitive to the cultural, political and historical context			

⁵ Immanent critique refers to judging a theory or policy against its own premises or goals. See Isaksen (2018) for a further discussion of immanent critique as a method of argumentation.

6 Methods

6.1 General approach

In this study, I am interested in understanding the choices and dilemmas faced by the people designing the regional dialogue processes as well as the effects of their choices. As this requires getting grip on a context-specific complexity that is currently ongoing, a case study design is an appropriate methodology (Yin, 2009). My cases will consist of Swedish counties. Taking into account the time span of this research project, I decided to engage with two case studies. This multiple case study research design (Yin, 2009) allows an exploration of how the Swedish NFP policy has been initially implemented in different regional contexts.

The external validity of my case study design builds on analytic rather than statistical generalization (Yin, 2009). This means that my research is not designed to generate a statistical representative sample of all regional dialogue processes in Sweden. Instead, I aim to uncover causal mechanisms and theoretical insights that are transferable to other contexts.

6.2 Selection of cases

The two case study regions in this study were selected for me by public officials at the *Swedish Forest Agency*, based on the following criteria. The case study regions should:

- be in the beginning phase of their dialogue processes
- have dialogue meetings planned in the period February-April 2019
- not be too atypical in terms of forest cover and social/political/economic context

Additionally, the regional coordinators of the dialogue processes should be willing to participate in my research project.

6.3 Case study design Gävleborg

When I contacted the *County Administrative Board* of Gävleborg, they had just executed 11 stakeholder dialogues in November-December 2018 and were planning for a round of meetings with municipalities in spring 2019. I commenced my research by analyzing the project plan and the minutes from the 11 dialogue meetings. While analyzing the minutes, I focused especially on stakeholder comments that had reference to the design of the dialogue process, clustered these, and linked them to the operationalization of communicative action.

This document analysis prepared me for my field visit to Gävle, on April 15th-17th 2019. At that time, a new project leader had just been recruited and the project was given a new start after some months

of silence. During the field visit, I was present at the first project board meeting with the new project leader and I joined dialogue meetings with the municipalities of Bollnäs and Ljusdal.

Furthermore, I carried out semi-structured interviews with the new project leader and all four project board members. The interviews focused on 1) how respondents believe an “ideal” dialogue process should look like, 2) what barriers hamper(ed) realizing such a process in Gävleborg, 3) why the process in Gävleborg was designed the way it was, and 4) how respondents reflect on the dialogue process so far (see interview guide in Appendix 1). The interviews took between 30 and 60 minutes each, and were held in Swedish. They were recorded with permission of the respondents, and transcribed for analysis. All direct quotes that are used in this paper were translated into English by me, and confirmed over email by the respondents. The respondents are anonymized and coded R1 to R5.

6.4 Case study design Västra Götaland

When I contacted the *County Administrative Board* of Västra Götaland, the project board was preparing for their first dialogue meeting on April 2nd 2019 together with an external consultancy. I was present at this meeting, and handed out a short survey to all participants at the end of it. The survey focused on how participants had experienced the meeting and addressed the different aspects of the ideal of communicative action (see survey design Appendix 2).

Furthermore, I carried out semi-structured interviews with all six project board members and one of the external consultants in the weeks after the dialogue meeting. Half of the interviews were face-to-face and half of them over Skype. The interviews followed the same structure and procedure as the ones in Gävleborg (see details above). The respondents are anonymized and coded R6 to R12.

6.5 Limitations

The most severe limitation of this study is probably the limited period of time over which I could follow the regional dialogue processes. In both regions, my study ended before the phase of strategy writing was entered. In order to understand the effects of (and possibly, adjustments to) the process design over time, a longitudinal study would have been needed. Instead, this study offers a detailed snapshot of the choices, considerations, and barriers relevant during the initiation phase of the dialogue processes in the case study regions. Although necessarily incomplete, I believe that these insights can still be relevant and salient.

Within the temporal and spatial delimitations of my case studies, I believe that the triangulation of different methods and sources of evidence allows for internally valid results (Yin, 2009). One note of

caution related to my data is that I cannot be sure about the completeness of the minutes of the dialogue meetings in Gävleborg which I used for a document analysis.

6.6 Positionality

As a non-Swedish student, I entered the two case study regions – and the scene of Swedish forestry in general – as a relative outsider. So, I had to put some extra work into grasping the social and historical context. At the same time, I believe that my outsider position was an advantage in conducting interviews, as it forced respondents to explain things they otherwise took for granted.

Due to my educational background in Forest and Nature Conservation in the Netherlands – where forests are used for recreation and conservation rather than for timber production – I found myself rather critical of a “sustainable” forestry system based on even-aged monocultures. I am personally more passionate about biodiversity than about climate smart materials, and this triggers my interest in trade-offs between production and environmental conservation.

Lastly, my education in Sustainability Science inspires me to strive for science that is embedded in and useful to society. Responding to the call to extend peer communities (Spangenberg, 2011), I defined my research topic in collaboration with two public officials from the *Swedish Forest Agency* working with the NFP, and received comments from them throughout the process and on a final draft. When discussing my results, one of my aims was to extract policy-relevant insights that could contribute to sustainable development.

7 Background to the counties of Gävleborg and Västra Götaland

The county of Gävleborg is located on Sweden's East coast about 200 km north of Stockholm (see Figure 4), and has an area of 18,830 km². In 2018, the county was home to 285,791 people (SCB, 2018), half of which live in remote rural areas⁶ (own calculation based on SCB, 2018; Tillväxtverket, 2018). Gävleborg has Swedish second-highest unemployment rate (Ekonomifakta, 2019).

The county of Västra Götaland is located on Sweden's West coast (see Figure 4). It covers an area of 23,500 km² and with a population of about 1.7 million it is Sweden's second most populated county (SCB, 2018). About 40% of the population of Västra Götaland lives in the highly urbanized area⁷ in and around Gothenburg, Sweden's second biggest city (own calculation based on SCB, 2018; Tillväxtverket, 2018).



Figure 4. Maps of Sweden showing the location of the county of Gävleborg (Wikimedia Commons, 2011a) and the county of Västra Götaland (Wikimedia Commons, 2011b).

⁶ Municipalities in which more than 50% of the population lives in rural areas, and less than 50% of the population lives close (max. 45 minutes by car) to a town of at least 50.000 inhabitants (Tillväxtverket, 2018).

⁷ Municipalities in which less than 20% of the population lives in rural areas, and that (together with neighbouring municipalities) form an urban population of at least 500.000 inhabitants.

The county of Gävleborg is one of the most densely forested areas in Sweden, with forest land making up 86% of the land area (Skogsstyrelsen, 2014). 94% of this forest land is productive forest (see Table 2). Not surprisingly, forestry is – and has historically been – one of the dominant economic sectors in Gävleborg, alongside with iron-mining (Länsstyrelsen Gävleborg, 2015).

With a 62% forest cover, Västra Götaland is less heavily forested. Recreation and conservation demands shape forestry practices close to urban areas (Göteborgs stad, 2014). But in the county at large the vast majority of forests is used for production (see Table 2). Economically speaking, the petrochemical industry and the car industry are dominant sectors in the county (von Schenck and Berglin, 2017).

Table 2. Total land area, area of forest land, and area of productive land in the county of Gävleborg and in Sweden as a whole, expressed in hectares and in percentages of total land or of forest land. (Own table, data from SLU & Sveriges officiella statistik, 2017)

	Total land area	Area forest land		Area productive forest	
	(ha)	(ha)	(% of total land)	(ha)	(% of forest land)
Gävleborg	1 883 000	1 615 000	86	1 512 000	94
Västra Götaland	2 350 000	1 453 000	62	1 301 000	90
Sweden	40 815 000	28 263 000	69	23 612 000	84

The two case study regions show big differences in ownership structure. In Gävleborg, about one third of the forest land is owned by private companies, and about half by individuals (see Table 3). In contrast, private companies own only 4% of the forest in Västra Götaland, and in this county 80% of the forest belongs to individual forest owners (see Table 3).

Table 3. Forest land (as defined by the Forestry Act) by ownership category for the county of Gävleborg and for Sweden as a whole, expressed in ha and in proportion of total forest land. The data excludes alpine birch forests. Data 2012-2016. (Own table, data from SLU & Sveriges officiella statistik, 2017)

	Private companies		Individual owners		Other owners	
	(ha)	(% of forest land)	(ha)	(% of forest land)	(ha)	(% of forest land)
Gävleborg	497 000	31	787 000	49	331 000	20
Västra Götaland	57 000	4	1 157 000	80	238 000	16
Sweden	6 197 000	23	13 442 000	49	7 715 000	28

In Gävleborg, the goal conflict between production and environmental protection has been topical and conflict-ridden over the past years. In an effort to protect the Siberian Jay (a threatened bird species), the *Swedish Forest Agency* stopped some forest owners from felling their forest in 2016 (Elfström, 2017). The fact that no financial compensation was offered was seen as an infringement to ownership rights and led to polarization and a series of court cases (Engelro, 2018).

8 Case study Gävleborg

8.1 Process design in Gävleborg

In the autumn of 2018, the *County Administrative Board* of Gävleborg applied for the NFP-funding from the *Swedish Forest Agency* for creating a regional action plan for the NFP. As strategic goals are already formulated at the national level, it was seen as unnecessary to create a regional strategy document first.

For this project, a project leader was appointed within *Department for Rural Development*. Representatives from the *County Council* of Gävleborg and from the local district office of the *Swedish Forest Agency* were invited to become part of a project board, but this project board didn't function well during the autumn of 2018. The process design was largely copied from the participatory process undertaken for the *National Food Strategy*, which was based on the approach of Participatory Learning and Action Research (Eksvärd, 2009). The consultation methodology was built around separate meetings with different stakeholder groups, that all followed the same structure:

- Presentation round: participants present themselves in a drawing and three words
- Participants propose and agree on rules for interaction
- Short introduction about the NFP and the regional dialogue process
- Mindmap exercise: participants are asked to finish the following sentence: "A regional action plan for the National Forest Program should include...". Answers are written on a whiteboard.
- Participants prioritize the three most important topics
- These topics, as well as the topic "Bioeconomy" (as it is central to the NFP vision), are discussed further
- Final round: everyone can make a last remark

Eleven such stakeholder meetings have been conducted in November and December 2018 by the project leader. Figure 5 shows the stakeholder groups that were targeted. Each meeting took two hours, and was held at a place and time convenient to the participants. The number of stakeholders present during these meetings ranged from 2 to 39. The resulting input has been collected in a table where all suggestions are sorted under one or more of the NFP focus areas. In the drafting of the regional action plan, the focus will be on actions that regional authorities have a mandate to address.

Overview of the stakeholder groups targeted during the first 11 dialogue meetins

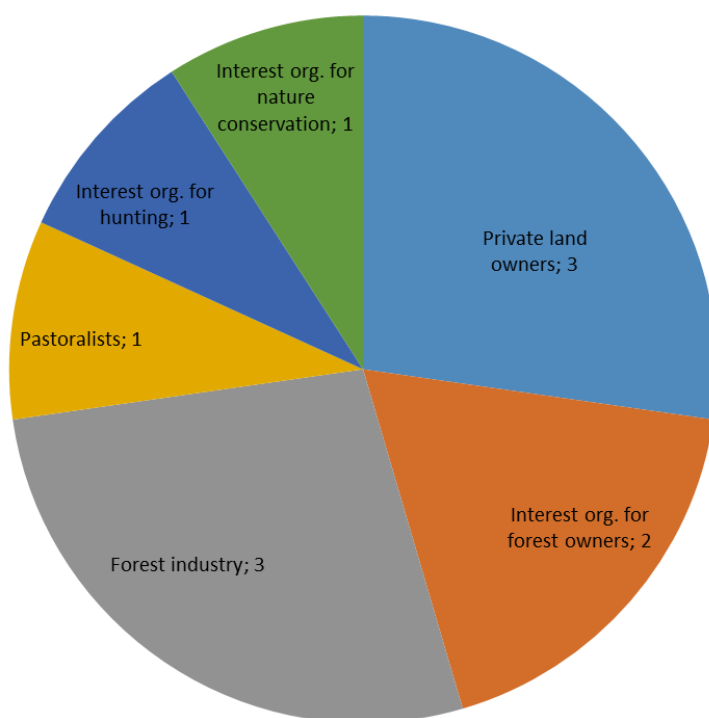


Figure 5. Pie chart showing the 11 dialogue meetings held in Gävleborg in November-December 2018, divided by the stakeholder group to which they were directed. Interest organizations for forest owners include the *Federation of Swedish Farmers* and the forest owner association Mellanskog. Own figure, based on information received from the *County Administrative Board* of Gävleborg.

During the start of 2019, the dialogue process went through a period of silence. In April 2019, a new project leader was hired by the *County Administrative Board*, and employed part-time (80%) until December 2019. The dialogue process is now restarted through a round of dialogue meetings with all municipal governments in the county (as was also done for the regional action plan for the *National Food Strategy*). Also the project board is given a new start.

8.2 Reflections by project board members

8.2.1 What ideal to strive for?

When exploring how an ideal dialogue process about forests should look like in Gävleborg, the five project board members brought up different themes.

Creating spaces for everyone to have their say

First of all, most project board members found it important to create a variety of platforms for dialogue in order to make sure that everyone can have their say. Such a broad inclusion is especially central when it comes to forests: *“Many Swedes see the forest as their own, although they don’t own forest... But they still feel a sense of belonging to the forest. It is everyone’s asset, in some way. So there is also a pressure that everyone should be (...) allowed to have a say, at least.”*(R1)

However, two other project board members questioned to what extent “everyone” should be included. One of them argued: *“It is possible to get a good result and good engagement even if one narrows down who is invited to the dialogue process. (...) Maybe you need a few such meetings, where anyone can come, from whatever background, and say whatever they want. That can surely have its value, but I believe that the majority of the meetings should be more demarcated”* (R4). Another project board member found that forest owners should be central to the dialogue process: *“It shouldn’t be that way that the industry owners or the big environmental movements decide over those who own forest. (...) The most important people that we should take care of in this forest program are the private forest owners. So that they can feel more secure, and so that they get paid and can enjoy their forest.”* (R5)

Some project board members also mentioned the importance of meeting stakeholders at the places where they live and work. Furthermore, one project board member stressed that a dialogue should not only be about collecting opinions, but also about understanding what lies behind: *“Because often there are very clever factors lying behind, that maybe aren’t visible in the opinion itself. So then it is important to be in a context where these are made visible.”* (R2) Finally, several project board members said that in an ideal dialogue process, stakeholders should be included throughout the process – not only in the initial consultation, but also in working groups or feedback meetings before the action plan is finalized.

Handling power differences and goal conflicts

Taking into account the power differences between for example private forest owners and the industry, two project board members emphasized that the *County Administrative Board* should take the role of an objective mediator. They believed this could be done by taking in viewpoints from different actors and making informed and fair decisions based on this.

When it comes to the best way to handle goal conflicts, some project board members suggested to choose the most important goal conflicts and to work with them actively. Doing so, one should try to gradually increase the level of consensus. At the same time, the goal of an ideal dialogue process can

never be complete consensus: *“Of course not everyone is going to be satisfied. But if everyone is a bit dissatisfied, then it will be good”* (R1). Except from dialogue and negotiation, these project board members believed that knowledge transfer and learning could be an important tool to handle goal conflicts, for example when it comes to teaching forest owners about alternative ways of forest management.

Two other project board members suggested that a variety of different measures at different places could offer a way out of goal conflicts: *“One can have multiple goals. I don’t see a conflict in that. The conflict only arises if you say that everything should be protected, or everything should be felled. But there is so much forest in this county...”* (R5).

The role of the National Forest Program

To most of the project board members, the unique role or purpose of the National Forest Program seems to be unclear. There is a general understanding that forests are important (both for Sweden and for Gävleborg), so that it is good to have an overarching strategy for them. But exactly which gap the NFP is supposed to fill is unknown. According to some respondents, the NFP should be a tool to address the goal conflicts between production and biodiversity, whereas others see it as step towards increased employment in the county or a way to take care of the interests of private forest owners. Two respondents also mentioned that the NFP should be used to promote other ecosystem services than timber production.

8.2.2 Barriers to an ideal dialogue

When project board members had described how an ideal dialogue process should look like, I asked them what barriers they had faced to live up to this ideal in Gävleborg.

Conflicts and fear

Amongst the first things respondents mentioned, was the polarized debate, which had led to conflicts during some of the dialogue meetings in the autumn of 2018. More specifically, the identification of threatened species and the registration of *key biotopes* on the land of private forest owners left forest owners with a sentiment of frustration, anger and fear. One of the project board members explained: *“It has come up as an issue in a process where it hasn’t even been relevant to discuss it. (...) And then there is a risk that the irritation gets even bigger: ‘this public official comes here and cannot answer the questions I am upset about.’ (...) So that’s a sensitive and difficult point to come around”* (R1). Another respondent felt that the national authorities should take more responsibility: *“Because it is the public authorities that have created the conflicts, it’s not like the*

people out there create them. No, they are produced politically for some reason that I don't know. (...) The way in which the inventory of key biotopes has been carried out has been fuel, a lot of fuel, on smoldering conflicts. That is something people [at the national level] should have taken responsibility for, for managing that" (R4).

Against this background, some respondents reflected on the fear amongst forest owners, also for the National Forest Program: *"People felt threatened by something... that they didn't want, but they didn't know what it was." (R2).* Another explained: *"It's not like people don't want to meet. They want to meet, but they also want to be clear about that ownership rights are constitutional, like they say. (...) If people are afraid, they get a tunnel vision. (...). It is so important to put forward this thing about ownership rights, that they forget to think about: How would I like to be paid for the natural values that I have on my land?" (R5)*

Time pressure and unclarity in the government assignment

According to the respondents, the second major barrier to creating an ideal dialogue process was the time pressure related to the funding during autumn 2018. According to a working report by the Swedish Forest Agency, Gävleborg received 800.000 SEK funding, and was able to use 357.555 SEK between October 1st and December 31st (Skogsstyrelsen, 2019): *"We got a sum of money that we had to get rid of immediately. There was no time to plan, no time to take in competence, no time to collaborate, not even time to flag or announce the dialogue meetings in a sensible way" (R4).*

According to some of the project board members, the conflicts that arose during the dialogue meetings in autumn could have been avoided if there would have been more time for planning and preparation. Especially a more clearly set organization of the process would have given participants more security about how their inputs would be handled. During the autumn of 2018, the project board *"hardly had time to meet" (R2)* and it was unclear what its role was. Some stakeholders in the dialogue meetings questioned why there was no broader representation of different interests in the project board. One of the respondents reflected: *"All those parts should have been made clear explicitly: This is a project board, the project board has this role, we have a reference group or a working group, etc. The organizational structure and mandates should have been set clearly." (R2)*

Perhaps related to this time pressure, one of the project board members observed: *"I can notice a regional fatigue of having received so many directives for creating strategies and action plans (...) Of course it is good to have strategic planning. But when they come one after the other, this causes an incredible fatigue. (...) And unfortunately, it easily becomes checking off mandatory assignments, without so much respect for the people in the dialogue meetings who give their time and expose*

themselves to conflict and all that” (R4). Respondents furthermore critiqued how the national government has shied away from managing goal conflicts, and instead left this up to the regional level.

Overall, the national NFP strategy doesn't seem to give much guidance to the regional dialogue processes: *“It feels like a very complex assignment. There is an enormous complexity within forest management, which weaves together so many other things than just forest management. (...) We have to talk about employment, education, (...) climate and environment, and maybe about food production. We have to deal with wildlife management as well, which is very big. (...) So it grows, it swells up at once, to become something that is quite hard to grasp.” (R1)*

Interpersonal dynamics

When a mix of dominant and shy people comes to dialogue meetings, this can also cause a challenge: *“How can we include those that don't dare to stand up and say what they think? (...) I think that that is common; many people think that they cannot influence anyway, so then they stay home instead” (R1). Furthermore one respondent noticed that, especially in a rather small and sparsely populated region like Gävleborg, it is often the same people who participate in different dialogue processes, and “say more or less the same things” (R4).*

Rational forestry

Finally, one of the project board members viewed the industrial forestry model as a major barrier to reach the NFP goals and to move forward in the regional dialogue process. On the one hand, this respondent referred to an educational and cultural lock-in into even-aged, single-species forest management. On the other hand, this respondent explained how private forest owners are forced to fell earlier and more than they might want to because of the low economic profitability and their dependence on the timber processing industry.

8.2.3 Reflections on the process so far

As we have seen above, there is a tension between how an ideal dialogue process should look like and barriers to create such a process. How have these tensions been navigated, and how do project board members reflect on this?

Organization and the role of the project board

As described above, most project board members felt that the organization of the dialogue process and the mandate of the project board should have been set more clearly from the beginning. As it went now, there was no functioning project board during the autumn of 2018 in which the *County*

Council and the *Swedish Forest Agency* were included. Reacting to the critique that the project board is too narrow, one of the project board members replied: ““*If our mandate is just about making sure things move forward, and about funding... If it’s not about the content, then [the project board] is sufficient. But that means that the content should be handled in another way.*” (R3)

Separate consultation meetings with the different stakeholder groups

Respondents saw both advantages and disadvantages of the choice for organizing separate consultation meetings with different stakeholder groups. An advantage of such an approach is that it avoids confrontations and power imbalances between stakeholder groups. In this way, a safer and more inclusive atmosphere is created where everyone can be heard. On the other hand, some respondents felt that mixed dialogue meetings are necessary to enable social learning and to work with concrete goal conflicts.

A clearer future?

According to the project board members, the continuation of the regional dialogue process should have a clearer organization. It could include further dialogue meetings around specific themes and action plan writing in working groups. Furthermore, respondents proposed that a final draft should be referred to all stakeholders for consideration before it is published. When it comes to resources, the NFP-funding is expected to run out around midsummer, but the *County Administrative Board* has requested funding to continue the work through the *Rural Development Program*.

8.3 Reflections by stakeholders: the first dialogue meetings

Apart from the interviews with project board members, also the minutes of the eleven dialogue meetings held in November and December 2018 offer valuable insights for the analysis of the dialogue process. Within these documents, I identified 79 process-related comments (ranging from 1 to 17 comments per meeting). I clustered these into 13 themes, and Figure 6 shows the frequency with which comments within each theme occurred.

The most frequently occurring comment (appearing in over 80% of the meetings) was the acknowledgement that collaboration and dialogue are important and necessary. However, mistrust towards public authorities and towards other stakeholders (e.g. “Why should stakeholder group X get a say in this?!”) was also common. Perhaps related to this, some stakeholders stressed that decisions should be fact-based and not influenced by politics or ungrounded opinions. Furthermore, the need of having a regional dialogue process and creating an action plan was questioned in over

half of the meetings. More specifically, many stakeholders found it unclear how the regional action plan will fit into existing policies and regulations.

Despite this skepticism, one third of the meetings yielded explicit positive feedback and appreciation from stakeholders. This can be an important finding when taking into account that negative emotions might be voiced more strongly than positive ones. Furthermore, in about a third of the meetings comments of participants indicated that they would like to have more opportunities in the future to co-create the regional action plan. This can be interpreted as critique to the initial choice for mere consultation, but it is also a sign that stakeholders care about the outcome and are willing to contribute in more profound ways.

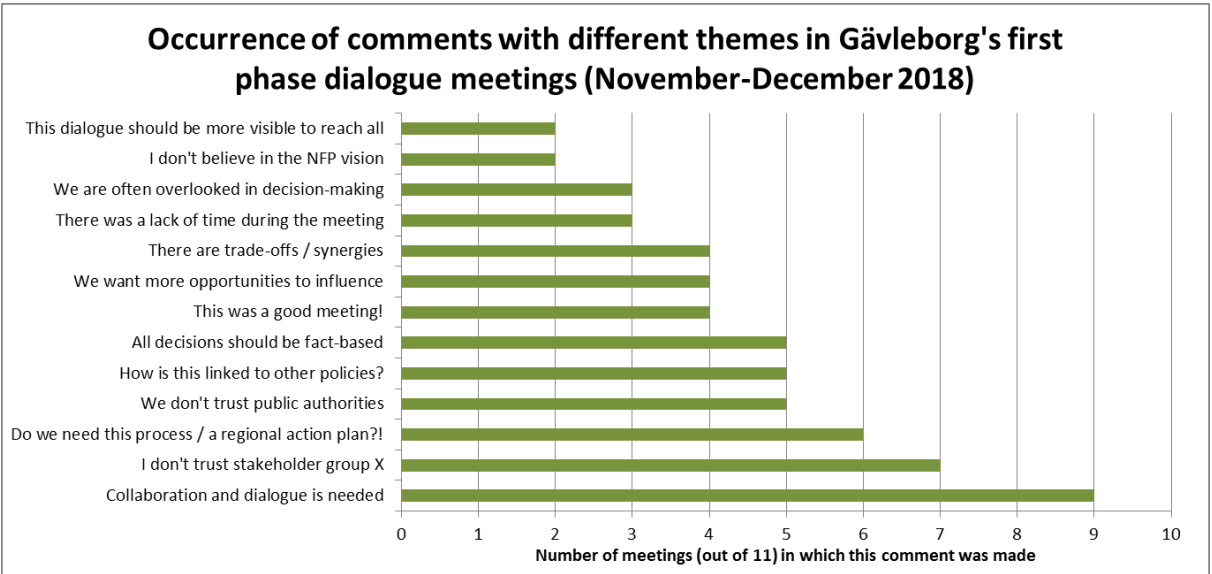


Figure 6. The bars show the number of meetings (out of 11) in which comments were made within the different themes listed to the left. Own figure, based on the analysis of 79 process-related comments identified in the 11 stakeholder meetings conducted in November and December 2018 in the county of Gävleborg.

8.4 Synthesis: the ideal of communicative action

Taking into account the interviews results and document analysis above, what can be said about the dynamic interactions between process design choices, barriers, and the ideal of communicative action?

To start with, the ideals that project board members hold about how a good dialogue process should look like, correspond well to the ideal of communicative action as it is used in this study. The first three dimensions (full inclusion, equal inclusion and handling conflicts through dialogue) were explicitly present in the interview results, as well as the importance of creating transparent rules, goals, and expectations.

However, living up to these ideals was hampered by two main groups of barriers. A first group of barriers is related to characteristics of the government assignment that the *County Administrative Board* received: the time pressure in autumn, unclarity about future funding, the unclear role of the NFP in relation to other policies, and the fact that goal conflicts are not addressed at a national level. A second group of barriers is related to the forest-related actors in Gävleborg. These include interpersonal dynamics, previous conflicts, polarization and distrust amongst forest owners.

Partly informed and shaped by these barriers, the dialogue process in Gävleborg started off with a series of separate meetings with different stakeholder groups. This broad consultation contributed towards a full inclusion of stakeholders. Furthermore, power imbalances were mitigated by the isolation of different stakeholder groups and all participants could have a say due to the meeting setup. So, a fairly equal inclusion was reached *within* the meetings, which led to positive feedback from participants.

However, the meetings themselves held no decision-making power, and due to time pressure, the overall organization of the dialogue process was still unclear at this point. Stakeholders did not know how the process would continue, nor how different inputs and interests would be weighed. Some of them assumed that the project board would be responsible for handling trade-offs and goal conflicts, and critiqued the fact that the board only consists of public authorities. Uncertainty about how the drafting of an action plan would be organized, added to existing sentiments of fear and distrust in public authorities. The interview results suggest that these sentiments lead to a tunnel vision amongst stakeholders, making them focus only on ownership rights, which hampered addressing trade-offs through dialogue. As different stakeholder groups did not meet in one room, both open conflict and trust-building have been avoided.

At this point, the process design has not yet allowed for resolving trade-offs through dialogue, as Habermas would have imagined it. Much is dependent on how the project board chooses to handle stakeholder input and in which form they will continue with the dialogue process. This might in turn depend on the availability of funding within the NFP. In any case, careful communication will be needed to make sure that the further process and the resulting action plan are seen as transparent and legitimate.

In Figure 7, the relations between the most important barriers, choices in process design and the ideal of communicative action are represented visually.

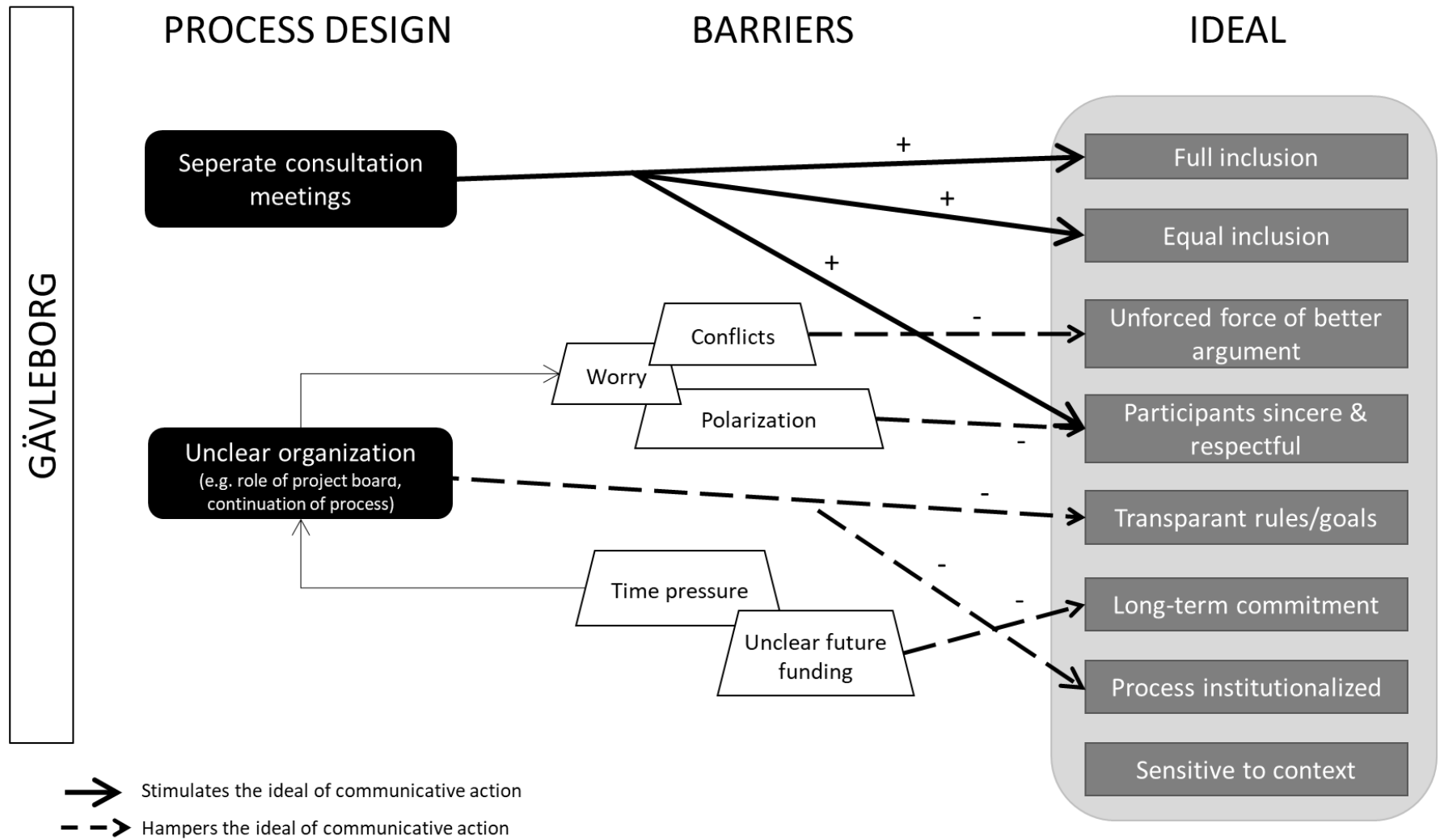


Figure 7. Visual representation of the process design choices, barriers and the ideal of communicative action, as well as the relations between them in the regional dialogue process in Gävleborg. Own figure.

9 Case study Västra Götaland

9.1 Process design in Västra Götaland

9.1.1 Preparation phase

In the autumn of 2018, the *County Administrative Board* of Västra Götaland applied for NFP-funding with a project proposal that included three subprojects:

1. Initiating a dialogue process to draft a regional forest strategy
2. Implementing practical measures for increasing the proportion of Scots pine
3. Creating a “story map” about the green infrastructure and ecosystem services in the region

The latter two projects were presented as practical measures that can contribute to the goals of the NFP directly, and were led by the *Nature Department*. The *Department for Rural Development* was made responsible for the strategy development (the focus of this chapter), and a project leader was appointed who could dedicate about 10-20% of their time to the project.

A project board was established in the autumn of 2018, with representatives from

1. the *County Administrative Board* (both from the *Nature Department* and the *Department for Rural Development*),
2. the *County Council* of Västra Götaland,
3. the local district office of the *Swedish Forest Agency*,
4. the *Federation of Swedish Farmers*, and
5. *Fyrbodal Association of Local Municipalities*.

Through procurement, a consultancy firm was hired to help plan and execute a first dialogue meeting. Partly based on input from the project board members, they carried out a stakeholder mapping that led to an invitation list for the dialogue meeting.

9.1.2 The first dialogue meeting

This first dialogue meeting was originally planned in January 2019, but was postponed to April 2nd to ensure that a greater variety of stakeholders could join. The meeting was held at a conference center in Gothenburg and covered a whole day. Except from three consultants, the six project board members and me, 45 stakeholders participated in the meeting. As can be seen in Figure 8, almost half of them represented different public authorities, while others represented forest owners, industry and innovation and interest organizations for nature conservation and heritage.

Overview of the organizations & interests represented on the dialogue meeting of April 2nd

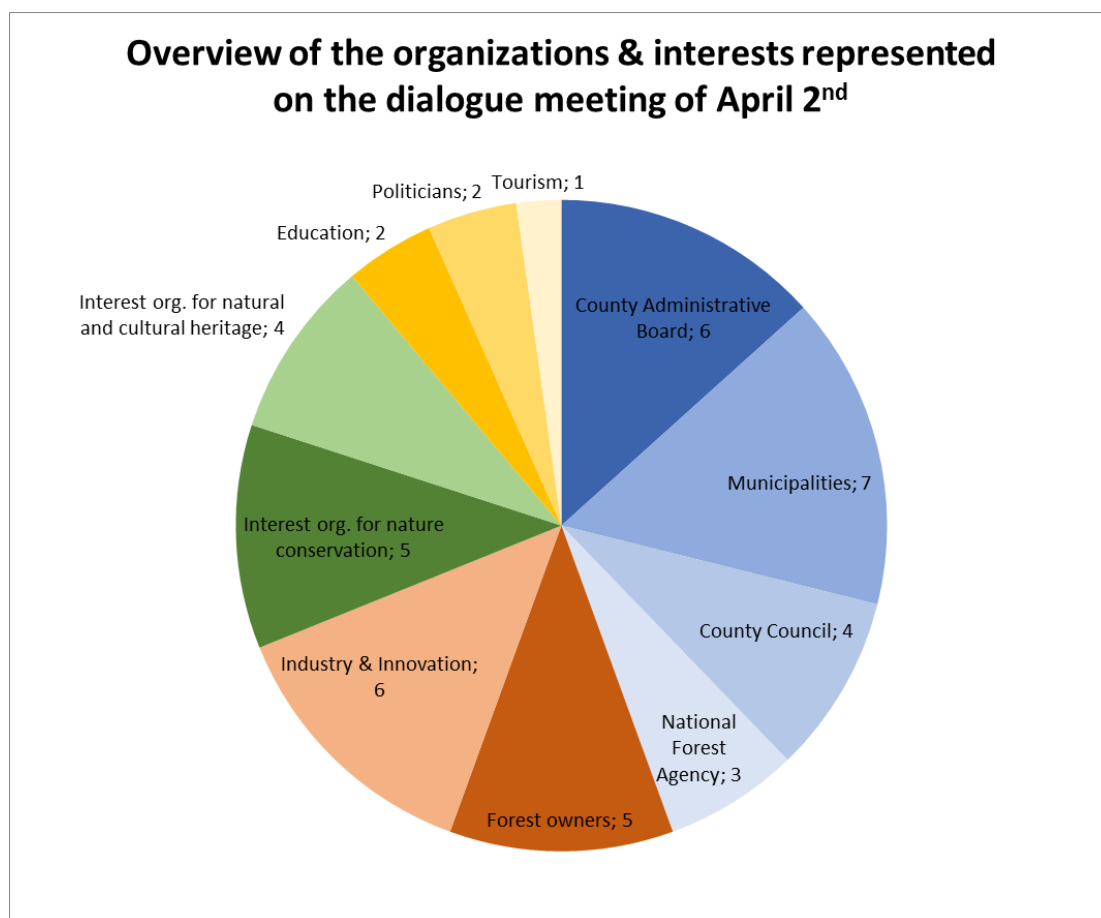


Figure 8. Pie chart displaying the number of people present at the first meeting in the regional dialogue process of Västra Götaland, divided by (type of) organization or interest they represented. The graph includes all participants except me, the 3 consultants and the 6 project board members. N=45. The category “Municipalities” also includes one representative of an *Association of Local Municipalities*. Own figure, based on the list of participants that I received from the *County Administrative Board* of Västra Götaland.

The meeting day was moderated by one of the external consultants. It started with five short inspiration lectures, covering the vision and focus areas of the NFP, experiences from two other counties, bioeconomy and industrial building in wood. The rest of the day was devoted to discussions in groups of around 6 participants, that were mixed in terms of interests and organizations. Inspired by the Arena-Forum-Court-model for strategic planning (Fredriksson, 2015), the group discussions were structured around three assignments,:

1. Identifying
 - a. Which trends have the potential to influence each of the five NFP focus areas?
 - b. How influential are each of these trends for the forest’s development? And how likely are they to happen?
2. Concretizing

- a. What are Västra Götalands needs within each of the focus areas?
 - b. Which interventions should be prioritized within each of the focus areas?
3. Realizing
- a. What development do we want to see in Västra Götaland? (short vision)
 - b. Which actors should cooperate for realizing this desired development?

The moderator stressed that everyone in the groups should be heard and that discussions should be written down on the sheets of paper designed for that purpose (for an example, see Figure 9). The sheets of paper were collected as input for the report writing by the consultants.

DEL 1: IDENTIFIERA

FOKUSOMRÅDE: ETT HÅLLBART SKOGSBRUK MED ÖKAD KLIMATVÄRDE

FOKUSOMRÅDE: MÅNGBRUK AV SKOG FÖR FLER JOBB OCH HÅLLBAR TILLVÄXT

FOKUSOMRÅDE: INNOVATIONER OCH FÖRÄDLAD SKOGSRÅVARA I VÄRLDSKLASS

FOKUSOMRÅDE: HÅLLBART BEHÅLLANDE OCH BEVÅRANDE AV SKOGEN SOM EN PROFILFRÅGA I INTERNATIONELLT SAMARBETE

FOKUSOMRÅDE: ETT KUNSKAPSKLIV FÖR ETT HÅLLBART BRUKANDE OCH BEVÅRANDE AV SKOGEN

1. IDENTIFIERA: Vilka omvärldsförändringar har potential att påverka de av regeringen utpekade fokusområdena?

TRENDER
TRENDER
TRENDER
TRENDER
TRENDER

2. KATEGORISERA: Hur stor påverkan har identifierade trender på skogens utveckling? Hur säkra är vi på trenderna?
Numrera trender och sätt ut på diagrammet

wsp

GRUPPMEDLEMMAR:

Figure 9. Image showing the lay-out of first sheet of paper used during the dialogue meeting (Assignment 1: Identifying). On the top, the five NFP focus areas are listed. In the left-hand panel, participants are asked to write down trends that have the potential to influence each of these focus areas. In the right-hand panel, participants are asked to place these trends in a quadrant of high to low influence and high to low probability. Image used with permission. **Note: This image is under copyright of WSP Advisory, and shall not be used without their permission.**

9.2 Reflections by project board members and consultant

9.2.1 What ideal to strive for?

When asked to imagine an ideal dialogue process, the six project board members and the consultant brought up different themes.

Some preconditions for an ideal dialogue process

First of all, they mentioned some necessary preconditions for a good dialogue process. For example, there should be enough time to prepare and analyze dialogue meetings systematically. Two respondents pointed out that long term thinking is indispensable, not least in terms of funding. Already in the start of the process, one should ideally be able to put aside resources for implementing agreed upon measures and for organizing a continuous dialogue.

Selecting the right participants

Furthermore, it is important who participates: *"You can have the best dialogue meetings ever, but if the wrong actors are there, or if somebody is missing who later opposes the process, it doesn't matter how good the dialogue was"* (R12). Some respondents stressed that "everyone" should be included, and that all dimensions of sustainability should be represented. Others argued for including the "right" people, both in terms of personalities and positions. One respondent believed that communication between producers and consumers is the key to success.

Furthermore, two respondents suggested to separate between the stakeholders related to the forest ecosystem on the one hand, and those related to the supply chain on the other hand: *"You cannot handle the whole challenge, or all challenges in one single dialogue. (...) There are different parts to it. Also because there are so many conflicting interests in that first part, of nature conservation, forest management, etc. (...) It's a bit easier in the other parts: (...) How can we take measures to stimulate development, when it comes to processing forest biomass?"* (R8).

Handling goal conflicts

When it comes to how to handle goal conflicts, some different opinions existed amongst respondents. Most of them seemed to agree that one has to "work with" goal conflicts: *"If we only talk about the things we can agree on, we won't make any difference"* (R8). The outcome might be unexpected: *"I believe that it is very important to know exactly what people disagree about. Because then maybe they don't disagree as much as they believed they did"* (R12). Still, complete consensus

might not be a realistic goal: *“Of course I realize that there will always be someone who is absolutely not satisfied with the result. But then I think the important thing is to have listened to this person, and that everyone has been able to have their say”* (R6).

Other respondents expressed opposing ideas. One of them argued for talking about synergies instead of about conflicts: *“I believe it can be a bit dangerous to say: “Here we have a goal conflict”. Because if you say that, then it becomes a goal conflict”* (R11). Another person felt that a regional dialogue process is not the right place to solve goal conflicts: *“They should be solved outside of this dialogue. Not by us in the room, but by politicians. (...) I’m a bit afraid that we will become an alternative parliament”* (R9).

Saying something new

An ideal dialogue should also go beyond the usual discussions. Someone explained: *“If we’re going to have a dialogue process, then something different, hopefully something smarter, should be said in this dialogue process than the stuff that is said all the time anyway”* (R9). In order to achieve this, the goal of the dialogue process should be set clearly: *“The parties that meet... we meet over the years in different contexts. (...) So it happens easily that we end up in the same discussion regardless of what the question is. (...) A good dialogue process could maybe be a bit more focused: what is it that we are talking about now?”* (R9).

The role of the National Forest Program

So, what is the role of the National Forest Program and the regional dialogue process within it? Four of the project board members interpreted the NFP primarily as a program for business and regional development. One of them explained: *“During the last decennia, much of the broad and general planning has been about the environment. To me the National Forest Program is incredibly complementary. It complements this environmental planning, and it is something different. (...) It shouldn’t become one more general environmental document, but the first development program for the forest sector”* (R9).

For another respondent, the main role of the NFP is giving political weight to the forest sector. Yet another project board member found it hard to see the unique function of the NFP, as it overlaps with existing strategies for strengthening the regional bioeconomy.

9.2.2 Barriers to an ideal dialogue

When respondents had described how an ideal dialogue process should look like, I asked them what barriers they had faced to live up to this ideal in Västra Götaland.

Time and resources

The first thing most of them mentioned were limited resources and time. The *County Administrative Board* of Västra Götaland received 900 000 SEK funding on October 1st 2018, and was able to use 370 449 SEK before December 31st (Skogsstyrelsen, 2019). The time pressure associated with the funding lead to less time for reflection and planning. This was also one the reasons for working with an external consultant: *“There is no alternative right now, because we don’t really have time for doing the work”* (R10).

Especially towards the future, it is unclear how the dialogue process will be able to continue after the first dialogue meeting. The NFP-funds were enough to cover the preparation, execution and analysis of this first meeting, but that is about as far as they reach. The project leader is now trying to find other funding for continuing the dialogue process. Several project board members emphasized that resources and time are needed to keep the dialogue process going: *“Everyone is so pressured from all sides, so it is important to find funding for moving the process forward”* (R7).

Organization

A second barrier, according to respondents, is that the organization of the process is currently too loose. In order to give the project board a formal and shared mandate, one of the respondents suggested to direct resources and responsibility to the different involved organizations. Furthermore, two respondents questioned why the government assignment was sent to the *County Administrative Boards*. In Västra Götaland, as in other counties, the responsibility for regional development lies with the *County Council* rather than the *County Administrative Board*. Against that background, a respondent reflected: *“We have noticed that there is no natural harbour for questions of forest sector development. (...) Why didn’t they choose the local office of the Swedish Forest Agency, or the County Council as the regional partner for funding? That is hard to understand for me. (...) I’m afraid that... especially with this unnatural harbor that the County Administrative Board forms... as soon as the assigned government funding disappears, the whole job will also be lost”* (R9).

A polarised debate?

According to some respondents, polarization can be a barrier to dialogue. However, others argued that the timing is good: *“The most important thing with a dialogue, is to have someone to have a dialogue with. And when people don’t agree, that’s maybe a good start. Then maybe they at least come to the meeting”* (R10). One of the respondents also claimed that the debate has become less polarized: *“The most decisive societal challenges today do not anymore consist of the conflict between business profits and the environment (...) but between one environmental perspective [biodiversity] and another one [climate mitigation]”* (R9).

9.2.3 Reflections on the process so far

Taking into account all these ideals and barriers, how have respondents navigated these tensions, and how do they reflect on this?

Choosing a department

After some initial unclarity about whether the regional implementation of the NFP should be handled by the *County Administrative Board’s Nature Department* or by the *Department for Rural Development*, the county administration decided for the latter. Several respondents stressed that this was an important and good choice, especially because of the NFPs perceived focus on business and regional development rather than forest management and conservation.

The role of the project board

Although most respondents agreed that being part of the project board was a good experience, they also indicated that not so much was asked from them. In order to save time, the project board meetings were held over Skype. Some of the respondents also told that they had taken a proactive role in becoming part of the project board, so it is hard to know whether they would have been asked otherwise. One of the project board members summarized it as follows: *“I don’t like the fact that we are called a project board (...) To me, it has worked well as a reference group, but we haven’t functioned as a project board”* (R8).

Postponing the first dialogue meeting

According to many respondents, the decision to postpone the first dialogue meeting from January to April hugely determined the quality of the process, as only people from public authorities had signed up for the original date. One of the external consultants reflected: *“In the inquiry that we got from the County Administrative Board, everything should be done before New Year’s Eve. If we would have*

kept that timeframe, I believe it would have been a catastrophic dialogue process. It would have been worthless, frankly speaking. (...) The fact that we postponed [the first dialogue meeting], until now in April, is awfully important for us to be able to deliver some kind of quality results to the Country Administrative Board.” (R12)

Advantages and risks of hiring external consultants

As mentioned earlier, a lack of time seemed to be the main reason for engaging with external consultants. Only one of the project board members mentioned the need for neutral facilitation as a reason to hire consultants. When reflecting on this choice, most project board members found the external consultants helpful to get things done quickly. However, several project board members noted that working with an external consultant also holds an important drawback: *“There’s always a very big danger that everything that is outsourced becomes nobody’s (...) It is fundamental for any form of strategy development that it is fixed within the organization, or the organizations, that have to administer it afterwards” (R9)*. Someone else reflected: *“On the long term, it can be good to build up an own competence base, but we don’t know how long this work will be able to continue either” (R7)*.

Reflections on the first dialogue meeting

The respondents were overall satisfied with the first dialogue meeting. Although some groups (e.g. tourism industry, universities, politicians, furniture industry) could have been represented better, they felt that an appropriate breadth of stakeholders was present. However, *“it was only one of quite many steps we have to take” (R9)*, as one of the project board members cautioned. Additionally, the consultant reflected: *“There are about six people in every group, and of course we don’t know exactly whether everyone contributed equally, and so on. (...) But it’s a bit like... we simply have to live with that uncertainty, and try to create the best possible atmosphere for people to be able to talk freely” (R12)*. Furthermore, respondents observed that the degree of consensus differed greatly between the discussion groups.

An unclear future

From talking with the project board members, nobody seems to know yet how the process will be continued. The external consultancy will compose the results of the first dialogue meeting into a report. Based on this outcome and on the availability of funding, a decision will be made on how to continue. The project board members proposed different shapes this could take: further workshops

and broad dialogue meetings, strategy writing in working groups, or negotiations in a smaller group of key stakeholders.

9.3 Reflections by stakeholders: the first dialogue meeting

Apart from the interviews, also the results of the survey that I distributed amongst participants after the first dialogue meeting in April 2nd 2019, offers useful insights into the dialogue process in Västra Götaland.

32 out of 37 survey respondents indicated that it was easy for them to come to the dialogue meeting, often as a part of their job. However, 5 respondents experienced barriers for joining. Two (out of three responding) representatives of environmental NGOs came in their own time – one of them noting that they had taken a day off from work. Also one forest owner and one politician joined the meeting during “own time” and financed travel costs privately. Finally, one representative of a small to medium-sized company in the forestry sector noted “own time and costs, big mental barrier”.

29 out of 37 respondents wrote down some positive feedback on the meeting. They noted their appreciation for meeting others with different views (14), the good structure and moderation of the meeting (8), the good conversation atmosphere (5) and the engagement of all who were present (3). 13 out of 37 respondents (also) wrote down some critique. Five people made comments related to time pressure experienced during the meeting, and three found the meeting too much industry-oriented. Furthermore, there were some comments (each shared by two respondents), referring to polarization, the lack of facts about the current situation as an introduction to the discussions and general lack of clarity of the goal of the meeting

When respondents were asked if any stakeholder groups were missing, 19 people noted specific groups that they perceived to be underrepresented. The groups that were mentioned are listed in Table 4.

Table 4. Answers to the question “Which stakeholder groups did you perceive to be missing today?”, in the survey that was distributed at the end of the first dialogue meeting in Västra Götaland.

Stakeholder groups perceived to be missing/underrepresented	Number of mentions
Research	4
Innovation/entrepreneurs	4
Forest industry	4
Forest owners	4
Nature conservation	3
Recreation and tourism	3
Education	2
Politicians	2
Young people	1
Hunting association	1

Finally, respondents were asked to rate 13 statements related to the communicative ideal on a scale from 1 (don't agree at all) to 5 (completely agree). Detailed results can be found in Table 5. A majority of the respondents felt that their voice was heard as much as others' and that they could safely express their thoughts and opinions. However, the opinions were divided about whether all dimensions of sustainability got the same weight in the discussions. The moderation of the meeting was generally experienced as neutral and professional, and a majority also felt that discussions were developed based on good arguments in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

In order to analyze whether specific stakeholder groups felt more negative about the dialogue meeting than others, I gathered all respondents who did not feel heard, did not feel secure to express their thoughts, and/or did not believe that the NFP and the regional dialogue process will contribute to the best use of the forest in the long term (scores marked red in Table 5). This group consisted of 10 people. Among them, representatives from environmental NGOs and from the forest industry (and, to a lesser degree, forest owners) are clearly overrepresented. So, extra efforts might be needed to include these groups on equal terms.

Table 5. Overview of the survey results for a question in which respondents were asked to what extent they agree/disagree (scale 1-5) with 13 statements related to the ideal of communicative action. The statements (grouped by dimensions of the ideal of communicative action, different order than in the survey) are shown to the left, the number of people for each answer is shown on the right. Here, the answer that was given by most respondents is shaded. Average scores were calculated from the answers. The scores marked in red were used to analyze which stakeholder groups felt most negatively about the meeting (see text above).

Please rate the following statements from <u>1 (totally disagree)</u> to <u>5 (totally agree)</u>	Average (1-5)	Frequency of answers				
		1	2	3	4	5
Equal inclusion / power imbalances addressed						
My voice was heard as much as all others' voices	4.58	0	3	1	4	28
Some people dominated the discussions today (<i>reverse scale</i>)	2.86	7	5	12	10	2
I felt safe to express my thoughts and opinions	4.36	1	2	1	11	21
The three dimensions of sustainability (ecological, social and economic) all got the same weight in the discussions today	3.03	4	7	11	10	3
Dialogue based on the "unforced force of the better argument" / skilled and neutral facilitation						
I experienced the moderation of the meeting as neutral and professional	4.11	1	3	4	10	17
The discussions developed based on good arguments	3.60	2	3	9	14	7
Emotions and stubbornness often took over the discussion today (<i>reverse scale</i>)	2.39	8	15	7	3	3
The NFP vision and focus areas limited what we could talk about (<i>reverse scale</i>)	2.53	10	5	14	6	1
Participants are sincere and show mutual respect						
Today we managed to listen to each other and to talk in mutual respect	3.91	1	4	5	12	13
Transparent rules, goals and expectations						
I have a clear idea of how this process is going to be continued	2.86	2	13	10	8	2
I have a clear idea of what the national forest program and the regional dialogue process are about	3.49	1	8	4	18	5
I believe that the NFP and the regional dialogue process will contribute to the best use of forest in the long term	3.29	4	5	6	18	3
Dialogue process is sensitive to historical context						
The meeting today complemented other dialogue meetings that I have participated in	3.13	1	3	21	5	2

9.4 Synthesis: the ideal of communicative action

What can the results from the interviews and the survey tell us about the interactions between process design choices, barriers, and the ideal of communicative action?

To start with, the project board members' and consultant's view on how a dialogue process should look like, correspond well to the ideal of communicative action as it is used in this study. Particularly,

the importance of full inclusion, handling goal conflicts through dialogue, long-term political commitment and an institutionalized process was highlighted in the interviews.

The barriers faced in Västra Götaland are mostly related to characteristics of the government assignment: time pressure in autumn, unclarity about future funding, the fact that goal conflicts are left unaddressed at a national level, and the way in which the assignment was directed to the *County Administrative Board* which forms an “unnatural harbor” according to some project board members. Polarization and conflicts do not seem to be such a big problem, but when organizing the first dialogue meeting, it has been difficult to get stakeholders to come to the meeting.

Because of the funding-related time pressure in autumn and the limited possibility to make time available internally at the *County Administrative Board*, an external consultancy firm was hired to help design and prepare a first dialogue meeting. Much effort was put into an initial stakeholder mapping, which contributed to an inclusive invitation list. However, this would not have brought results if the original time plan would have been kept, as only a few stakeholders could make themselves available for a dialogue meeting. Postponing the first dialogue meeting from January to April contributed to a full inclusion of all stakeholders, although the survey results suggest that financial compensation could have been appropriate for certain groups. Furthermore, the meeting setup and the moderation by an external consultant contributed to trade-offs being addressed through dialogue.

However, the choice for working with an external consultant also carries the risk that the dialogue process will not be institutionalized sufficiently to lead to real change. This risk is further aggravated by the loose organization of the project board and by the unclarity about how the continuation of the dialogue process will be designed and funded. Also the perception that the *County Administrative Board* might not be the most logical actor to lead a dialogue process on regional and business development shows that the dialogue process is not yet solidly institutionalized. The unclarity about future funding also hampers long-term commitment to the process.

In Figure 10, the relations between the most important barriers, choices in process design and the ideal of communicative action are represented visually.

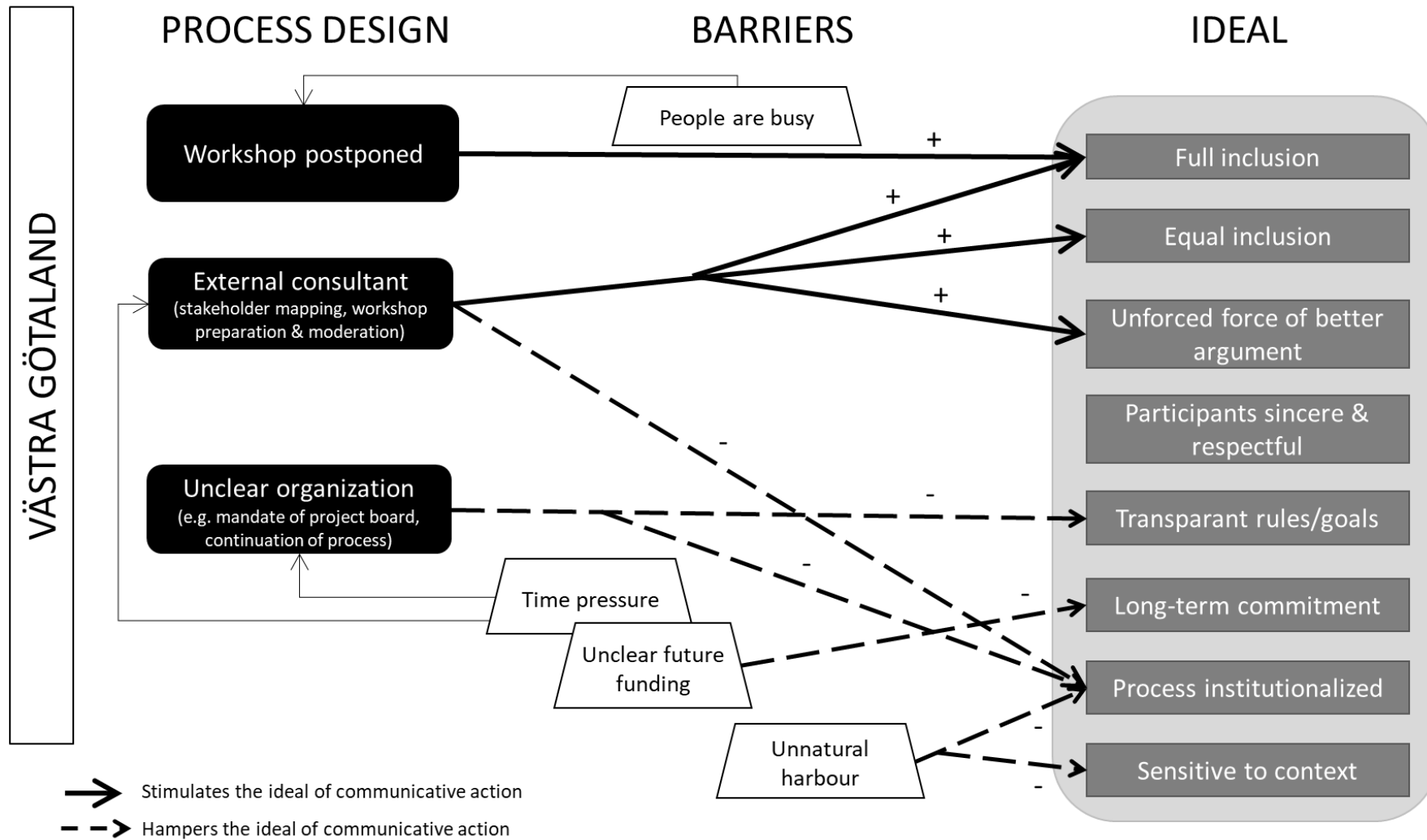


Figure 10. Visual representation of the process design choices, barriers and the ideal of communicative action, as well as the relations between them in the regional dialogue process in Västra Götaland. Own figure.

10 Discussion

10.1 A struggle for dialogue

The case studies described above illustrate two out of a variety of regional dialogue processes within the Swedish National Forest Program. Although the two case study regions differ in many regards, some of the main barriers that they faced are the same. After all, both dialogue processes were shaped and affected by the same government assignment and associated short-term funding. And although this led to dissimilar choices in process design in the two case study regions, the outcome of my analysis of the ideal of communicative action is surprisingly similar. Both in Gävleborg and in Västra Götaland, major efforts were done to reach a full and equal participation of stakeholders, whereas a long-term commitment and institutionalization of the process have not (yet) been reached.

Viewing the case study results through a more theoretical lens can bring additional depth. As explained in section 4, Habermas' concept of communicative action was originally postulated in contrast to instrumental action. For Habermas, instrumental action – associated with economy, administration and law – ultimately forms a threat to the communicative action that keeps society together (Thomassen, 2010). The regional dialogue processes can thus be interpreted as struggles to create spaces for communicative action in a world that is shaped by instrumental action.

The case study results show that this can be a real struggle indeed; dialogue spaces are put under pressure by instrumental action from all sides. The most obvious example is the way in which funding for the dialogue processes is closely linked to national politics and budget years. Also the multitude of government directives for drafting regional strategies, leading to fatigue and an attitude of “checking off” mandatory assignments, points to an encroachment of instrumental action into an area of communicative action. And not only the organization of the dialogue process is embedded in instrumental action, also the participants to the dialogues are. For example, the regional dialogue processes take place within a context of “rational” forestry, that is: forestry directed towards delivering high volumes of timber, the main ecosystem service with a price in the market. Furthermore, power imbalances, a lack of time to participate, and previous conflicts are all in some way linked to the workings of impersonal economic, administrative and legal systems. As the case study results show, these pressures constrain the ideal of communicative action.

10.2 Some ways forward

For Habermas, the struggle to reach the communicative ideal holds emancipatory potential. Using dialogue to set the boundaries and goals of instrumental systems is the only way in which they can be “tamed” (Thomassen, 2010). An important question is at which organizational level this can best be done when it comes to Sweden’s National Forest Program. In both case study regions, some respondents argued that goal conflicts, for example between production and conservation, should be managed by national politicians and not left up to regional stakeholders. Also Lindahl et al. (2017) claim that managing this trade-off requires political adjustments, and they critique the way in which it is instead *“relegated to enlarged, cross-sectoral deliberative arenas”* (p. 53). Indeed, regional stakeholders will mostly have to work within existing economic, administrative and legal systems – even if they create an ideal dialogue. In contrast, the national government has the power to set the goals and boundaries of relevant instrumental systems, such as law, subsidies or financial compensation for conservation.

So, if national politicians can agree on what balance between production and conservation goals is desirable, they could use their power to realign economic, administrative and legal systems accordingly. The challenge lies of course in the first part of this sentence: to agree on a desirable balance between production and conservation goals. Due to the focus on win-win situations within the dominant ecological modernization discourse, there has been a reluctance within Swedish forest policy to acknowledge trade-offs (Lindahl et al., 2017). From reading through the NFP strategy document (Näringsdepartementet, 2018a), it seems like this reluctance still exists. However, acknowledging trade-offs and ecological limits is a necessary precondition for reaching sustainable development, and issues such as climate change and biodiversity loss cannot be solved within the win-win framework of ecological modernization (Langhelle, 2000).

Apart from the need to address persistent goal conflicts at a national level, the case study results also point to the need for long-term funding and clear mandates. Without this, the regional dialogue processes will not get beyond the level of “checking off” mandatory process steps with limited real meaning. Ownership and institutionalization of the regional dialogue processes might have to be rethought, so that the dialogues can be led by one or multiple organizations that form a “natural harbor”. Furthermore, the relationship between regional and national processes, and between bottom-up and top-down steering, needs to be clarified. Related to this, it would be helpful if national level actors could clarify and delineate what exactly the role of the NFP is, as this was interpreted quite differently by the different project board members and regions in my study. Should

the NFP cover forest management, business and regional development, or both? If the NFP is a program for business and regional development (as its vision suggests), in which policy arena will trade-offs between conservation and production, or between biodiversity and climate change mitigation be handled? How does the NFP relate to existing policies, and what gap is it supposed to fill?

Finally, the case study results suggest that regional actors could benefit from tools and knowledge on participatory processes. Although virtually all project board members recognized the importance of taking into account different views, most of them had no clear strategy for handling goal conflicts and power imbalances or for creating an institutionalized and transparent process design. Many respondents expressed concern about the whole process having limited impact and ending up “being only a piece of paper”. Understandably so, as organizing a fair, inclusive and impactful participatory process is a complex challenge. Existing theoretical, scientific and practical knowledge – for example the knowledge collected in this study, but also in the NFP feasibility study (Skogsstyrelsen, 2013) – could offer guidance and inspiration.

10.3 Theoretical reflections

The theoretical framework that I used in this study, focusing on the preconditions for communicative action, proved to be meaningful in studying dialogue processes that are still in the initiation phase. It guided my attention to aspects of process design that will most probably influence the quality of participation. Habermas postulated his social theory at a quite high level of abstraction and had no intention to use it for empirical research (Sköllerhorn, 2001). For me, enriching Habermas’ theory with insights from the participation literature was a valuable and necessary step to create a framework that could be used empirically. I believe that this operationalization of communicative action could be usefully transferred to other studies.

One limitation of my theoretical framework is that it leaves out other potentially insightful concepts, such as discourse (Hajer and Versteeg, 2006; Lakoff, 2010), power (Few, 2002; Lukes, 2005) and modes of representation (Klenk et al., 2013). Once the dialogue processes have proceeded further, these could become additional relevant analytical frameworks. Within the dialogues’ initiation phase, however, the amount of data available for such analyses seems limited.

11 Conclusion

In this paper, I set out to analyze to what extent the National Forest Program's regional stakeholder dialogues will be able to reconcile the ongoing goal conflicts in Swedish forestry through Habermas' ideal of communicative reason. Firstly, I found that the dialogue processes in my case study regions have been hindered by the short-term funding and unclear mandates within Sweden's National Forest Program, leading to a lack of institutionalization, long-term commitment and transparency. The funding and function of the regional dialogue processes need to be strengthened and clarified for the regional dialogue processes to deliver meaningful results.

Secondly, I suggest that acknowledging the unaddressed trade-offs between the two goals of Swedish forest policy is necessary for sustainable development. And although these trade-offs can be talked about at all governance levels, Habermas situates the emancipatory potential of such a dialogue in its ability to translate its outcomes into adjustments to instrumental systems. In the case of Swedish forest policy, the power to adjust relevant legal, economic and administrative systems lies at the national level. Therefore, I argue that the goal conflicts between production and environmental protection should be handled at a national rather than a regional level.

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Appendix 1. Interview guide

Note: The original interview guide was in Swedish.

- Introduce myself
- The interview results will be handled anonymously (everyone described as “project board member” or “consultant”)
- If I want to use direct quotes, I will translate these into English, and you can check your quotes over e-mail
- You can stop the interview or skip a question at any time without giving a reason
- How much time do we have for the interview?
- Ask for consent for recording the interview

Intro (5')

- Can you tell a bit about yourself (job/position)?

How would an ideal dialogue process look? (10')

- In an ideal world, how should a regional dialogue process about forests look like according to you, in this county?
- Do would goal conflict be handled in an ideal world?
 - *(Probe)* Some people believe that all decision should be made in a fact-based way. Other say that goal conflicts are inherently political, so they cannot be solved with facts. What is your opinion? How should we handle goal conflicts as a society?
 - *(Probe)* Should all stakeholders have an equal decision-making power? Or should some interests be weighed heavier than others? Who has the right to take decisions about goal conflicts in the forest?
- What should the unique function/role of the NFP be within the existing complexity of different policies and dialogues?

Barriers (15')

- Now you have told a bit about what you believe to be important for a dialogue process to succeed. To what extent do you feel that you have managed / will manage to live up to this ideal [*refer to first question*]? Why or why not? What barriers and difficulties did you face?

- *(Probe)* How much change will the dialogue process be able to make? How much flexibility is there within the current regulatory frameworks for doing things differently? To what extent is the regional dialogue process limited by the NFP vision and focus areas that were decided upon at a national level?
- *(Probe)* How do you reflect on the timing of the regional dialogue process? Is the current context favourable for a good dialogue process?
- *(Probe)* To what extent do you perceive the forest debate as being polarized? Do stakeholders generally trust each other? Are there big power differences between them? And to what extent do they trust public authorities, according to you?
- *(Probe)* To what extent are there enough time and resources available for the dialogue process?

Understanding the dialogue process so far (15')

- How did you decide on the design/organization of the regional dialogue process? Who wrote the project plan? Who could give input on it? Were alternative designs considered? What factors were decisive in the end?
 - **Gävleborg:** Why did you choose to develop a regional action plan rather than a strategy document?
 - **Gävleborg:** Why did you choose to have separate meetings with the different stakeholder groups?
 - **Gävleborg:** How did you decide whom to talk with?
 - **Västra Götaland:** Why did you think it is important to create a regional strategy document in this situation where the strategy is already given at a national level?
 - **Västra Götaland (project board members):** Why did you choose to work with an extern consultant? Which role did this consultant have?
 - **Västra Götaland (consultant):** How did you approach the stakeholder mapping?
 - **Västra Götaland (consultant):** How did you decide on the setup of the first dialogue meeting?
- How do you plan to continue the process?
 - *(Probe)* What should the goal of the regional dialogue process be?
 - *(Probe)* Where will resources for the continued dialogue process come from? And for implementing the strategy?
 - *(Probe)* How do you plan to weigh different interests when they clash?
 - *(Probe)* Who should be included in the continuation of the process?

Reflection (10')

- How satisfied are you about the design of the dialogue process until now? Would you have made certain choices differently with the knowledge you have now?
 - *(Probe)* How have you experienced working in the project board? Have there been any conflicts of interest? Are there any stakeholder groups missing?
 - **Gävleborg**: What influence does it have that you got a new project leader?
 - **Västra Götaland (project board members)**: How have you experienced working with an extern consult? What are benefits and problems?
 - **Västra Götaland (consultant)**: How did you experience working with the project board? How much freedom did you get?
 - **Västra Götaland**: How do you feel about the first dialogue meeting? Did it live up to your expectations?
- What resources/support would have helped you (or could help in the future) to create a better dialogue process? e.g. Knowledge/expertise? Clearer frameworks? Time/money? Is there anything the Swedish Forest Agency could do to further support the regional dialogue processes?
- Are there any other comments you want to make?

Appendix 2. Survey design (Västra Götaland)

Note: The original survey was in Swedish.

The regional dialogue process in Västra Götaland

This survey is part of the research project that I (Iris Hertog, student at Lund University) am carrying out for my master thesis. In this project I illuminate how the regional dialogue processes within the national forest program look differently in different counties. The data collection for this research is financed with help of research funding from the EU through the Horizon2020 project InnoForEst (www.innoforest.se). Your answers will be handled anonymously. Participation is voluntary, and it is fine to skip questions that you do not want to answer. Please answer the questions as honestly as possible. There is no “right” or “wrong”. Thank for your cooperation!

Which group of organization do you represent here today?

- Forest owners
- Public authority
- Industry/business: small or medium-sized company within the forest industry and its value chain
- Industry/business: big company within the forest industry and its value chain
- Special interest organization: nature conservation
- Special interest organization: hunting
- Special interest organization: tourism
- Research and/or education
- General public
- Other:

How easy/difficult was it for you to come here today? (e.g. travel costs, is it in you own time or part of your job, acceptance within you organization, accessibility, or other)

What did you feel was good and/or less good about the meeting today? Please write some lines freely!

Please turn the paper...

Were there any stakeholders missing today, according to you? Which ones, in that case? Do you know why they didn't come?

Indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements by circling your answer.

	I do <u>not</u> agree at all					I have no opinion				I agree completely
	1	2	3	4	5					
My voice was heard as much as all others' voices.	1	2	3	4	5					
The three dimensions of sustainability (ecological, social and economic) all got the same weight in the discussions today.	1	2	3	4	5					
I experienced the moderation of the meeting as neutral and professional.	1	2	3	4	5					
Some people dominated the discussions today.	1	2	3	4	5					
I felt safe to express my thoughts and opinions.	1	2	3	4	5					
Today we managed to listen to each other and to talk in mutual respect.	1	2	3	4	5					
I have a clear idea of how this process is going to be continued.	1	2	3	4	5					
I have a clear idea of what the national forest program and the regional dialogue process are about.	1	2	3	4	5					
The discussions developed based on good arguments.	1	2	3	4	5					
The national forest program's vision and focus areas limited what we could talk about.	1	2	3	4	5					
I believe that the NFP and the regional dialogue process will contribute to the best use of forest in the long term.	1	2	3	4	5					
Emotions and stubbornness often took over the discussion today.	1	2	3	4	5					
The meeting today complemented other dialogue meetings that I have participated in.	1	2	3	4	5					

Other comments/thoughts

Thank you for your time! In case you want more information about the research project, please contact Iris Hertog (irishertog1995@gmail.com).

