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Network and participatory governance in urban forestry: An assessment of examples from selected Slovakian cities

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ABSTRACT

Current political trends and scholarly research increasingly promotes network and participatory governance in multi-level systems as a way to more sustainable and effective environmental policy. In Slovakia best practice knowledge on shaping and implementing participatory processes is scarce. The main aim of the article is to assess the role of various stakeholders in the processes of participatory and network governance in urban forests in Slovakia. Based on selected case studies critical factors of success or failure in urban forestry at local level were identified. The methodological approach consisted of combination of multiple research methods. The main data sources for the qualitative part were expert structural interviews and complemented by desk study of relevant scientific literature, strategic documents, and personal observation and own findings from previous research projects on public participation. At national and regional levels open, continuous and initiatively functioning network is present and influences decision making. The result of the cooperation among various stakeholders at the local level most frequently takes the form of positive experience sharing from the implementation of community and civic projects, but it can also be beneficial to promote alternative proposals in strategic documents and development plans. In Slovakia, companies of municipal forests organize participatory processes in collaboration with local self-government, local and regional state government, nature conservation agencies, community activists and NGOs and enhance participation at regional and local level. The results thus show that difference between success and failure in many participatory processes is often unclear especially if a large number of stakeholders take part in the activities and their interests might differ. The crucial factor for the success or failure of the complex participatory process is to ensure the sustainability of the achieved goal or result.

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1. Introduction

The necessity of strong public participation in governance processes has been generally recognized in recent years. In this area, different actors in Slovakia are still undergoing a learning process because the best practice knowledge on shaping and implementing participatory processes is scarce.

Urban forests that are used as commons (e.g., various forms of common property regimes of Non-state Forest Owners), where participatory and network governance has been well proven (Carlsson and Sandström, 2008), present a good example. Urban forests enhance the environment and increase community attractiveness and livability. Fostering civic pride has greater significance when communities strive to

balance economic growth with environmental quality and social well-being. The effective securing of urban forest benefits is directly dependent on forest management quality and rational land-use planning at the local and regional levels, which involve various stakeholders' and citizens' interest groups.

Contrary to the countries where forest ownership is divided into public and private ownership, in Slovakia, a distinction is made between state and non-state ownership where non-state ownership includes private, community, church, municipal and agricultural cooperatives' forest ownership. The ownership structure is recorded in the forest owners' and managers' registry (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic, 2015). Forest ownership and management under Slovakian cities and municipalities was significantly influenced by a land reform in 1948, which led to the nationalization of private property with an area larger than 5 ha and the transfer of urban forests to the management of the state forest enterprise. After 1989, the process of forest ownership rights conversion developed dynamically, and forest owners could request the restoration of their

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property rights to forests in a restitution process. The process was connected directly to the establishment of several organizations, such as the Association of Municipal Forests in Slovakia and other regional associations in 1994, the Union of Regional Associations of Non-state Forest Owners in Slovakia and other regional associations in 1996, the Union of Diocesan Forests in Slovakia and other regional associations in 1998 and the Council of Non-state Forest Owners Associations in Slovakia in 2006.

The summary information for 2007–2014 on the state of forests in Slovakia that was published by the National Forest Centre shows that the forest land area in Slovakia has increased slightly. In 2007, the forest land area was 2,006,601 ha, whereas in 2014, it reached 2,014,259 ha. In 2014, registered forest land was 41.1% of forest cover, where 1,040,921 ha (53.6%) were managed by the state and 901,071 ha (46.4%) were managed by non-state forest actors (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic, 2015). Of the forest stand cover of 1,941,992 ha, the share of forest ownership was as follows: state 40%; private 10.6%; joint 20.9%; church 2.6%; agricultural cooperatives 0.8%; municipal 8.7%; and unknown 16.9% (Hricová et al., 2015). The slight increase in the forest land area in Slovakia does not include urban forests. Their area, on the contrary, is most at risk mainly from developers that exert constant pressure to change the functional use of the territory. In response to the pressure of investors, since 1989, active citizens' initiatives and associations have been created and their mission is to protect the environment, including the forest cover.

Urban forests enhance the environment and increase community attractiveness and livability, and fostering civic pride has greater significance when communities strive to balance economic growth with environmental quality and social well-being. Urban (and in general) municipal forests provide many benefits to both the people and wildlife that live in urban areas (e.g., Tyrväinen et al., 2005), which in the planning processes, transform into ecosystem service values by using economic indicators (Breuste et al., 2013; Finka and Kluvánková-Oravská, 2015). The effective securing of urban forest benefits directly depends on the level of forest management quality and the rational land-use planning at the local and regional levels, which involve various stakeholders (i.e., urban forest companies, local and state governments, nature protection agencies, scientists and NGOs) and citizen interest groups.

To date, no network governance research that addresses the participation and the interconnection of interest organizations' activities that relate to forest policy making or drafting strategic forest governance documents has been conducted in Slovakia. So far, studies and surveys have focused mainly on formulating forest policy measures (Sarvašová et al., 2012; Dobšínská et al., 2013) and on the participation of a small group of concerned citizens in forest planning (Sarvašová et al., 2014). The traditional forest actors' concept of participation is rather intra-sectoral, and they do not consider it the participation of a wide range of actors from various sectors of public life. Little attention has been paid to the participatory processes that have been initiated by citizens' associations and community initiatives or to the analysis and evaluation of the critical factors for success or failure in the forestry decision-making processes at the local level. Therefore, the participatory governance research in urban forestry is new and innovative and brings a wide perspective to participatory processes that show how they, in fact, occur in Slovakia.

The main aim of the article is to assess the role of various stakeholders in the processes of participatory and network governance in urban forests in Slovakia. We analyze and assess the network modes of governance in forestry and participatory governance in selected urban forest companies from eleven cities in Slovakia. For a detailed assessment of the critical factors for success or failure in urban forestry at a local level, we use six case studies from selected cities that represent examples of various combinations of initiators, aims and forms of

participatory processes. In this article, we address the following research questions.

1. How does network governance function in Slovakia at the national level?
2. How does participatory governance at a local level in the cities function for urban forests?
3. What are the main critical factors for the success or failure of participatory governance based on selected local case studies of urban forests?

2. Conceptual background and theoretical frameworks

2.1. Public participation in urban forestry planning and management

Public participation has become an integral part of the global forest policy discussion. The UN Forest Declaration states that in the development, implementation and planning of national forest policies, governments should promote and provide opportunities for the participation of interested parties, including local communities and indigenous people, industries, labor, non-governmental organizations and individuals, forest dwellers and women (UNCED, 1992). In European countries, the trend towards participation was definitely influenced by the debate on sustainable development that was initiated in the 1980s among organizations in the forestry sector and fueled by the Conference of Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and the pan-European Process that was initiated in Strasbourg in 1990 with the First Inter-ministerial Conference on the protection of forests in Europe, which resulted in the resolutions of Helsinki and Lisbon (Cantiani, 2012).

Participation is viewed as an important aspect of sustainable forest management (Kangas et al., 2005, 2010; Primmer and Kyllönen, 2006; Kouplevatskaya-Yunusova and Buttoud, 2006; Cantiani, 2012; Sarvašová et al., 2014). Participation is also expected to contribute to effective decision making by creating legitimacy and therefore building support for decisions (Vacik et al., 2014). Finally, participation is anticipated to produce better policies by encouraging the exchange of information and ideas and by promoting collaborative learning about problems and their potential solutions.

Different methods are used to evaluate participatory processes (for an overview, see Bruna-García and Marey-Pérez, 2014 or Cantiani, 2012). Recent research on participation in forest planning has identified several key factors to successful participation such as inclusiveness, transparency, and resource availability (Buchy and Hoverman, 2000). Other important issues were good facilitation, constructive interaction among participants, access to information, and the power to influence the process and outcomes (Tuler and Webler, 1999).

2.2. Participatory and network governance in forestry

For more than 30 years, the concept of governance has been frequently used in the public sector, for example, in global, national, regional and local governments and related governmental and non-governmental bodies – i.e., agencies, commissions, boards, and enterprises. In connection with sustainability principles, governance is applied in various fields, including forestry, the environment and urban planning. Governance is a term that refers to larger society processes that define goals and priorities and strategic goals. Governance involves the processes by which public policy decisions are made and implemented and is much broader than what governments do (Paudítšová et al., 2014). Governance is the result of interactions, relationships and networks at horizontal and vertical levels among different sectors (i.e., the government, the public and private sectors and civil society) and involves decisions, negotiation, and different power relations among stakeholders to determine who gets what, when and how (UNDP, 2009). An important aspect of governance – as opposed to government – and of multi-level governance in particular is the

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