



LANDSCAPE DIALOGUES – DISCUSSING LANDSCAPE ISSUES WITH LOCAL PEOPLE

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Summary

Human impacts on landscapes pose serious threats to Central European landscapes (e.g. urban sprawl, land consumption and loss of landscape diversity and biodiversity) and consequently, influence quality of life as landscapes are a key factor in individual and social well-being and affect everybody. Therefore, public participation is an issue of great significance when elaborating visions and action plans for sustainable landscape development. In order to implement participatory discussion of landscape issues, “landscape dialogues” in the Austrian LEADER region Mühlviertler Kernland were organised in the framework of the VITAL LANDSCAPES project. The introduced method proved to be an adequate instrument to create awareness and to give local people a forum to elaborate on visions and concrete actions for sustainable landscape development. In the course of the “landscape dialogues”, complex issues of landscape development, e.g. the renewal of village cores, the cultivation of low-productive grasslands, the management of small-structured landscape elements as well as the increase of renewable energy use were addressed and gave impulses in some involved municipalities to continue the discussion in communicative and participatory planning processes within the Local Agenda 21 framework.

Keywords

Landscape development • public participation • Local and Regional Agenda 21 • European Landscape Convention

1. Introduction

Cultural landscapes in Central Europe are endangered although they are of great value as evidence of our natural and cultural heritage (ELC). This is often associated with loss of diversity caused by urbanisation, increased accessibility and globalisation [Antrop 2005]. Considering that landscapes are a key factor for physical, intellectual and spiritual well-being of individuals and societies [Dejeant-Pons 2006], a loss of landscape diversity will also cause a substantial loss of quality of life. Landscapes have an impact on the regional and local identity of the people and the potential to be relevant for sustainable landscape development [Meier et al. 2003] for which reason public participation is an issue of great significance to reach sustainable land-

scape development [Jones 2007, Sevenant and Antrop 2010]. Therefore, objectives for participation should include awareness raising that our everyday actions have an impact on landscape development, visioning for sustainable landscape development and action planning to elaborate concrete implementation measures.

Consequently, the ELC (Art. 2A) deals with the question of public awareness calling for a stronger valuation of landscapes, such that landscape issues are established and raised in the societal value base. The communicative planning paradigm that perceives planning as a consensus and democracy-oriented process between citizens, decision-makers and planners [Healey 1997, Müller 2004, Selle 2004] is suitable to reach common ground for the inclusion of landscape issues in the societal value base. A central part of communicative planning processes is to express the value base as visions which are placed in the centre of the respective planning process. In doing so, participatory planning can make an important contribution to an improved and more comprehensive decision-making [SGP 2010]. It supports the generation and formulation of a clearly defined and transparent value base as a precondition for traceable decision making [Stöglehner 2010].

From a learning theory perspective, such a process can be understood as a collective learning process that can induce two ways of learning by reflecting on the consequences of recent developments and proposed actions [Argyris 1993, cited by Innes and Booher 2000, Stöglehner 2010]. In single loop learning, a reflection of the consequences of proposed actions leads to adaptations of an action programme (including mitigation and compensation measures) without questioning the vision and the underlying values of the planning/development process. In contrast, double loop learning also questions the values and vision and therefore, undesired consequences might induce a general change of the vision. In terms of sustainable landscape development, it is not only necessary to mitigate or compensate for negative impacts on landscape “end of pipe” but to change societal processes that shape landscapes. This calls for double loop learning in communicative planning processes with participation of the wider public.

This theoretical framework grounds the approach of “landscape dialogues” as a participatory method developed and tested in the Austrian “Vital Landscapes” (www.vital-landscapes.eu) pilot project. The “landscape dialogues” aim to (1) create awareness by local and regional people that everyday actions shape landscapes, (2) to give the local and regional people a forum to elaborate on their visions concerning landscape development and the position of landscape in the local and regional value base, (3) to think about actions, how to put these visions into practice. In the following pages, the concept of “landscape dialogues” based on the application in the Austrian pilot region Mühlviertler Kernland is described, followed by a discussion of the approach.

2. Landscape dialogues

The Austrian “Vital Landscapes” project team conceptualised and introduced “landscape dialogues” as a two-part workshop series, based on the Local Agenda 21

approach. This was to implement participatory discussion of landscape issues with the local and regional population. In this activity the authors representing Academia were supported by the SPES-Academy, a company that inter alia, is specialised in guiding and moderating community development processes like Local and Regional Agenda 21. Accordingly, from September 2011 to April 2012, eight workshops in four locations in the LEADER region Mühlviertler Kernland (two single municipalities and two co-operations of municipalities) were organised involving altogether eight municipalities. The aim of the “landscape dialogues” was the involvement of the

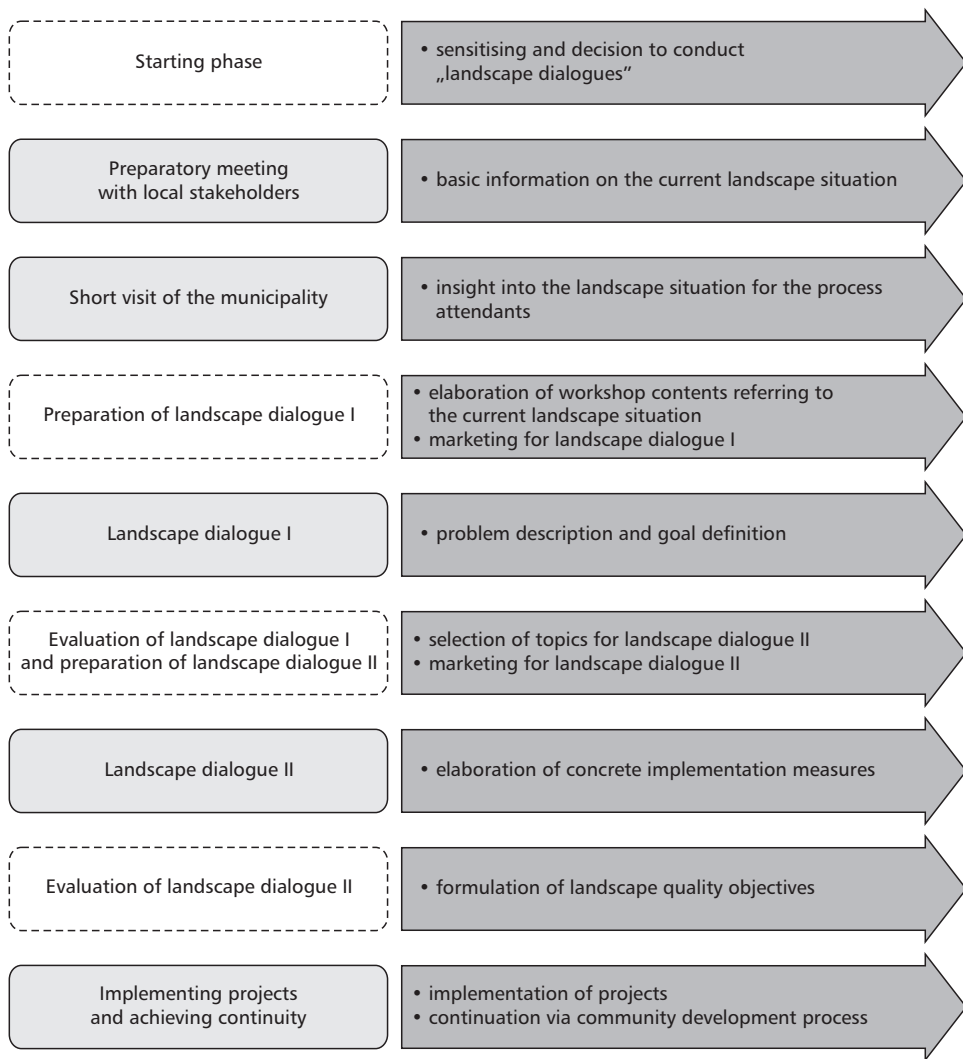


Fig. 1. “Landscape dialogues“ process scheme (continuous border line, shaded – community action; dashed border line – desktop work of process attendants)

public, in the elaboration of visions and goals for sustainable landscape development, as well as concrete implementation measures. The participation process comprised the following steps (see Figure 1).

During the starting phase, municipalities selected by the authors, in cooperation with the LEADER region, could be sensitised and interested in active participation in the VITAL LANDSCAPES project, via discussions in the respective municipal councils or responsible committees (e.g. spatial planning committee). When the decision to participate was taken basic information on the current landscape situation in the respective municipalities was gathered in a preparatory meeting with local stakeholders and municipal representatives. This was done in the form of a discussion session. Subsequently, a short visit of the municipal territory together with the mayor provided an insight into the landscape so that the process attendants could get an overview of the current situation in the respective municipality. Based on this information and a desktop analysis, the contents of the first “landscape dialogue” were elaborated. The public was invited to participate via municipal newspapers and websites, conventional and electronic mailing as well as personal invitations. “Landscape dialogue I” was focused on problem description applying the Group InVENTion Method (GIVE) by SPES (Stöglehner et al. 2006) and goal definition with the aid of the fruit-tree-method [SPES 2006]. The GIVE method is a tool to collect ideas in groups of people in a very efficient way. As a first step, the workshop participants give their personal answers to several questions, written on a flip-chart. In a second step, a prioritisation is done where the participants have the possibility to show their own priorities giving three points for each flip-chart (question). In the second part of “landscape dialogue I”, small working groups of participants focus on the goal formulation for vital landscapes related to landscape issues outlined on several flip-charts of the GIVE method. Each working group composes a fruit tree, in assembling fruits (= goals), blossoms (= implementation measures) and leaves (= framework requirements). On the basis of the evaluation of the first workshop evening, several topics for the discussion in the second “landscape dialogue” were selected, after consultation of the municipal representatives. Marketing activities were carried out in the same way as for the first workshop. “Landscape dialogue II” aimed at the elaboration of concrete implementation measures. Together with the workshop participants several out of the agreed-in-advance topics were chosen for a discussion in greater depth in the second workshop evening, applying the 10-finger-check according to Hujber [2007]. This method supports the elaboration of clear project plans, along a set of ten key points¹: data (thumb), clarity of goals (index finger), obstacles (middle finger), tour guides (ring finger), small steps towards to great success (pinkie), dialogue and marketing (thumb), cooperation (index finger), mentor (middle finger), bill (ring finger) as well as bits and bobs (pinkie). Finally, the evaluation of both “landscape dialogues” was incorporated into the formulation of landscape quality objectives as well as concrete implementation measures. This

¹ In German, the first letter of each key point corresponds with the name of the finger.

provided the municipalities and the LEADER region a basis for their further work on municipal and regional level.

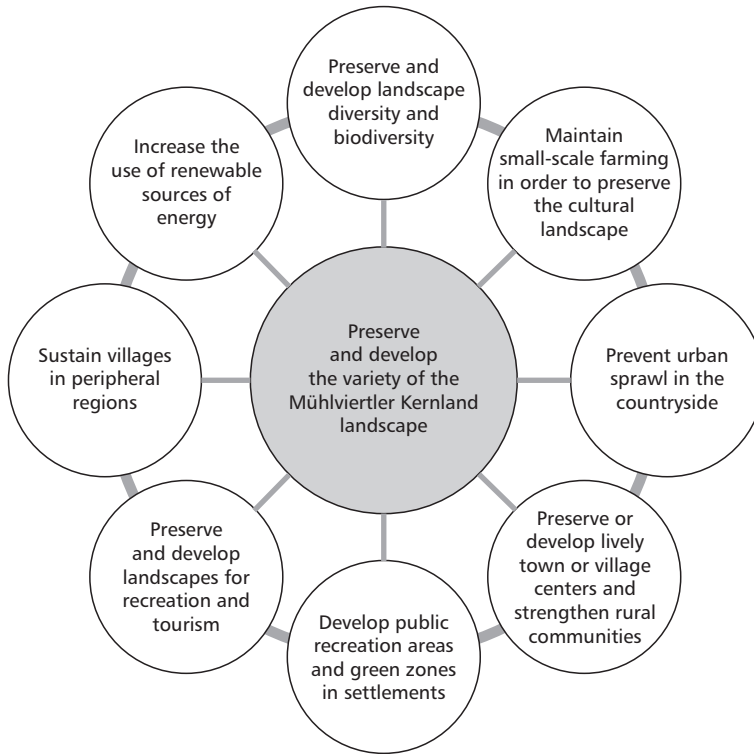
3. Results

The “landscape dialogues” provided insights regarding the public perception of landscape in the respective municipalities participating in the VITAL LANDSCAPES pilot process. This enabled a critical reflection of ongoing landscape developments. Based on these findings, the authors formulated landscape quality objectives for the LEADER region, providing a normative framework for future landscape development. With “landscape quality objectives” the competent public authorities shall express “the aspirations of the public with regard to the landscape features of their surroundings” for each specific landscape (Art. 1 ELC). Landscape quality objectives could be defined as objectives related to landscape development that define the future state within certain areas, and the timeframes within these states should be reached [Neugebauer and Stoeglehner 2012].

On the one hand, the “landscape dialogues” indicated a high level of satisfaction with regard to the current state of the landscapes in the Mühlviertler Kernland region which many participants judge to be “predominantly intact”. On the other hand, the residents see the current state of the landscapes under threat. Changes in land-use (e.g. urban sprawl), structural changes in the primary sector (e.g. a trend towards more efficiency and bigger plots) as well as changes in the system of energy supply (e.g. land-use for the production of renewable energy) were identified as relevant influencing factors.

Due to a generally high level of satisfaction with the current state of the landscape, the landscape quality objectives overwhelmingly have a conservatory character (e.g. “preserve landscape diversity” or “maintain small-scale farming”). However, several landscape quality objectives (e.g. “develop public recreation areas” or “increase the use of renewable energy sources”) indicate that landscape development is acknowledged to be a dynamic process and subject to change and outside influences [Löschner et al. 2012]. The individual objectives and their interrelations (see Figure 2) constitute the region’s principal landscape quality objective, to preserve and develop the variety of the Mühlviertler Kernland landscape encompassing the following aspects:

- varied and highly structured landscapes including well-preserved landscape elements,
- a high diversity of plant and animal life,
- diverse landscape capacities (e.g. for recreation or agrarian and energy production),
- varied but balanced land-uses, preserving favourable farming areas and allowing for controlled settlement development,
- a socio-spatial diversity, which allows for a sustainable life style in central and peripheral regions.



Source: Löschner et al. 2012

Fig. 2. Landscape quality objectives for the Austrian LEADER region Mühlviertler Kernland

Human beings are intrinsic parts of the landscape [Linehan and Gross 1998, Matthews and Selman 2006] laying several claims to the system “landscape”. Consequently, the above mentioned landscape quality objectives address all three essential landscape benefits, according to Simmen and Walter [2007], Knoepfl and Gerber [2007], Rodewald and Knoepfl [2006]: these are aesthetic, sociocultural as well as ecological landscape qualities.

4. Discussion

We start this discussion with learning and planning theory and end with practical issues concerning participation, landscape definitions, as well as expected and achieved outcomes.

In terms of a social learning process, the “landscape dialogues” are intended to activate both behavioural modifications (single-loop-learning) and a discourse about context and goals (double-loop-learning), broadening the spectrum of supposable implementation measures throughout the reflection of action strategies and governing

values. Also, a discussion about landscape and local/regional identity could be started and a general awareness that landscape is a feature of quality of life could be created. From our experiences, we can state that “landscape” often is simply “there” and given no special attention. In the process, with the simple questions asked, people started to think about the special qualities and features of their landscapes and their “value” for their quality of life. By the moderation techniques chosen, it was guaranteed that visions were elaborated that proved to be stable in the ongoing process. They were also well embedded in the overall value frame of the respective municipalities. Partly, “inherent” values to societies were expressed as visions, especially applying the “fruit-tree-method”. Awareness emerged in the landscape dialogues that buying locally/regionally creates (regional) income and economic activity. This automatically leads to landscape management. Consequently, the regional population proposed to strengthen and increase projects like farmers shops and markets, use of regional renewable energy sources, creating touristic offers with respect to landscape management, and to support existing civil-society based initiatives for landscape management.

The “landscape dialogues” proved to be an adequate method to involve the interested public in the discussion of landscape issues, although via such workshops and other interactive methods, normally only a certain, but not very large share of the population can be reached. On the average, approximately 20 persons attended each of the eight “landscape dialogues” in the Mühlviertler Kernland. Overall, we experienced a significantly more male than female participation and that the youth were not present at all. For teenagers, we created a separate school action that is not the subject of this paper.

Our experience is that “landscape” is a complex and awkward topic to discuss with the general public. To find a common understanding of landscape, takes time. Classical landscape definitions² work on an academic scale, but with the general public, a more practical understanding has to be gained. Visualisation of landscapes and landscape elements, e.g. by showing pictures or drawing maps about special landscape features together, supports a jointly agreed concept of “landscape”. Both the open landscapes and the build structures were in the local/regional landscape perception with a predominance of agriculturally used areas and old town/village cores with historical buildings. Finally, new settlement developments, especially sprawl and big infrastructures were often perceived as “necessary” disturbances. This can be seen on the highway project S10, the landscape change is perceived partly negatively, most people are still in favour of the project, because of expected positive economic incentives, improvements for commuters and the expected population stabilisation or even growth in a structurally weak rural region.

² See e.g.: The European Landscape Convention defines landscape as “an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors” (Art.1 ELC). Tress et al. (2000) outline a similar understanding of landscape, that “the physical processes and the human actions together with the thinking of humans are shaping and creating the landscape. The three fields (the physical geosphere, the biosphere and the mental noosphere) are closely related and influence each other mutually”.

When we started the process, we expected to come up with more concrete projects and single, event-like actions, e.g. the planting of hedgerows, tree-cutting in sensitive landscape sceneries. However, we experienced that people wanted to tackle complex issues, such as ongoing landscape management strategies, the renewal of town/village cores etc. Consequently, two out of the eight municipalities participating in the “landscape dialogues”, have started a full Local Agenda 21 process, with two more municipalities thoroughly considering Local Agenda 21 in the near future. From this perspective, we can firmly state that the experience of taking part in participatory planning methods created awareness for the benefits of participatory planning by the respective municipal decision makers.

5. Conclusions

Summing up the results of the “landscape dialogues”, it can be stated that on the one hand “landscape” as such, is a difficult issue to be discussed with local people as the general concept of landscape is not very tangible to the broad public. On the other hand, if certain areas or landscape features are discussed, where a personal affection is present, people intensively engage in discussions and show some willingness to implement action. We can state that in some municipalities, the “landscape dialogues” created more need, understanding and enthusiasm for communicative and participatory planning processes, which should address very complex issues of landscape development that cannot be sufficiently handled in the short-intensive layout of the “landscape dialogues” and need a longer process. When addressing landscape, people engaging themselves are not only interested in single actions, but also in long-term processes, like the renewal of village cores, the cultivation of low-productive grasslands, the management of small-structured landscape elements, the increase of renewable energy use and many other activities. These actions can be linked to sustainable landscape development, taking economic, social and environmental issues into account.

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