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“Landscape and Participation: Construction of a PhD Research Problem and an Analysis Method. Towards the Comparative Analysis of Participatory Processes of Landscape Management Projects Design on a Local Scale in the Walloon Region (Belgium)”

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Abstract: A preliminary reflection to the definition of a PhD research problem on the concepts of participation, landscape and project, led the student to be interested in the participatory processes of landscape management projects design, and in the inhabitants landscapes representations. The method includes the comparative analysis of local processes of projects design, and the direct observation of two Walloon landscape management projects design (investigation conducted with stakeholders implied in the project design and among inhabitants, direct observation, organisation of participative meeting-debates. Fitting her research approach within the field of the territorial participative research-action, the PhD student assumes that the participation of the territorial actors and the population can “feed” the scientific research as well as territorial action. She reconsiders moreover some difficulties encountered in her research.

Key words: Participation, landscape management project, stakeholders’ involvement, landscape representations, participatory research-action.

1. BACKGROUND

Largely discussed in the scientific and institutional spheres as well as within the civil society, landscape is nowadays considered as an essential component of people's surroundings (Council of Europe, 2000) but also as an operational instrument of territorial development (Joliveau, 1994). Moreover, the partisans of the landscape consider it as a federator object avoided of multiple qualities (Guisepelli et Fleury, 2005): accessibility, transversality, support of identity, animation and participation tool.

However, each actor or user –i.e. officials, administrators, farmers, foresters, contractors, tourists, defenders of nature, local residents or researchers – has his own perception of landscape. Therefore expectations and priorities for land use may differ and conflicts of interests and disagreements may appear about the management of landscape (Bell, 2001).

If establishing a better dialogue with the local populations and integrating their visions, needs and aspirations into the propositions of landscapes protection, management and planning are new priorities, then taking these various perceptions into account seems fundamental. In that respect, we join the growing number of authors and experts in the field of the landscape who estimate that a sustainable, consensual and democratic management of the landscapes and quality of populations' surroundings should ideally be based on the participation of all interested parties and populations. Moreover this participation is especially mentioned in the 5c and 6D articles of the European Landscape Convention (Florence, 2000).

On a more practical point of view, this participation can hardly be made real since; in addition to a political good will, it requires appropriate methodologies and tools to be built, developed and diffused.

Participation in Walloon Region is more considered as an information or consultation process (public hearings, advisory committees) than as a real opportunity to work together for the search for the best solutions.

However, one should not neglect the existence of informal or occasional participative process: many local initiatives taken in recent years to promote landscapes valorisation and management were based on dialogue and partnership between various actors (local authorities, public servants, associations, private citizens) brought together in follow-up committees and work groups.

2. CONSTRUCTION OF A PHD RESEARCH PROBLEM

A preliminary reflection on the concepts of participation, landscape and project, like on the manner of articulating these three entries led us to formulate the following: we assume that participatory design of landscape management projects associating all concerned parties constitutes a privileged way to take into account of the stakeholders' representations, needs and constraints and to implement participation.

Therefore the aim of our PhD research is to identify the significant components for a design process of a project adapted to the landscape (carrying structure, stages sequence,

concerned actors, participatory actions...). We will particularly evaluate the specific contributions of the participation to the landscape management project.

3. CONSTRUCTION OF AN ANALYSIS METHOD

3.1 Comparative analysis of participatory processes of landscape management projects design on a local scale

First our work will be based on the comparative analysis of concrete local experiences of participatory design processes of landscapes management projects integrating a participatory investment.

A rapid inventory of operations carried out in Wallonia led us to list a dozen projects (Local Action Group, Natural Parks, River Contract...). In order to collect information on those processes, we chose to make the projects managers speak, privileging the direct meeting and the individual interview technique.

3.2. Direct observation of two landscape management projects design

In the second time, our research is fed by the direct involvement in the action.

We retained two operations that, beginning from common objective and methodology, developed their own project:

- the *Culturalité en Hesbaye brabançonne* Local Action Group (LAG) (municipalities of Beauvechain, Hélécinne, Incourt, Jodoigne, Orp-Jauche et Ramillies; 270 km²; 37376 inhabitants) and
- the *Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse* LAG (municipalities of Cerfontaine, Florennes, Gerpinnes et Walcourt; 387 km²; 43940 inhabitants).

These two structures gather Walloon rural municipalities joined together within the framework of the Community Initiative Leader+ (2000-2006) around the priority theme of making the best use of natural and cultural resources. They made valorisation of their landscape heritage one their priorities. On the basis of a jointly worked out schedule of conditions, each LAG charged a research department charged to carry out a landscape diagnosis as a basis for the definition of an operational “Landscapes” actions program.

We were associated with the drafting of the schedule of conditions of the landscape study and then we accompany the projects evolution while taking part in the meetings of the follow-up committees.

Also, it seemed logical to us to exploit this participative investment and the trust relationship that gradually settled with the coordinators and privileged actors of these projects.

On these two cases, our experimental approach will include:

- 1) The examination and analysis of the produced documents:** reports, maps, activities to awareness-raising papers, newsletters, and minutes;

2) An investigation by individual interviews conducted with a sample of stakeholders implied in the project design but also among inhabitants

A first part of the interview address to people who were directly involved in the project and focus on factual data about the process (genesis of the project, different stages of the process, involved actors, held discussions). The second part of the interview intends more to reveal the landscape mental representations of the actors and the inhabitants.

The investigation is not limited to the only people directly implied in the project and thus makes it possible to be addressed to those who spontaneously do not take part in these projects or that are held by it distant.

3) The direct observation of on-going projects

Participating in follow-up committee meetings, in information seminars, in work sessions relating to landscapes seems to us fundamental to observe the actors' practises.

The direct observation constitutes a complementary approach to the interviews that moreover makes it possible to establish certain proximity and to gradually build a trust relationship with the actors.

4) The confrontation of the various landscape representations

The confrontation of the various landscape representations of the local actors with those of the inhabitants and the analyses resulting from the diagnosis of the expert landscape designer and our own diagnosis should reveal probable similarities and variations. This operation will make it possible to highlight the divergences or conflict zones but also the converging foresees that can be mobilised to overcome differences and make the landscape management "manageable".

5) The organisation of participative meeting-debates

According to us, the investigation alone is not enough. Admittedly, it brings information, it widens the range of touched people and is a first step towards landscape sensitising, but it does not constitute a participative process since the inhabitants - except a very restricted group already implied - do not have a say in decisions. Moreover, questioned people do not know how the results of the investigation are used.

Also, according to us, the representations must be brought, not as a single truth, but as a debate subject.

Consequently, we intend to directly intervene in the territorial action by the organisation of meeting-debates between the different parties. Those meetings will give us the opportunity:

- to initiate a dialogue between the various actors (and also researcher) and bring them closer together;
- to help the participants to gradually specify their point of view and to gradually move from concerns expression to problems formulation;
- to bring a scientific expertise and to debunk misunderstandings but also, with the participation of the actors, to validate how the collected data will be interpreted;

- to gradually build (by the debate) a collective - not obligatorily consensual - reading of the landscape which acknowledge the diversity of perceptions, analyses, positions and interests... and lead to common problems that will found the management orientations and recommendations;
- to evaluate how relevant, operational and acceptable the considered actions are.

The precise methods of this meeting were not considered yet.

4. DISCUSSION

Fitting our research approach within the field of the participative research-action, we assume that the participation of the territorial actors and the population can “feed” the scientific research as well as territorial action.

We have thus a double objective: a scientific one (that is improving the fundamental knowledge of a concrete aspect of a territorial process, here the building of a landscape management project) and another practical one (that is raising the awareness and empowering local actors and inhabitants by involving them – trough the investigation then the meeting and the debate – in the development of a landscape diagnosis, orientations and recommendations proposal and finally the development of actions in favour of the landscapes.

However this posture may meet some obstacles:

- the difficulty of finding a willing experimentation field and the necessity to install a ethical frame negotiated and accepted by everyone;
- the fact that the research does not concern a, “experimentation field” but takes place in the frame of a project whose temporalities are different from the one of the PhD research and a project from which several elements - however structuring the research – are not under control;
- the fact that participatory involvement takes time and lengthen the duration of the protocol of data acquisition and validation.

Moreover, this posture requires particular aptitudes such as the insertion in the existing networks and the capacity of negotiation, mediation and animation... Persuaded of the interest of this approach, we assume this risk taking and will try to overpass these difficulties.

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