

Diversity of forest-community relations in Europe: an analytical examination through a case-study approach

Nevenka Bogataj¹, Paola Gatto², Anna Lawrence³, Gun Lidestav⁴

¹Andragoški Center Slovenije, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia, nevenka.bogataj@acs.si

²Dept. TESAF University of Padova, Viale dell'Università 16, 35020 Legnaro PD – Italy, paola.gatto@unipd.it

³Inverness College, University of the Highlands and Islands, IV2 5NA, Scotland, UK, anna.lawrence.ic@uhi.ac.uk

⁴Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Department of Forest Resource Management, SE-901 83 UMEÅ, Sweden, gun.lidestav@slu.se

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The paper explores conceptual and methodological aspects of addressing universal relations between forest and communities. Four European countries with very different geographical and historical contexts - Sweden, Italy, United Kingdom/Scotland and Slovenia - are taken into consideration. The rationale for integration of cases is given by a multitude of needs: high terminological diversity and local variety of European practice leaving open a challenge of classification and comparative insight; a shift from individual and target group relations to real local social entities related to forests; a need for better understanding of their functioning and roles, a lack of analytical tools for contextual differences examination; last but not least personal motivation of the four authors in learning from each other. Weak informative value of direct comparison and the fact that institutions are socially constructed and embedded has led to the development a common analytical framework.

The case study approach enabled analytical (rather than statistical) generalization through regular discussions amongst authors in a three years period. A point of departure was standardized qualitative comparison already developed. Our empirical evidence was collected on the basis of experiential knowledge. Commonalities and differences between imposed agendas and bottom-up modes has led us to select cases that either 'fit' or 'challenged' our understanding of a community related to forest. Iterative cycles of joint discussion and sharing the concepts (e.g. of forest common, community, community forests) enabled evolution of shared understanding of: i) certainty of being a community forest, ii) similar or different practices and iii) uncertain cases testing our perspectives and the boundaries of our focus. Comparative analytical insights into structures, functioning, meanings and manifestations of elements followed, both general and state-specific, until a framework of dimensions was developed and precised. External testing was done with other studies to the stage of a simplified model, representing a forest and a community linked by a set of rights and responsibilities. Model dimensions consist of four types of relations, analysed by means of specific dimensions: Forest (6 dimensions), Community forest group-CFG (15), Relationship between CFG and forest (13), External relations of CFG (10).

Resource (e.g. forest) related community, poorly addressed until now and publicly (e.g. statistically) invisible thus gets a tool for analysis and comparison in time and space. Even if a framework and the joint dataset presented are not only a synthesis of certain process but also a call for further testing and refinements, our approach seem to overcome some obstacles. Above all it broadens understanding of a complex and dynamic relation between contextually diverse functional entities, underexplored as a developmental potential.