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Combining deliberative governance theory and discourse analysis to understand the deliberative incompleteness of centrally formulated plans

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Abstract

In the past few decades governments in Western European countries have put increasing efforts into creating new green and forest areas in and around cities. At first sight, these centrally formulated plans seem to run counter to the current trend towards *less* central steering and *more* participation (and deliberation). However, closer scrutiny in two cases of green structure planning in the Netherlands and Flanders – Balij-Biesland forest and Park forest Ghent – reveals that we are facing a seemingly contradictory image of central steering on the one hand and openness to various actors and ideas on the other. This paper takes a closer look at this ambivalent situation using the two theoretical perspectives of deliberative governance and a discourse analysis. Although the green structure planning exercises did not intentionally have a deliberative character, we argue that such a perspective can *and* should be put on situations where new local coalitions challenge the centrally formulated plans, and try to start deliberations about their ideas In order to become more specific about the

'deliberative incompleteness' of the two Flemish and Dutch processes, a discourse-analytical focal point needs to be taken as well. Normatively, the paper first addresses the *diversity* of viewpoints and *openness* to preference shifts in the Dutch and the Flemish cases. It concludes that in the course of both processes, a high diversity of viewpoints surfaced, as well as a certain degree of openness to preference shifts. When the two processes are subjected to discourse analysis, it becomes evident however that the preference shifts occurring as a result of the input of a greater diversity of viewpoints did not bring about changes in some vital discursive practices that had been connected to the green structure planning and implementation processes. It was suggested, therefore, that combining the two theoretical perspectives gives a good insight into 'deliberative incompleteness' and highlights persistent institutional obstacles to come to more inclusive green structures in urbanized areas.

1. Introduction

In the past few decades, governments in Western European countries have put increasing efforts into creating new green and forest areas in and around cities (Konijnendijk et al. 2005). This paper will focus on the so-called low countries of Europe. Both in Flanders (northern region of Belgium) and the Netherlands, we find ambitious strategies and plans for creating large green spaces in urbanizing areas. In the Netherlands, the Randstad Green structure plan (1985) was developed for the heavily urbanizing west of the country. Apart from improving the coherence and 'buffering' function of the existing open space, the plan aimed at creating large forests for recreation. To realize this goal it is planned to acquire 13,120 ha by 2013 (Farjon et al., 2004) to be designated in municipal zoning plans. In Flanders, the Spatial Structure Plan (1997) determined a target afforestation of 10,000 ha by 2007. The areas for forest expansion were to be designated in the regional spatial implementation plans

(RUP). The forest administration subsequently developed a forest expansion program that mainly focused on the urban environment, more specifically, the creation of fifty-one new forests near cities and towns (Van Herzele, 2006). These new forests in both regions were mainly planned for development on agricultural land. Both the Netherlands and Flanders have a substantial record of green space planning. Also, both countries are known for their centralized spatial planning (Rientjes, 2002) as well as for their attempts to seek new, networked modes of governance. We analyze two local cases that are part of the mentioned structure plans, one in the urban fringe of Ghent ('Park forest' Ghent) and the other, the Balij-Biesland Forest, in the strongly urbanizing Randstad in the west of the Netherlands.

At first sight, these centrally formulated plans seem to run counter to a trend towards *less* central steering and *more* participation (and deliberation) by various kinds of actors, a process that has received a great deal of attention in the recent research literature (Goodin & Dryzek, 2006, Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003 and Fung & Wright, 2001). Terms such as 'deliberative', 'communicative', 'argumentative' or 'collaborative' planning or governance have been used to refer to this trend and its practices (Healey, 1997, Innes & Booher, 2003 and Allmendinger, 2002). This recent proliferation of empirical studies shows that what has been tagged by these adjectives goes well beyond rhetoric and suggests that it is not just words that have changed, but also practices (Thompson, 2008 and Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003). Various authors highlight the positive impacts of deliberative practices such as its influence on voting behavior (which, in case deliberation has taken place, is argued to be based more on arguments rather than uninformed emotions), on possibilities of learning and interaction, on the likelihood to bridge differences, on the costs of government (preventing mistakes) and on achieving more creative and acceptable decisions (Rosenberg, 2007, Aarts et al., 2007, Goodin & Dryzek, 2006, Innes & Booher, 2003, Jasanoff, 2003 and Fishkin et al., 2000).

Upon closer scrutiny, this trend away from traditional forms of governance and towards networked, pluricentric and process-oriented forms of governing (Derkzen, 2008) also seems to characterize the policy processes with regard to the green space plans that form the focus of the current paper. Firstly, the circle of actors involved in realizing the mentioned centrally formulated plans has ever widened. More specifically, coalitions have been established in which a great diversity of actors have been engaged to give direction to the design and the subsequent consolidation of land. For example, in the Netherlands, the importance of decisive action by governments for the realization of coherent green structures in the vicinity of cities was campaigned for by a temporary coalition of nature organizations ('Nederland Natúúrlijk'), a farmers' association, the Dutch Automobile Association (ANWB), and an inter-provincial body. In Flanders, temporary coalitions were also formed, such as for the implementation of urban forest projects. One example was the 'Bossanova' coalition for the Ghent Park forest, which consisted of the Flemish forest administration, the province of East-Flanders and the Flemish Forest Association ('Vereniging voor Bos in Vlaanderen'). In this context, experiments were made with new spaces of interaction (a web forum, popular events, public debates, etc.) so as to widen the circle of public and political support. Secondly, these processes tend to be more open for a wider variety of input with regard to the content of the plans. The enhanced options to challenge existing ideas and to reformulate problems in ways that encourage new solutions to be found, do suggest a move to planning processes that can be characterized by argumentative or deliberative communication by a range of actors. Even if pre-formulated concepts and ideas are the starting point, these tend to be open for discussion, rethinking and transformation (Van Herzele, 2005: 136).

Thus we are facing a seemingly contradictory image of central steering on the one hand and openness to various actors and ideas on the other hand. In this paper we will take a closer look at this ambivalent situation. So far, empirical research on deliberative governance has mainly focused on processes that were intentionally organized to achieve high quality exchanges of a diversity of views. In contrast, large planning exercises such as the Park forest Ghent and the Balij-Biesland forest (or the large-scale 'green structures' of which they make part) have not been intentionally 'deliberative' and

contain various moments over a long stretch of time that could be more, or less, deliberative. In this paper, it is our objective to draw on the experience of the two cases to argue that a deliberative governance perspective can *and* should likewise be put on situations where new local coalitions challenge the centrally formulated plans, and where these coalitions confront their own ideas and arguments with the plans. These are, after all, the occasions where it is not a government inviting people to deliberate about a situation, but vice versa. That is, where citizens or their organizations challenge a government to deliberate. Moreover, we think we should consider whether the concept of deliberative governance itself may invoke too strong an emphasis on the elements of a planning process that had been intended to be deliberative while paying too little attention to the deliberations that could evolve when well institutionalized policy ideas are challenged by local groups or agencies.

Theoretically, we start with the premise that deliberation in a policy-making process is necessarily incomplete (Fishkin, 1995). As an approach to understand more fully the incompleteness of deliberation we combine a normative perspective of deliberative governance, which has mostly been associated with the work of Jürgen Habermas, with an approach that looks for different discourses in a policy process and how, through discursive practices, some ideas dominate and others remain sidelined in the policy-making process. The latter type of analysis, as we will show, is quite different from the first and has generally been associated with Michel Foucault's writings. The deliberative governance approach provides for a normative yardstick that can measure the more explicit parts of the deliberative process, while discourse analysis provides an insight into what discourse 'ruled the game', even if it did so in implicit ways. Considering their differences, Habermasian and Foucauldian analyses have mostly not been combined in single studies as a theoretical basis, although Hillier provides one example of a reconciliation of their works (Hillier, 2002). In order to underpin her "theoretical model of discursive democracy", Hillier endorses Habermas to provide the universalistic normative dimension of open communicative discussions in the public sphere, something that is lacking in Foucault's work. She also endorses Foucault to provide the particularistic analysis of power that is lacking in Habermas' work (Hillier, 2002).

The paper is organized as follows. In Section 2 we will first introduce our theoretical points of departure and explain how we translate a deliberative governance perspective and discourse analysis to a few (methodological) focal points. The section will conclude with a description of the methodology used. In Section 3, we will describe our cases from the perspective of the two focal points. Section 4 will reflect on the meaning of our findings in terms of theoretical development and practical implications, demonstrating how the scope of policy options widens when possible consequences of this type of analysis are considered.

2. Combining deliberative governance theory with discourse analysis

2.1. Deliberative governance

Governance has often been defined in terms of what it is supposed *not* to be, namely, government. In such cases, government is associated with a hierarchical, rational idea of steering. To distinguish government from governance, various adjectives have been added to the latter to refer to its "indisputably good" character: for instance participative, communicative, argumentative, collaborative and deliberative. Some authors have even started to criticize the legitimizing role of governance as a concept that "has become a synonym for a positive new way of doing things" (Derkzen, 2008, for an overview). However, in contrast with such superficial, legitimizing uses of the term 'governance', deliberative theory has a long history of fundamental writings. In most of these, deliberation has been considered as an expansion of representative democracy (Rosenberg, 2007 and Chambers, 2003). Deliberative theories have in common that they are fundamentally based on the Habermasian idea that it is possible for people to "make sense together" (Allmendinger, 2002: 185). Anglo-American theorists in particular emphasize the autonomous capabilities of individuals to engage in a "joint, cooperative process of clarifying, elaborating and revising common conceptions and values in the course of defining specific problems and determining how they should be

addressed" (Rosenberg, 2007). According to them, certain conditions have to be met before a fully deliberative democratic exercise, such as economic or other forms of equality, can be achieved. Some have highlighted the inherent dilemma this requirement leads to: the authoritarian rule that is needed to achieve such egalitarianism is in contradiction with principles of deliberative democracy (Tucker, 2008). Continental European theorists, on their part, focus more on how the capabilities of individuals to be rational and reasonable are influenced by social and historical conditions (Rosenberg, 2007). But the German sociologist Habermas does *not* differ from the Anglo-American theorists in the sense that his appeal to provide for free speech and an open exchange of arguments has mainly been a reaction to the emphasis that democratic theorists have put on the aggregation of interests and preferences through systems of voting. Both believed that open, constructive conversations were needed to avoid irrational outcomes and to create a shared sense of the common good and thus a better voting (cf. Chambers, 2003 and Hendriks, 2006: 491, Bohman, 1998: 400).

In recent years, empirical studies have proliferated to add to the theoretical body of work, and overviews of this empirical work have also been produced (Delli Carpini et al., 2004 and Thompson, 2008). Authors have started to emphasize the importance of studying the inherent conflicts in deliberative democracy, such as that between participation and deliberation, and they have begun to advocate more cross-fertilization of normative and empirical work in the field (Bohman, 1998, Thompson, 2008 and Tucker, 2008). As Chambers states, definitions of deliberation differ considerably among authors.

"Generally speaking, we can say that deliberation is debate and discussion aimed at producing reasonable, well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by fellow participants" (Chambers, 2003: 309).

According to Chambers, this is how deliberation differs fundamentally from other forms of talk, such as bargaining or rhetoric. In the deliberative projects that are the focus of the above literature, citizen engagement is promoted by means of organized events such as citizen panels or juries in which participants exchange arguments about a specific issue, mostly in the relatively short time frame of a conference or a series of meetings. These exchanges are meant to improve rational argumentation, mutual understanding and civic engagement. In these situations, reaching consensus is possible, but not a necessity. Rather than interests and preferences, decisions are to be based on communicative processes and opinion formation on the basis of arguments (Chambers, 2003).

However, in addition to studying the occasions that were designed to be 'ideal' deliberative practices through the lens of the norms of deliberative democracy, we are of the opinion that it is not a too long jump to studying the centrally designed urban green projects from the same perspective. We agree with Tucker when he states:

The abstract, even utopian, characteristics of purely normative discussions of deliberative democracy have led some of its advocates to shift their research to the examination of really existing deliberative democratic practices and institutions. Instead of deducing deliberative democracy *a priori* from normative first principles, it is sensible to build from the ground up, by looking for deliberative democratic practices, trends and potentials embedded in existing institutions and to consider which deliberative democratic institutional designs are better in different social contexts (Tucker, 2008: 128).

After all, most state and societal actors in advanced democracies still pursue policy-making processes that are open to a diversity of views, and responsive to these views.

2.2. Deliberative incompleteness

Necessarily, deliberation in a policy-making process (or any large decision-making process) is incomplete. Incompleteness may result from a lack of openness to the arguments of all involved actors (some of which may play a role but remain 'under the table'), insufficient in-depth information about consequences of certain choices or suppression of additional perspectives on the situation. We find this notion of 'incompleteness' useful for our research because it urges to be as precise as possible about what is deliberative about a situation, and what is not. The term incompleteness has been used by Fishkin:

"We can put the ideal speech situation at one extreme of an imaginary continuum and then imagine various forms of *incompleteness* – compared to this ideal – as we think about more realistic forms of deliberation. When arguments offered by some participants go unanswered by others, when information that would be required to understand the force of a claim is absent, or when some citizens are unwilling or unable to weigh some of the arguments in the debate, then the process is *less deliberative* because it is incomplete in the manner specified. In practical contexts a great deal of incompleteness must be tolerated. Hence, when we talk of improving deliberation, it is a matter of *improving* the completeness of the debate and the public's engagement with it, not a matter of perfecting it because that would be virtually impossible under realistic conditions. No plausible democratic reform can bring us to the ideal speech situation, but there are many changes that might take us a little closer than we are" (Fishkin, 1995, 41).

Reflecting on the green space planning processes in such a way, through the lens of normative deliberative theory but with an awareness of the inevitability of incompleteness, shows the deliberative *and* not-so-deliberative characteristics of these processes, and gives clues as to how they could perhaps be improved. Although several authors have addressed the question of what would count as appropriate indicators or standards of deliberative quality (Goodin, 2005 for an overview),

most of them, at some point, identify the difficulty of empirically investigating it (Niemeyer and Dryzek, 2007). Conceptual vagueness is mentioned as the most important reason for this (Burkhalter et al., 2002). To unravel 'deliberative incompleteness' we propose to use criteria that have generally been accepted as basic elements of deliberative processes (Hendriks et al., 2007 and Dryzek, 2007), and that match with the mentioned definition of deliberation that we use (see Chambers in the above statement):

- *diversity* of viewpoints: what space is available for different viewpoints? And
- *openness* to preference shifts: can these different viewpoints also give rise to preference shifts?

We chose to start with diversity of viewpoints and openness to preference shifts because these criteria are relatively concrete and detectable and obviously relevant when the focus is on local initiators challenging mainstream policies. Diversity of viewpoints refers to the viewpoints that have become explicit in the deliberations. Did the involved actors have to choose from a preselected variety of viewpoints or was there also some space for creativity and new perspectives? A second question needs to be asked: did these different viewpoints also have consequences in terms of changed preference shifts? This is translated to the criterion openness to preference shifts. A shift does not necessarily need to take place, as long as there is the possibility of it (Dryzek, 2007).

2.3. Discourse analysis

Awareness of the inevitability of deliberative incompleteness also implies that another approach is needed to cope with that part of a policy process that is implicit and taken for granted (and so not open and hardly susceptible to shifts of preference), considered as unalterable 'context' or so deeply embedded in institutional structure that one does not come to think of debating, let alone changing it. It is here that we suggest drawing on discourse analysis and theory.

Discourse theorists present a counterweight to the Habermasian 'normative ideal' of communicative rationality. Discourse, they say, should be looked at in terms of what is actually done (rather than what should be done) (Flyvbjerg, 1998). Of what *is* done, discourse analysts aim to identify what has influenced the way a problem is defined. In their analyses, they include those elements that are mostly not a topic of dialogue but that do create possibilities for actors to act and/or create limits to what can legitimately be done (Hajer and Versteeg, 2005 for an overview). Thus, a particular way of framing a problem may become dominant while participants may be unaware of why this should be so. So discourse is not just about how ideas are framed in words or discussion. It also refers to the practices in which specific ways of looking at things are embedded (Hajer, 1995). Hajers' often used definition of discourse is an expression of this:

"a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations that are produced, reproduced and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities" (Hajer, 1995: 44).

This also means that statements that form the elements of discourse, cannot properly be grasped outside their contexts of use. Their meaning will evolve by using them. Thus, Foucault states that discourses *are* "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault, 1972; 54).

It is justified to expand more at this point on the major differences between the authors who have been inspired by Foucault or by Habermas. Although *both* lines of thought have been dealing with language and communication, with power (as a positive *and* a negative force) and with context-dependency (Hillier, 2002), their differences have been accentuated more often than their similarities. The main difference between the two is that Habermas presents a normative theory while Foucault

proposes an analytical approach. Therefore, Flyvbjerg referred to Habermas in terms of idealistic and to Foucault in terms of realistic (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 106–107, see also Mansbridge, 1996: 51). In our view, the Habermasian ideal of democratic discourse is not to be accepted as a given nor should it be pushed aside as utopian or naïve. Instead we suggest it should be viewed as a critical yardstick, not as an assumption but as a hypothesis and, as said, with an awareness of the inevitability of incompleteness (compare with Thompson, 2008). The Foucauldian approach to discourse urges that we look for the ways in which discourses are embedded in practices, as well as for the ways in which they involve certain power relationships. These discourses may be hidden and they are (therefore) not a topic of dialogue that can be judged in terms of 'diversity' or 'openness'. Because of their hidden nature these ideas do not contribute to the deliberative ideal. It is also in such a dual way that we wish to look at 'deliberative governance': as an idealized notion that can be more, or less complete, but that should always be substantiated through studies of specific practices.

2.4. Qualitative research methods

The question remains as to how we went about conducting such an analysis. We could have reasonably gathered topics that had been deliberated in a specific decision-making process, in public discussions, the media or otherwise. However, on the basis of this method we would probably not have gained an in-depth insight into issues that had been hardly discussed or exposed in the media, for instance because they were framed as 'unrealistic' at some earlier time and nobody thought that it would be sensible to bring them in again. The investigation of 'incompleteness', therefore, is by definition incomplete in itself. However, by being immersed in a situation for quite some time and by combining this with an in-depth analysis of process documents, we were more likely to discover elements of incompleteness. We think this is particularly useful in situations where actors attempt to 'break into' a policy-making process with ideas that are different to the direction of the mainstream policy. These mainstream policies are mostly well documented and expressed, whereas the alternatives often remain undocumented. Our research has not followed the 'traditional' path of

'theory–site selection–data gathering–analysis', but has been based on active participation in the two research settings, keeping of a detailed journal of observations and post-hoc analysis of the data obtained over a period of several years.

More specifically, our analysis was based on a variety of research methods. With regard to the Balij-Biesland forest case most of the data were acquired by keeping a research diary on the basis of a 5-year field immersion. This field immersion involved activities such as participation in meetings of a project group of officials, researchers and local people, a steering group of administrative decision makers of the various governments and 'Friends of Biesland', meetings at the Ministry of LNV (Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries) or other involved bodies such as the province, the National Green Fund or the DLG (the executive service that was to implement the policy). The exchange of e-mails between these actors has also been an important source of information. Meetings in less formal settings, such as kitchen table discussions with volunteers, the farm family and researchers, and the notes taken at these occasions have also been used to analyze the process. A series of contract-research projects, sponsored by the Research section of the Ministry of LNV and the province, provided the basis for most of the research activities. Attendance at the congresses of one of the large Dutch political parties by one of the authors gave insight on how the acquisition of land for the Dutch green structure continued to be a priority in such a political party. Outcomes have been compared with statements formulated in other political parties. In-depth interviews and review of minutes of meetings and other project-related documents were included to complement these field experiences (see Buizer, 2008 for a more elaborate reflection on the research methodology).

With regard to the Park forest Ghent, the data were obtained from various sources, including official policy texts, commissioned reports, transcripts of public debate, participant observation, minutes from meetings, personal correspondence, articles in newspapers and specialist journals. A large part of the documentary sources consisted of internal material on the Park forest project: protocols of steering

group meetings, exchange of letters (between officials, politicians, members of the public, etc.), the project's web forum, and press releases. Furthermore, the case study uses notes from participant observation and recorded material from public events (election debates, public hearings on the spatial structure plan for Ghent, information meetings for local residents and farmers on the Park forest project). Two EU-funded projects provided the basis for most of the activities related to the project (see also De Vreese et al., 2004). Data collection was complemented with conversational interviews with key actors in the process (public servants, politicians, members of voluntary organizations). In order to test how and whether the Park forest project was being received by local people and visitors to the area, 100 short field interviews were made in the framework of a recreation study (January–March, 2004). Part of the material obtained was also used in a genealogical study of discourse–actor relationships in forest policy making in Flanders (see Van Herzele, 2006).

3. Two urban green structure cases

From here on we will first, in order to evaluate incompleteness, focus on the two criteria diversity and openness of viewpoints. In the second part of our analysis, we will turn to take the perspective of discourse analysis. Such will be done for both cases. The paper will then reflect on the relationship between the outcomes of the two types of analysis.

3.1. Diversity and openness to shifts of viewpoints in Biesland

The Dutch state initially planned the Balij-Biesland forest in the fifties. At the time, the main purpose of the forest was wood production. As it was located in the vicinity of cities, it gradually obtained stronger moorings in the various 'urban green plans', such as the Randstad Green structure and the Green–Blue Slinger. The provincial forest report of 1991 refers to the *national* Randstad Green structure as the most important framework for realization of the forests, meaning that the greatest part of the required budget, and legal basis for purchase and management of the land would be provided

by the state. The 1991 report places emphasis on the need for increased attention for the ecological potential of forests, in addition to their role to deal with 'recreation shortages' in this heavily urbanized part of the Netherlands. Forests, so the State Forest Service stated, could accommodate a larger amount of visitors than open land (personal communication). Forests should not be scattered, according to the Provincial plan, but should form 'large forest complexes'. Furthermore, forest and recreation areas had to be part and parcel of urbanization plans, which would have to arrange for part of the finances. For the area in between the cities of The Hague, Delft and Zoetermeer, emphasis was also put on the function of forest as 'compartmentalization' in an urbanizing region, and as an improvement of the climate for living and working (Provincie Zuid-Holland, 1991: 18). For this part of the area, it is concluded that "it is characterized by significant urban pressure" (...) and that "the state of agri- and horticulture leaves much to be desired". Therefore: "The development of forest is needed, from the viewpoint of landscape as well as recreation" (Ministries VROM and LNV, 1985: 62).

Despite the various legitimizing arguments and high-level pressure, realization of the green structure plans was slow. Various research reports related the slow process to the voluntary basis of land acquisition and to a lack of clarity in terms of spatial plans, causing farmers and developers to speculate about future higher prices of the land. It was argued that the low (agrarian) prices that the DLG (the executive service that was to implement the policy) was allowed to pay to convert the land to nature could not convince farmers to sell. In this urbanizing region, farmers were generally assumed to wait for other (more lucrative) destinations of the land than nature, which would render a higher price for the land.

Issues of pricing were generally not debated with a wider public. These debates were mainly taking place in the institutions of representative democracy, and, as mentioned in the Introduction, new coalitions of large membership organizations lobbied for a greater budget to secure a quicker

implementation. Some political parties would stress these points in the nature paragraphs of their election programs. The political parties, as well as other organizations such as 'Natuurmonumenten' and the Dutch Automobile Association (ANWB), believed and argued that government-ownership would provide long-term security for the green open land, while farmers would not be able to do so. By saying that they had their farms on 'hot land', it was assumed that they would in the end fall victim to the prices offered by developers and sell their land.

In the later stages of the realization of the Balij-Biesland forest, policy makers would involve the inhabitants in the area more, but they did so mainly by giving them information about the potential of the green area for recreation, not by asking their ideas on whether and how the green structure should be created.

So the planning process was, at first sight, not very open to an input of a diversity of viewpoints, other than through the electoral route. Consequently, 'deliberative democracy' seems not to be a relevant approach to this type of planning processes. However, closer scrutiny on the basis of the two criteria renders a different picture, showing that some level of deliberation is also part of centrally formulated planning processes. The lobbying and electoral process did not mean that alternative viewpoints did not exist at other levels. A too strong focus on explicit lobbying and bargaining would therefore show only part of the arguments being used. This becomes visible when we focus on one part of the Biesland area. Here, various relatively small nature organizations were active. One of these argued elaborately for the presence of sustainably managed farmland, as according to them this would favor the meadow birds, enhance biological diversity and be attractive for visitors. The one remaining farmer in this one small part of the area (most of the land in the other parts of the area had, in the meantime, been acquired by the state for the realization of the green structure) also actively engaged in the discussions about the plans. Part of his land was also due to be acquired. He believed that he was able to achieve at least equal nature values by implementing a nature-oriented type of farming on

his entire farmland. In such a way none of his farmland would need to be bought by the government, and farming practices could continue, although in a more radically organic way than before. On these grounds, a coalition between the farmer, nature volunteers, other inhabitants and researchers came into being. Together, they made a nature-oriented plan that would cater for the wishes of recreationists and of those who wanted to keep farming practices in the area. Aware of the fear for the sale of 'hot land' by farmers, they suggested consolidating this plan in a legal contract that would permanently connect the new farm practices to that land (see Buizer, 2008 for a more detailed description). These ideas, although having been deliberated about at the local level, did not 'penetrate' the more open negotiations about land acquisition at other levels.

In summary, even if the process was rather closed, there was a greater diversity of viewpoints than what showed up in the explicit negotiations. Though some would argue that the circumstance that the realization of forest would need to be based on voluntary land acquisition jeopardized the implementation powers of governments, this also enhanced the possibility of bringing in alternative viewpoints. That is to say, as long as the voluntary process did not come to a conclusion yet.

Slowly, the advocates of the alternative, nature-oriented farming approach – an integrated view that the initiators themselves called 'Farming for Nature' – gained the support from regional administrations. Also, the Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality promised to provide for half of the required budget if the regional parties would provide for the other half. A foundation 'Friends of Biesland' was established by local inhabitants to support the Biesland initiative and some members of parliament started to ask parliamentary questions about it.

Nevertheless, the discussions about the design of this small area with the Ministry of LNV, the province and DLG took several years. In the course of time, these actors continued to bring forward a

diversity of reasons to the argument for realizing a forest on this location: first wood production, recreation, buffer against urbanization and the environment in general; later health, protection against dust particles, climate change and a good living and working climate. One of the arguments brought in by the nature volunteers and the farmer, however, was that these tasks could also be performed by a farmer, and that nature qualities in the area, as well as attractiveness for the urban dweller, would actually benefit from the presence of open farmland. Eventually, various people came to see a far reaching integration of nature and farming as a serious alternative option to contribute to the implementation of the green structure.

The discussions did lead to a shift. In 2005, the most contested part of the area was decided no longer to be a forest, but marshes instead. This would keep in place the open character of part of the area and contribute to the diversity of ecological conditions, an argument that the farmer and the nature organizations had defended.

3.2. Discourse Balij-Biesland forest

The normative focal point rendered a picture of a variety of arguments used to underpin the importance of the Balij-Biesland Forest, particularly in the context of the policy ambition to implement the Randstad Green structure. However, the contents of the plan did not remain the same throughout the process. As a result of the arguments that were brought to the table by some stakeholders a significant shift of preference occurred in at least one part of the area: a shift from forest to marshes. However, the decisions on who would own and manage the land did not change. The initial targeted hectares of land that should be converted to green structure and, thus, be state owned remained unchanged for the most part. The design of the land was adapted to the new preferences, but not the ownership and management, so that the relationship between the idea of safeguarding nature through state ownership and management by state sponsored nature organizations was kept in place.

The way in which the entwining of the 'state land ownership' discourse and the green structure discourse implied a lack of preference shifts as far as targeted hectares were concerned only becomes visible if a closer look is taken at how these discourses played a role at the national and local levels. The implementation of the Randstad Green structure was a rather politicized affair at the national level in the sense that members of parliament from all sides of the political spectrum would frequently make an issue of lagging implementation and argue for speedier land acquisition for the sake of nature protection (because of the mentioned fear of farmers selling their 'hot land' to developers keen to buy land in an urbanizing region), buffering urban expansion, and sufficient space for recreation. So the necessity of establishing a Green structure was hardly disputed. That the state would have to acquire land for it was assumed to be a natural, uncontested consequence of that ambition. At the local level however this discourse was challenged by a coalition that wanted to show how nature, buffering and recreation objectives could be achieved in different ways than through land ownership by the state and nature management by the State Forest Service.

The farmer, the nature volunteers and the researchers argued that the acquisition target (that affected only 10 ha of the farmland) could reasonably be adjusted downward because nature and recreation quality objectives could more than be reached on the farm as a whole. Also, the farmer wanted to implement the mentioned marshes himself, in addition to his farm activities and as a "PR-element" (personal conversation). However, though there was openness to preference shifts with respect to the design of the area itself, the new coalitions' proposal to reconsider buying up part of the land and keep ownership as it was, did not translate into a reconsideration of the principle of state ownership. In the final stages of the local decision-making process, the involved officials at one point in time did consider giving up acquisition of the 10 Ha, but the immediate question arising from that consideration was where else in the nearby neighborhood hectares would be available as a replacement. Adjusting the target itself was not an issue for them. At state level, the argumentation for this type of nature management by farmers as an alternative to state ownership of the land and management by nature organizations, when scaled up to other locations in the Netherlands, did not

receive a warm welcome either. The State Secretary had just celebrated her success of getting the support of Parliament to allocate a larger budget to the acquisition of land.

The principle of state ownership obtained legitimacy and an almost uncontestable status in connection with the discourse that the state would be the most reliable protector of nature, and that farmers would generally be a threat to nature values. Nor would the farmers, it was assumed, be able to take care of recreationists. This state ownership discourse went together with practices such as laying down the hectares to be acquired in numerical objectives and maps. These targets were tangible and provided a clear, measurable indication of the state's trustworthiness. Letting go of these targets was considered as a sign of political and administrative weakness. Such a finding corresponds with observations made by others, who conclude that targets may become routinized or 'fixed'-standards (see van Herzele, 2005: 54–56). When planners resort to conceptions like 'structure' and 'targeted hectares' in their attempts to convince other parties, it is not only because they want to achieve a certain political goal, but also because they are professionally educated and trained to do so, and they want to meet the expectations of their job (Van Herzele, 2004). So in the Biesland case, when 'giving up' the 10 ha on farmers land came up, the involved officials started to wonder what other nearby farmland would be available for acquisition. When asked with hindsight why officials at the national Ministry showed resistance against discussions about the new initiative in the context of mainstream policy, a few of them would use expressions like 'not invented here' or 'we need the land to make ends meet' to explain this. Obviously, arguments like these were not used in any of the deliberations, but they *did* play a significant role in determining outcomes.

3.3. Diversity and openness to shifts of viewpoints in Ghent

The Ghent Park forest project was one of the first initiatives in the framework of a Flanders-wide strategy for forest expansion. Although the first ideas of forest expansion date back to the early 1970s, it was only in the run-up to important reforms in the planning system in the 1990s that a clear strategy

for forest expansion was explicitly formulated (Van Herzele, 2006). With strategic documents such as the 'Long Term Forestry Plan for Flanders' (1993) and the 'Desired Forest Structure for Flanders' (1996) the forestry sector could position itself as a well-prepared and convincing partner in the negotiation process around the Spatial Structure Plan for Flanders (Van Herzele, 2006). In 1997, with the formal approval of this plan, a forest expansion target of 10,000 ha was included in the regional spatial policy. The Flemish government was given the task of designating the areas for forest expansion in the regional land use plans (RUPs). The Flemish forest administration developed a forest expansion program dividing the required afforestation target over the provinces of Flanders, taking into account the actual inequality of forest distribution. It was particularly the aim to provide each city and town in Flanders with a forest. It was argued indeed that afforestation in and nearby urban areas would sustain many forest functions (economic, ecological, environmental, social) and thus produce the most societal gain (Van Herzele, 2006).

Meanwhile, in 1995, the forest administration, together with the province of East-Flanders, commissioned a study to find the best location for a 200–300 ha city forest near Ghent. It was decided to preferably spend this 'spatial budget' for the creation of one unbroken forest unit. It was expected that a large-scale entity would better ensure the multi-functionality of the forest (and its 'professional management'). The study adopted a 'scientifically sound' method using a set of suitability criteria for estimating the recreational, ecological and structure-strengthening potential of forest locations. As a result, the Kastelensite (our case study area) obtained a high ranking. The forest's potential to border the residential development of the city and to reinforce the historical characteristics of the castles, and also the historical presence of forest were the main arguments in favor of this location.

However, it rapidly became clear that the idea of a city forest was not something that could easily be 'sold' locally. Politicians in the municipality of De Pinte were initially opposed because they associated the city forest with 'the city', of which they did not want to become a part. But that concern

could be counteracted in part by the argument that the forest would put up a barrier to the city (personal communication). In a formal statement (March 1999) the city of Ghent declared its readiness for collaboration, but it also criticized the study that would have to justify the selection of the locations for the forest (the so-called 'location study') because it lacked any consideration of 'how the forest project would be integrated into the present cultural landscape with its valuable landscape elements'. Also in the newspapers there was much talk of destroying 'the beautiful meadows' and 'chasing away the farmers'. These are just a few examples of an emerging debate that does not merely make explicit pre-existing interests or anxieties: the newly proposed project brought new topics to the fore, rendered them thinkable and hence made them amenable to deliberation.

Nevertheless, the image of 'a massive forest core' remained to be used in promoting the project (Flemish Forest Association, press release July 2000). In 1999 an EU-funded Life Environment project was started with the prime objective to create a firm societal support base for the Ghent city forest (see De Vreese et al., 2004, for a description of strategies and tools employed). The project initiators (Flemish forest administration, province of East-Flanders, Flemish Forest Association) formed the 'Bossanova' alliance to actively promote the project to the wider public and the local politicians, through networking and campaigning. In the same period the Spatial Structure Plan for Ghent was in the making. For Ghent, the enhancement of the urban quality of life was a major concern. In this context, the concept of the four 'groenpolen' (large multi-functional green spaces in the urban periphery) was formed as a main part of the city's green structure. The Kastelensite was included as one of these areas. After the elections (October 2000) the new political coalition of Ghent declared its commitment to realize the four 'groenpolen' in its governmental agreement (2001–2006). Although they aimed to create new forests in these locations, this was not the case in the 'Kastelensite', for which the 'preservation of its present landscape values' was among the main action points. The local nature movement, the Minister of Environment and the Flemish Forest Association reacted with disappointment, arguing that the location had been selected through scientific investigation and departmental budgets were already in place.

Increasingly aware of the importance attached to the actual landscape, Bossanova decided to change the name of the project from 'City forest' into 'Park forest' (December 2000). It was recognized that a more 'consumer'-oriented view (focusing on scenic and recreational values) would be necessary for promoting the forest more widely. In the same period (January 2001), the project was integrated in the planning process for the RUP (coordinated and led by the regional Spatial Planning Division). In this context, the area of Kastelensite–Scheldevelde was to become a 'city landscape park': a multi-functional area of 1200 ha with a dominantly open-space character and including about 300 ha of new afforestation. The process was followed by a steering group consisting of representatives of various regional administrations (including the Divisions of Monuments & Landscapes, Land, Nature), as well as the three municipalities involved. Remarkably, the joint discussions about what the Park forest should look like, and where the desired forest expansion should be located, led to a thorough revision of the initial plan: the choice for splitting up the forest over several units, ranging from three 'core forests' to numerous small forest patches spread over the area. The new concept was presented in a structural sketch (preparatory study RUP, September 2001), showing a mixture of areas – including different types of forest, sustainable agriculture, and so on – but with smooth and fluent transitions between them. Special attention was also given to scenic qualities, such as borders and gradients of transparency. From this perspective, the open farmland was given a central place. The new image also infiltrated the project's campaigning. In Bossanova's Park forest magazine, photographs of dense forest stands populated with squirrels and woodpeckers were replaced with pictures of meadows with cows and trees

While the RUP discussions brought the public administrations and politicians to agreement, the uncertainties among local people were growing. Farmers and their organizations continued to complain about the legal insecurities caused by the project (potential restrictions on farm practices and future expansion, etc.), which they thought would become even worse through the fragmentation of the forest into multiple entities. In October–November 2002, Bossanova organized a series of information meetings for the wider publics. Despite the detailed presentation of the plan (including its

foundation in legislation and scientific study) during these sessions, the farmers and also local residents continued to question the forest idea: Why the city forest is being planned here? Is there a need for forest at all? The residents were also concerned about the practical implications of the plan: on safety, property rights, privacy, tidiness, etc. However, their worries could not properly be dealt with and they were often denied as too personal or less relevant or as something to be handled by the RUP's formal public consultation procedure. We note here that in Bossanova the intention has grown to involve local residents more actively (e.g., by means of design workshops) but this was constrained through the integration of the project in the RUP, which does not include 'communication' as a structural element. Thus, various opinions were formed and expressed but the formal planning procedure creates a barrier to open and constructive debate. Early in 2002, the Flemish Land Agency became involved in the project (via a partnership with the Flemish forest administration). Main activities were an agro-economic investigation, an analysis of instruments for land acquisition and individual consultations with landowners/farmers, in particular, for translating the structural sketch of the RUP into a detailed, parcel-wise land use plan. It was remarkable that as a result the agreed-on Park forest concept was transformed into a segregated landscape with demarcated strips and parcels of land for singular land uses. Moreover, for earlier mentioned reasons of legal security, farmers wanted agricultural land use to be interpreted in its strict sense, implying that elements like 'field forests' and 'edge forests' were rejected. However, in terms of hectares, the 'balance' was restored to a great extent by enlarging two of the core forests, resulting in a total of 285.5 ha afforestation. The RUP plan (December 2005) also included a regulation for the compulsory purchase of properties. It was also remarkable that some landowners/farmers could make better use of the – largely informal and eventually political – channels for negotiation than others. For example, the few greenhouse growers that were initially destined to disappear from the area even managed to expand their perimeters. Thus, what looked like a centrally led planning process with real potential for integrating different viewpoints, turned out to be finally decided on important details through individual arrangements.

3.4. Discourse in Park forest Ghent

It became clear from the normative focal point that in the case of Ghent's Park forest a broad diversity of viewpoints was brought to the table. Moreover, the various views that were taken had also led to important shifts in preferences. This was most evident from the discussions held among the widened project group in the framework of the preparatory study for the RUP. At this occasion, the different viewpoints expressed led to a clear shift from defining the city forest as a massive entity to a more open concept of interacting land uses. A shift occurred again in the end, when due to legally established procedures and, importantly, stakeholders' expectations about them, the new concept was reduced to its most simple interpretation, that is, a juxtaposition of strictly delineated land uses. Remarkably, however, the initial afforestation target in terms of hectares of land remained largely unchanged. The spaces to be forested were moved and rearranged or adjusted so that the desired forest expansion remained intact.

What could be easily overlooked is that the various views most listened to were actually those that fitted into two centrally established discourses that came to interact (already existing from the time of the location study). On the one hand, a forest-centered discourse of forest expansion in Flanders was used to impose the preference of creating a large-scale forest near Ghent. Through an appealing 'story line' the previously unnoted problem of the low forest cover in Ghent could be turned into a new policy claim. In this, the particular framing of multi-functionality in relation to space created a representation of the forest as a norm on its own terms and subsequently, forest expansion as the most logical decision (Van Herzele, 2006). Accordingly, to purchase legitimacy for the desired afforestation in the chosen area, 'objective' criteria derived from scientific study were employed to adapt flexibly the multiple functions of the forest to local needs (recreational activities, a buffer against the city, etc.). On the other hand, a city-centered planning discourse advocated what could be termed a particular standard of good practice, that is, plans should include a set of elements that constitute the 'green structure' of the city, in this case, interconnected open-space structures in the

urban fringe. So, for example, we read in the location study that the "image- and structure-defining value of urban greenspace" should be strengthened through "creating proximity and connection to existing urban structures" and in this way "a more pleasant living environment for the urban dweller will be created".

Whereas these two expert-based discourses, one forest-centered and the other city-centered, could be nicely reconciled in the course of the process and have led to a planning concept that brought to agreement the widened circle of actors involved, this concept could not appeal to the local public. Local residents as well as visitors to the area would welcome more 'nature' and more recreational equipment but the present landscape was a sensitive issue among them (notes from the field interviews). Throughout their statements they made a connection between an appreciation of the landscape and those who made it and still maintained it (the farmers, the great landowners). Creating a forest thus means changing these relationships and would also imply a dependency on those institutions that will be given the management task (Van Herzele, 2006). However, the topic of who would manage the land, although it was a public concern (and some farmers and landowners even suggested that they were able to make recreational improvements) is something that remained beyond discussion. Rather it was taken for granted that government should take up this task. We note here that in July 2007, a cooperation agreement was signed between the Flemish government and the Province of East-Flanders (the former will buy the land and finance the project management, the latter will coordinate the practical aspects of implementing the project on the ground).

As we earlier observed in the course of the RUP process, place-based understandings and concerns were largely dismissed as resistance to change or as just motivated by personal interest. Such a presumption corresponds with a general observation that local agency in the urban fringe is seen almost entirely in a negative light because of the presumed inability of local actors to take account of the broader interests of society (Bryant, 1995). But more important in this case is that by attributing

personal interests to the locals while framing their own interest as a broader societal concern, the proponents of the Park forest assumed interests as given or fixed and by doing so have missed the potential of developing alternative discourses that could have led to more place-centered approaches. That does not mean, however, that no attempts were made to initiate deliberation from below. A clear example was the local coalition – the 'Hutsepot Front' – that mobilized early in 2004 around the controversy over a small part of the plan, a 10–15 ha business area. Cynically enough, the diverse group of opponents (nature activists, local residents, politicians, artists, and farmers) used 'illegal' tree planting as a strategy of action (see Van Herzele, 2006). More generally, in the end, the debate around the project as a whole was moved to the background in favor of very partial or individual issues of importance.

4. Conclusions

Occasions where centrally formulated plans to implement large green structures have been challenged by new coalitions, have not generally been looked at from the perspective of deliberative democracy. What is more, this perspective has so far perhaps invoked a too strong emphasis on the elements of a planning process that had been intended to be in accordance with lists of necessary conditions for deliberative democracy. This has done insufficient justice to the situations in which new coalitions have been bringing in different views, and by doing so have challenged institutions to engage in deliberations about the relationship between their policies and their diverging ideas. The concept of 'deliberative incompleteness' and particularly the notion that decision-making processes are *by definition* 'deliberatively incomplete' gives an answer to this bias, because the concept urges the analyst to start examining what elements of the process were indeed deliberative according to normative standards, for whom and in what way, and which were not. To examine the latter in greater depth, an analysis of discourses seemed to be more appropriate. Therefore, we combined the two types of approaches in this paper.

Comparing the two cases in terms of the two deliberative criteria renders the conclusion that in both cases, new coalitions of actors willing to make a change to the plans had added to the diversity of viewpoints by actively initiating and engaging in discussions. This engagement also contributed to shifts of preferences. In the Balij-Biesland Forest, the most significant change that has taken place as a result of the introduction of new viewpoints was the move from forests to marshes. In the Park forest Ghent, it was conspicuous that the idea of a large forest entity was replaced by a more open concept of interacting land uses in which agriculture was assigned a central role. Yet by taking a closer look at the ways in which central discourses were intertwined and at how these strengthened each other, a more in-depth insight was obtained in the deliberative incompleteness of the two processes. The intertwined discourses, such as the green structure and the state ownership discourse, and the practices related to it, such as targeting hectares, mapping these and buying up land, offer a possible explanation for the fact that some preferences were not open to challenges by local groups. The planned hectares seemed to be positioned somewhere 'beyond discussion'. In both situations, they were part and parcel of the professional tasks of officials implementing the green structures. The options that were excluded by these practices were hardly questioned by them or at a political level, and so the part of the argumentation that remained mostly implicit, namely that farmers could under no circumstances be long-term managers of green open space, was reproduced. Therefore, the prospects and opportunities for creating nature values and an attractive environment for urban dwellers in a different way, through farm management, did not become a serious alternative to state land ownership. In other words, the local discourse did not become a serious topic of deliberation.

For analysts, this means that to use normative criteria in an assessment of deliberative incompleteness is certainly informative, but insufficient to achieve a deeper level of understanding of the power of discourse. This requires concentrated attention on what happens at the overlapping boundaries where different discourses converge, to uncover what makes it so difficult for foresters, spatial planners, and so on, to break out of their own ways of understanding a situation (Van Herzele, 2004). The combination of the two approaches did not just show *that* deliberation was incomplete in terms of

diversity of viewpoints and preference shifts, it also uncovered *how* this occurred. For policy makers, this understanding helps to see missed opportunities if one would like to establish widely supported green structures that are as inclusive in terms of the diversity of viewpoints being discussed, as they are inclusive in terms of who may, in the end, own and manage them.

Acknowledgements

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