Transition towards co-ownership in forest management: Bosland (Flanders, Belgium) as a frontrunner

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Abstract

Intro and research questions
Forest management is evolving towards multifunctionality and sustainability. Thereby, co-owned forest managing models, where different owners collaborate and all forest users participate, are still exceptional. ‘Bosland’ (Flanders, Belgium) unites different stakeholders in a partnership and is an interesting pioneering example of drastic, systemic innovation in forest management. In that realm we aim to answer the following research questions:

- Can Bosland be categorized as a frontrunner case of systemically innovative forest management?
- In what ways does the Bosland management approach differ from the current forest management regime?

Methods
We used ‘lenses’ of transition management (TM)(Raven, 2005) and strategic niche management (SNM)(Rotmans et al, 2001) to analyse the Bosland-case by developing a learning history-like approach. We started off with a desktop study to list the mere ‘facts’ about the project, later on we conducted semi-structured interviews with ten key stakeholders involved in the origin of the Bosland partnership. In a third step we reviewed the processes on a transition theory background to assess which transition elements were in play in Bosland and whether more generic learnings could be derived as being instrumental for upscaled/accelerated forest management innovation.

Results
Analysis of the history of Bosland identified many typical characteristics of transition experiments as defined in SNM and TM. Our analysis shows that Bosland goes beyond traditional and more incremental innovation approaches. Furthermore, the case differs from the traditional forest management regime in the following specific features:

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(i) A paradigm shift towards co-management;

Bosland reflects a distinctive paradigm shift from management of isolated forest patches by different owners to collaborative management across various owners on a landscape scale. The traditional top-down approach was abandoned and the involved parties are now collaborating as equals.

(ii) Connection of long term visions and short term actions;

Bosland started off with the development of an overarching long-term vision for the forest land assembling all forest fragments of the entire region. This vision is used as a basis for the shorter term management plans.

(iii) Focus on participation;

The initiators of Bosland recognized that building legitimacy and empowering societal actors is essential in the transformation of forest management towards sustainability. Several participatory events took place and this involvement was later anchored in ‘the Bosland parliament’, consisting of three equal ‘participative houses’.

(iv) Shared learning.

The formation of Bosland describes a joint search and learning process for the variety of actors. Negotiation and debate co-created a common understanding and shared ownership.

Conclusions

Bosland can be considered as a frontrunner case in a system innovation towards sustainable forest management. Many features of Bosland align with transition experiments as defined in SNM and TM approaches even though the conception of Bosland was not explicitly based on these approaches, but rather emerged from the initiative of specific engaged actors. Our findings highlight that such ‘emergence’ of novel (management) approaches offers fertile breeding ground to experiment with new forms of organization and coordination which create favourable conditions for transition guidance/steering.

Keywords: Adaptive co-management – Innovation – Land management – Participation – Regime shift, Shared learning – Stakeholder engagement, Transformation