

Arguing for implementation of Natura 2000 in Hungary



The Brief in brief

This study examines the arguments used for and against Natura 2000 by different stakeholder groups in policy formulation and implementation phases and different policy levels (national and local). The main focus of the case study was to understand the institutional context of argumentation in Hungary. A large number and diversity of arguments in relation to Natura 2000 was evaluated according to their effectiveness and context of argumentation. Results show that the arguments are framed and conditioned by habits, law and other institutions and reveal the argumentative strategies that were applied.

Context

In Hungary, the national regulation for the Natura 2000 network was established in 2004. The implementation period began in 2007 when landusers could apply for compensation in Natura 2000 grasslands. Compensation for private forest owners and forest associations was available from 2012. The preparation of management plans was the next important step from 2008 in the implementation of Natura 2000.

In this case study we examined arguments for biodiversity through document analysis at the national scale both in the policy formulation and implementation stages. At the local level verbal interactions of Natura 2000 stakeholder forums were observed. We found that the Natura 2000 system sits within a complex institutional structure comprising governmental and non-governmental organisations and private sector entities. Moreover, these actors operate at European, national and regional levels across economic, social and environmental domains. This complexity has increased over the years of Natura 2000 implementation by the establishment of new financing and governance mechanisms for the network in Hungary. Conflicting regulations existed such that local rules were in collision with national level regulation. The weak institutional structure was not adequate and did not ensure public engagement in the implementation of Natura 2000. There was asymmetry in the knowledge about the Natura 2000 rules and legislation on nature conservation between different actors. These features of context made it very difficult for participants in controversies to find common ground or discover what arguments could be used to motivate action for biodiversity conservation.

Different types of stakeholders were involved in discussions relating to Natura 2000 implementation. Planners/consultants were expert knowledge holders in the discourses and they were responsible for the preparation of management plans. Public administrators acted as representatives of the state. The public administrators usually supported the claim that the state is a good owner/manager of the Natura 2000 areas. Civil agents/farmers/land owners were mostly passive receivers of the information. Since the cooperation between land users is low in Hungary they have weak institutional power. Indeed, they had little ability or capacity to take part in the official exchanges and usually had a passive role. Local politicians acted as representatives of the local inhabitants' reactions: They translated the citizens' needs and the issues that had emerged into political actions and they defended the interests of local entrepreneurs.

Arguments

During the designation stage of the Natura 2000 policy, moral and legal arguments were emphasized in the national level of argumentation. The argument that referred to our responsibility towards protecting nature in Europe was often mentioned since *“we offer an important contribution of natural heritage to the community”*. It was also highlighted that *“Natura 2000 is a compulsory European legal obligation that has been accepted with the EU accession and has to be fulfilled.”*

The implementation phase of the Natura 2000 system was richer in arguments, particularly at the local level. The most important arguments and argument lines at local levels were about the economic advantages and the livelihood supports that can be provided by the implementation of the Natura 2000 network. They focused mainly on the subsidies and compensation schemes rather than on the other economic advantages of conservation. Thus arguments included such things as *“Natura 2000 is a possibility to secure livelihoods. The subsidies/compensation have economic advantages. Farmers can develop their farms and can be compensated to supplement the low incomes from agriculture.”*

Framing

The way in which Natura 2000 was framed largely determined how issues were understood and acted upon. The nature conservation authorities exclusively used data-base decision science and regarded scientific ecological expertise as the only relevant information required for deciding and/or arguing which areas should be designated. This was not very influential. Social aspects were not considered and local traditional knowledge of the landscape was neglected. Referring to natural scientific expertise to legitimise the designation of Natura 2000 was far less effective. The designation stage of Natura 2000 process being over, reason-giving and argumentation are now redundant.

Natura 2000 implementation was framed in a different way at national and local levels. At the national level, the persuasive framing strategy involved the appeal to a sense of responsibility for nature. At the local level, self-interest was normally used in framing. When planners and public administrators justified the implementation they referred to compensation schemes and individual self-interests.

Direct reference to ecosystem services was rarely, if ever, used in framing. It seemed difficult to formulate evidence-based explanations and develop scientific arguments for ecosystem services, whether at local or national levels.

Effectiveness

Argumentation could be very effective when it emphasized the common interests of the participants so that they were able to establish common grounds, for example all participants agreed that certain species (e.g. indigenous detritivores, game species) provide some important services which are very important from local inhabitants' viewpoint.

Appealing to common sense, when parties referred to shared rights and obligations was also an effective strategy in argumentation. It was emphasised that Natura 2000 offered a compensation scheme that could be used to secure rural livelihoods.

Arguers sometimes used uncertain information in the argumentation (e.g. Legal uncertainties about land ownership add up to the difficulties). Some of the properties on Natura 2000 area have an unsettled legal status, they are pending under some contradictory regulations and the property registry system does not help to clarify the owner structure either). This leads to the risk of misunderstanding / non-understanding or suggesting to the landusers that something will go wrong.

Furthermore farmers and landusers widely share the view that the basic principle of Natura 2000 is good but the purely institutional context is inappropriate as it is not supportive of local interests. Therefore institutional changes are needed to take account of this..

Planners tended to use the arguments from expert opinion both to justify their authority and to reply to questions. Landusers often encountered terms they did not understand (e.g. metapopulation or source population). Using such terms is not effective since they require specialist ecological knowledge.

It was emphasized in discussions that Natura 2000 involved a new attitude in nature conservation where landusers have a large and active responsibility. Arguments with species and habitat protection focus did not generate any response from land users since the protection was traditionally supervised or done by the state. Landusers couldn't recognize their responsibility in the protection process.

Transferability

The Hungarian case study provides a rich basis for developing argumentation of Natura 2000 issue and gaining an in-depth understanding of effective argumentation. This case study revealed some discursive strategies. The effective ones could be applied/tried in different contexts in other countries.

Another transferable outcome of this case study is the research approach. The case study was developed through continual negotiation between researchers with different scientific backgrounds. The aim was to produce practical results and outcomes for planning and policy implementation by generating useful knowledge and improving argumentation. This state of the art research approach can be widely applied in argumentative policy analyses.

Lessons learned

- **Argumentation is context dependent. To understand which specific constraints and opportunities are available to the arguer, it is necessary to take into account the specific context of argumentation. The institutional dimension is a very important aspect to describe an argumentation context since the argumentation is conditioned by habits, law and regulation, institutional roles and established practices.**
- **Arguments are considered to be more legitimate when: they are the result of a democratic process; they are science and evidence-based; they are based on shared values. Scientific expertise can be a substantial source of legitimacy but other sources can also be important.**
- **Using more arguments is better. It is demonstrated that the large number and diversity of arguments is important as it shows that the Natura 2000 system could be beneficial for the whole society.**

- Arguments should address all or most actors involved in implementation of Natura 2000 as this shows a better understanding of the consequences of these actions.
 - Analysis of policy argumentation, including argumentation in biodiversity governance requires a contextual, problem-oriented, multidisciplinary and case study based approach. The research framework should focus on the arguments used, the strategies for using these arguments and the social-institutional networks affecting these processes.
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Looking for more information on effective arguments for biodiversity?

For more BESAFE results, including separate briefs focusing on other case studies and various aspects of argumentation, see <http://www.besafe-project.net> and BESAFE toolkit <http://tool.besafe-project.net>.

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