What is the real role of National Forest Programmes?

**National Forest Programmes** (NFPs) aim to incorporate the views of a wide range of stakeholders into the management of national forests. However, an analysis of NFPs in Bulgaria and Germany found they had little impact on forest policy. Despite this, stakeholders who took part in the NFP negotiations welcomed the opportunity to contribute to the policy-making process, even though they realised they may have little impact.

Since their introduction in the 1990s, NFPs have been seen as one way in which governments can establish a robust policy for their forests in the absence of a legally-binding global regime for sustainable forest management. Ideally, NFPs allow many different national stakeholders to contribute to the development of future forest management policies. They have been established in many European countries and are often seen as excellent examples of open and participatory government. However, the latest results suggest that even the most successful NFPs might have had little effect on forest policy or on policy-making processes.

The researchers used an approach called an ‘Advocacy Coalition Framework’ to analyse the policy change caused by NFPs in Bulgaria and Germany from the point of view of the political coalitions involved – for example, coalitions of different policy makers, NGOs, forest workers and industries may club together to advocate nature protection in forests or to promote forest-based industry development. Using interviews with stakeholders and evidence from scientific papers, political articles and press releases, they studied the roles of these coalitions in creating and implementing the NFPs.

The results reveal that, although both NFPs met the goals of the ‘ideal’ NFP by involving a wide range of stakeholders in an inclusive policy process, they did not lead to a change in forest policy. For example, the Bulgarian NFP successfully involved three interested coalitions, but resulted in an unworkable compromise. Eventually, all three coalitions abandoned the process in favour of other political strategies.

The findings also suggest that NFPs are sometimes used by political ‘coalitions’ to achieve strategic political goals. For example, the highly-regarded German NFP was established at a time when a coalition with strong interests in nature conservation gained political influence and challenged the dominance of the forest industry coalition. The NFP led to a long-lasting dispute, which continued until the political situation changed. The result was that few changes were made to German forest policy. The researchers therefore recommend that future analyses of NFPs and other participatory forms of government should consider the broader political role they can play, rather than focussing exclusively on how they increase participation.

However, participants in both countries’ NFPs appreciated the opportunity to take part in the decision-making process, even though they thought the impact on policy of the NFP was low. This led to greater expectations that stakeholders would be invited to take part in future policy-making, which could lead to governments gradually adopting a more open and democratic forest policy process in future.

For more information about NFPs, see [www.fao.org/forestry/nfp/en](http://www.fao.org/forestry/nfp/en)


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