

Differences in stakeholder perceptions on woodland creation in south Scotland: A case study on sources of tension and possibilities for progress

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Summary

The Scottish Government has a policy target to increase woodland cover to deliver climate mitigation and adaptation, restoration of lost habitats, and supporting rural development. This large-scale land use change is particularly rapid in rural areas in the south of Scotland, where increased commercial plantations are cause for concern amongst communities living in the affected landscapes. In many places this has led to tensions and protests against individual planting schemes and the overall development.

In summer 2023, one particular case in south Scotland was researched by Sophie Zeller, a Master's student from Copenhagen University in Denmark for her final thesis-project. She aimed to assess how the situation was perceived by different stakeholders involved in and affected by the proposed planting. Additionally, she assessed the role of power dynamics and opportunities for improvement of the situation. She conducted interviews with representatives of several relevant stakeholder groups: an agent for the landowner, the forest management company, members of the local community and farmers. However, for logistical reasons, she was not able to include important perspectives by actors such as Scottish Forestry, and local businesses such as forestry contractors. The study keeps the interviewees and the name of the particular case anonymous. The area lies in the south Scotland conservancy and is affected by new woodland creation, especially commercial conifer plantations. The planting proposal was one of several planting projects in the surrounding area.

She used the analytical framework, the 'progress triangle'¹ for organising the research. Using this framework, she categorised the situation into the three dimensions of relationship, procedure and substance. In the 'substance' dimension, the more concrete, material issues as seen by the different stakeholders were identified. These are the concrete aspects of agreement and disagreement, for example how the planting proposal was viewed by the different parties, and includes issues like the choice of tree species. In situations like this, issues at the 'substance' dimension are often the primary aspects of debate. However, in many cases these aspects are strongly influenced by the relationship between parties, or matters of decision making processes. The 'relationship' dimension refers to understanding who is involved in a situation, and the relational histories between those parties, and poses the opportunity to assess levels of trust and power dynamics. Within the 'procedure' dimension, the logistics of the decision-making processes in the situation were assessed, looking at jurisdiction, resources, and processes such as the community engagement. This framework emphasises the interrelation of the dimensions and the notion of progress. Hence, the focus lies less on the end goals of the individual parties, but on improving the conditions within different dimensions related to a situation.

¹ Daniels, S. E., & Walker, G. B. (2001). Working Through Environmental Conflict. The Collaborative Learning Approach. PRAEGER.

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The results showed that all dimensions were relevant to all interviewed stakeholder groups:

The stakeholder groups supporting the planting project, the landowner and the forest management, described key issues within the relationship dimension. For example, they perceived interactions with local communities in other development cases in south Scotland often as hostile and discomfoting, leading to a sense of distrust. The interaction in this specific case was perceived as less hostile but still tense. At the procedural level, they described issues with slow and laborious planting application processes, and challenges with time, workload, and resource constraints. They perceived these aspects as causing misunderstandings about the specific planting proposal, pointing out their willingness to plan for community benefit, and managing land responsibly.

Community members and farmers were the two stakeholder groups opposing the planting project and shared many of each other's viewpoints. It became clear that those groups did not oppose woodland creation per se, but instead saw strong issues in the way it is implemented. Key issues ranged from national to local scale. Importantly, many participants saw their experiences at local scale as driven by large scale developments. At large scale, they pointed to issues with policies surrounding land ownership structures and land sales, the Forestry Grant Scheme, and the cumulative impact on livelihoods in the region, farming and heritage. At local scale, many issues were seen for example with the planting area as a unique and important place to the community, environmental aspects, the choice of tree species and the large scale at which change is happening in the surrounding area. Importantly, opinions over these concrete aspects of the development in the substance dimension were influenced by aspects at procedural level, such as the lack of clarity regarding planning processes, transparency, and perceived lack of adequate community engagement, and relationship issues such as the lack of meaningful relationships with both local project developers and Governmental agencies, perceived dismissiveness, disrespect, and lack of influence. Historical aspects, such as negative experiences from past afforestation developments in the sixties and seventies in the wider region, as well as examples of current afforestation projects in the area also led to distrust towards the proposed afforestation. Community members and farmers also experienced a strong lack of power compared to other stakeholders such as the landowner, the forest management, and Scottish Forestry. Again, these experiences negatively impacted the level of trust towards the project. The perceived power imbalances were seen as especially problematic due to the wider issues with land sales, regarding who can own how much land. Additionally, the dependency of tenant farmers on landowners was raised as an important issue, leading to the perception that tenant farmers were restricted to openly object against planting projects in this and other afforestation cases.

As for this aspect, all stakeholder groups saw issues to be rooted in national scale developments and regulations, but also for the specific planting project at local scale, due to the importance of the specific area to locals. While some community members, and the forest management discussed issues for the specific planting proposal of the case, other

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community members, farmers, and the landowner often referred to the larger context of large-scale land use change in the region. The results showed that opposition and tensions between project developers and local communities have complex and interrelated causes which could be addressed at different dimensions and scales, and by different parties. This also shows the role of governmental entities for this and other cases of woodland creation in the region.

The research aimed at identifying key areas for improvement of the situation. The challenges in the relationship dimension were identified as crucial and the research suggests that addressing them is a high priority. Possibilities for improvement at this level include building relationships and trust, and addressing power imbalances, which would be especially useful at local scale. Importantly, forest developers should tackle issues of communication and lack of transparency by providing understandable information and responding to community inquiries timely to address issues of trust and power. The willingness of decision makers to share their power becomes an important aspect and could induce more collaborative processes.

Collaborative approaches can lead to improved outcomes for all stakeholders, including the landowner, and lower the risk of public resistance and loss of reputation. Collaboration poses opportunities for fair decision-making processes that allow the exploration of mutual benefit for involved and affected parties. This is in line with governmental policy, as the Scottish Government aims for more collaborative approaches in decisions about land, especially for long term and significant changes in an area². However, the research showed that the demand for improved community engagement, especially by actors in low power positions, was a significant issue, and current engagement processes do not meet these Governmental aims. It is important to develop decision making processes in collaboration with communities and other stakeholders. Engagement events could become more inclusive by meeting different stakeholders' time constraints, for example by allocating more than one day for the event per community. Developing a shared understanding of the situation and tackling misunderstanding over the existing plans could be reached by visits to the area, characterised by meaningful dialogue over possibilities of planting proposals. Mutual invitations to the planting area could pose a useful way for this, can lead to improved relationships and trust, and address power issues. Fair decision making processes need to include underrepresented groups such as tenant farmers. Additionally, dealing with issues over community benefits should go beyond communicating existing benefits, but explore the increase of community benefits in collaboration with locals. Hence, instead of only hosting drop-in events where individual comments are collected, a

² Scottish Government. (2022b). Scottish Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement 2022: advisory notes. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-land-rights-responsibilities-statement-2022-advisory-notes/pages/10/>.

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community meeting could bring together different stakeholders at the same time for a dialogue over the situation.

The implementation of community engagement largely depends on landowners, forest management companies and agents. The research highlighted challenges for workload and resources for both project developers and communities, who are using their free time to engage. The research identified possible solutions to these issues, including: clear guidance by the regulatory body, Scottish Forestry; support for skill development, such as training in collaborative methods for forest developers; and providing funding to supporting more collaborative approaches through the FGS revision in 2024.

As pointed out by all stakeholder groups, issues seen at local scale were strongly embedded in national scale developments. This highlights the responsibility of the Scottish Government, and the regulatory body, Scottish Forestry, to foster and support just processes for decision making. Hence, addressing the issues seen with large scale policy mechanisms regarding land ownership, and the revision of the FGS pose important opportunities to address procedural and substantial aspects at larger scale. This includes more integrated landscape level planning, and requires increased clarity and transparency over local, and regional land use change, as well as more collaborative approaches both by landowners, and governmental entities.