

Planning realities in Galicia

The development of a participatory approach

For her master thesis Marlies Meijer spent five months in Galicia to study the planning system and the evolvement of a more participatory approach in policymaking. For a long time policy making here was a governmental *tete a tete*, now more players (like citizens) are involved in the game. This paper discusses this change in spatial policy making, from four different themes and personal experiences.

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Balancing between multiple realities

"Only when we travel, and meet strangers, do we recognise other ways of being human"
(Patsy Healey in Collaborative Planning, after Latour).

So here I am, travelling (or balancing) between land use planning and rural sociology, my Dutch planning knowledge and the Galician rural reality, between reading in Gallego, speaking in Castellano, writing in English and chatting in Dutch, between the Spanish working hours and my Dutch empty stomach.

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Back in the Netherlands, I was aware of the Dutch context of my education so far. Most examples provided are Dutch, or could be placed in the Dutch planning context. I wanted to broaden my scope, go somewhere where policy making is less evident and face the effect of a different cultural context, but also to experience a real rural area. Now I find it hard to let go of the familiar Dutch context and to explain what exactly I study in the Netherlands (something like geography, people making plans and rural development) and what my research is about (even more vague). Multi-faceted policy, focused on the spatial environment, does not exist here, as it exists in the Netherlands. So I keep on balancing, and exploring and let myself be surprised every day by the Galician way of doing.

(personal blog, posted on ruralsociologywageningen.wordpress.com, june 2009)

Introduction

Galicia is an autonomous region¹ in the upper north west corner of Spain (*fig. 1*), just above Portugal. Hidden behind the Cantabrian Mountains, Galicia was for a long time isolated from other parts of Spain. Though the region is relatively unknown, it can be very interesting to study its culture, ways of policy making and development over time. They show another way of policy making, but also the differences tell more about the ways of policymaking I was familiar with and my own background. For me the contrasts with my own country (the Netherlands) were surprising every day.

For my master thesis on participatory processes in policy making in rural Galicia, I lived almost five months in Lugo, a city in Galicia's inland (*fig. 2*). Although my research was mainly focused on rural Galicia (and more particularly on the collective management of private production forests), this was enough time to



Figure 1. Galicia within Europe

become familiar with the planning system in general and more urban issues specifically. In this paper these two topics will play a central role. They will be illustrated with four different themes (the meaning of property, everything is politics, a new kind of policy, and, getting things done).

These four themes will illustrate the

¹ Spain is divided in 17 autonomous regions, or *Comunidades Autónomas*. These regions are established in the constitution formed in 1978, after the Franco regime. All autonomous regions have their own parliament and government, and have large legal and administrative powers. For Galicia this government is the *Xunta*.



Figure 2. Topography of Galicia (provinces, main cities and roads)



Figure 3. Abandoned houses in the city center of Lugo (photo Jaap Meijer)

spatial situation in Galicia, the policy making process and how is dealt with new, more participatory strategies. The information is derived from my own experiences, completed with broader perspectives from literature and interviews I conducted.

Wandering through the city centre / the meaning of property

During the first weekends I was in Lugo I wandered a lot through the city centre. Looking down from the roman wall, which encircles the centre, is a good way of getting an overview of the city. One of the first things that struck to my eye were the many abandoned houses (fig. 3). In every street there are several houses that are falling to pieces, that are inaccessible and overgrown with weeds. Later I discovered this did not only occur in Lugo, but also in other cities, like A Coruña and Vigo.

For me this was a large contrast with the Netherlands, where every square meter is used. Unoccupied dwellings are either renovated, or demolished for urban renewal or squatted. My first impression was that it had to do with the absence of scarcity of arable land, as new building projects popped up everywhere in the urban rural fringe. Later it became clear to me that the issue of abandoned

houses is more complex and deeprooted within Galician society. The absence of spatial scarcity is not one of the main drivers for the current situation. Ground prices are relatively high in Galicia, as in the rest of Spain. This has to do with a high level of speculation by building companies. How speculation can exist when almost a quarter of the total area of Galicia is abandoned, could best be explained from a more rural perspective.

The background of the problems is in both rural and urban areas more or less the same. The difference is that in rural areas most Gallegos consider land abandonment as a problem, while in city centres abandoned houses are regarded as a part of the city, something that just happens (Varela García et. al. 2006). On the countryside land abandonment leads to higher risks for forest fires² (in 2006 almost 20% of Galicia was burned) and a non-competitive agricultural sector³, which make land abandonment together with depopulation a rather big problem (Dominguez García 2007).

Land abandonment has a wide range of causes. One of the most prevailing is the demobilisation of the land market (Dominguez García 2007). In a mobile land market selling and purchasing of land is a smooth process. In Galicia,

having property used to be something beyond reach for most people. About a century ago this changed; many farmers could take over the land they had always worked on. Children and grandchildren of these farmers inherited and divided the land equally. Now Galicia has many land owners; about half of the population owns a piece of land somewhere. Despite the high number of owners, having property is still regarded as something special, even though most landowners simply own land. To “simply own land” implies that most owners do not live at their property, nor do they use the land for (agricultural) production. Because of low costs it is possible to own land, and leave it more or less abandoned. Most owners do not want to sell their land, they prefer to keep it as a capital resource for economically bad times, or hope that its value increases because of urban expansion or forestation. Because of the non-existence of effective town and country planning, all rural areas can be reallocated as urban or forestry areas at any time. This reinforces the hope of most owners for a value increase of their land in the near future (Lopez 1996, 2000). It also increases the ground price (land is ‘overestimated’) and leads to a high rate of speculation.

² Higher forest fire risks are caused by shrubs and bushes growing unrestrained on abandoned parcels. Biomass accumulates during spring (the wet season) and catches fire easily in autumn (the dry season).

³ A non-competitive agricultural sector is the result of the inability of most farmers to expand their farms (surfaces). Ground prices are high, and money often lacks because of previous investments (milk quota, modern equipment/machinery).

These issues do not only apply for the rural areas, but also in the urban rural fringe (Varela García et. al. 2006). Here chances for urban expansion are even higher, and the mobilisation of the land market even lower. In city centres things are different, but still the same mechanisms can be recognized. Most of the abandoned houses do not belong to one person, but to a whole family. These families inherited the houses from their ancestors, but do not actively live there. A number of options arise: the house could be sold to a project developer for new housing development, one family member could to live in it in the future, or it could be renovated and sold. Since the costs of owning are low and mortgages are often paid off, indecision usually remains. Like in rural areas, families just own houses hope for a value increase. Inheritance conflicts can take years and in meanwhile the house decays.

Land abandonment on the countryside is directly related to developments in the urban rural fringe. Most (young) people who left the countryside moved to the bigger cities of Galicia. (*fig. 4*). The last decades cities expanded enormously. (Domínguez García 2007). This trend is still continuing. Young people do not foresee a future at the countryside. A thriving example of this trend is a woman (daughter of a farmers woman) I met during one of the interviews. She did not want to live the life of her mother, working at a minifundio (a small selfsufficient farm). As soon as she had the chance she started to study English in the city. After that she found herself a job in Vigo as an English teacher, bought an apartment, and is determined never to return to the countryside. Many young people do not want to continue the hard working life of their parents at the countryside. They look for a better future, with a higher income. As written before, clear spatial policies are often absent. Urban expansion is hardly

finetuned with other developments (like industry, infrastructure or physical aspects of terrain). Together with a high demand for housing and an immobile land market these circumstances determine the space for manoeuvre/ policy making in Galicia. In later sections these factors will be discussed in more detail.

Everything is politics

One of the first lessons I learned, while investigating policy-making processes, is that in Galicia (like in all southern European country(parts)) everything is politics. Discussing the local newspapers during coffee breaks, my colleagues showed me that most articles have to do with politics in some way, whether it is about the construction of a new highway, agricultural development or sports. Also in university life regional politics is present. The student and employee council represent the different political factions (mainly the socialist, nationalist and conservativist party). Moreover all civil servants in charge are replaced when a new coalition is elected, also the executive person of the university and all other government related organisations. This replacement has a large impact on the shaping of policy as well as the implementation of policy. Politics and policymaking are closely related. In Spanish (and Galician) language there does not exist a difference between politics and policy, for both the word *política* is used. On the one hand this leads to a high level democratisation. Civil servants do not form a power on their own, but are ideologically related to the policy they are developing. On the other hand, a lot of political friends are needed before a new policy can be executed. This does not always lead to rational⁴ and transparent decisions.

Clientalism is present in many governance systems, not only in southern (European) countries. Healey

(2006) describes clientalism as a system that involves an interactive relationship between politicians and government officials, through social networks of the politicians and officials. These social networks are used for allocating and distributing resources, mostly in a non-transparent way. Resources could be distributed for personal gains (e.g. a befriended construction developer could be tolerated illegal building, in exchange of political support). In Galicia however most favours are not executed for personal good, resources are mostly distributed along political lines, and for the greater good of a certain region (Batterbury 2002, Keating 2001). In her paper Sarah Batterbury names a technology park, to be located in Orense, one of the main inland towns. According to many local actors, this park could better be located in Vigo or A Coruña, where the universities are located and technological knowledge is available. Nonetheless, since the minister is from Orense, the park was allocated in Orense. For Orense this park is very important, it could employ a lot of persons and attracts more highly developed industries. Local politicians lobbied for this science park and got it, even though the location is sub-optimal. In the same way political lines are used for the allocation of housing, infrastructure and implementation of new spatial policies.

Also in the project I studied (UXFOR, Unidades de Xestión Forestal, collective management of production forests) I saw a close relation between the implementation of policy and political networks. Since the democratization of Spain in 1981 the Partido Popular (PP, the conservatives party) won almost every regional election. In 2005 this changed, after a series of political blunders (with indecision around the oil-spill of the tanker Prestige as low point) the socialist (PSOE) and nationalist party (BNG) gained majority

⁴ *With a rational decision is meant that all reasonable alternatives are taken into account and the most optimal, given the circumstances, alternative is chosen. (Healey, quoted in Allmendinger 2002).*

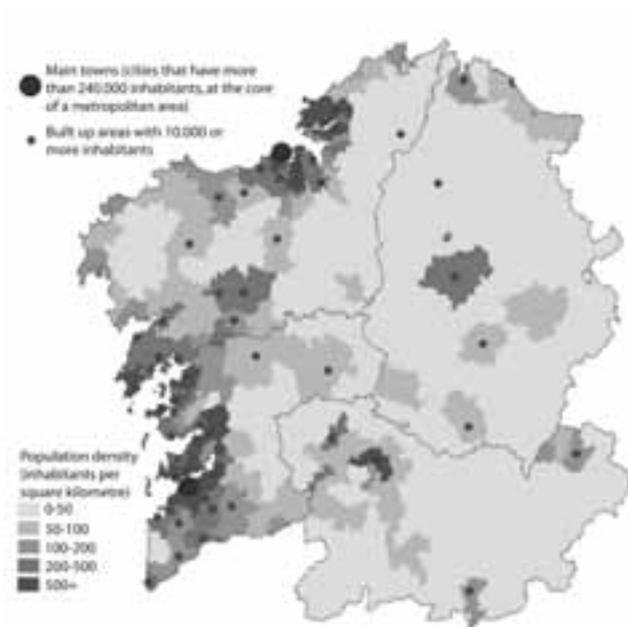


Figure 4. Population density and main cities in Galicia (source: Instituto de Estatística Galega)

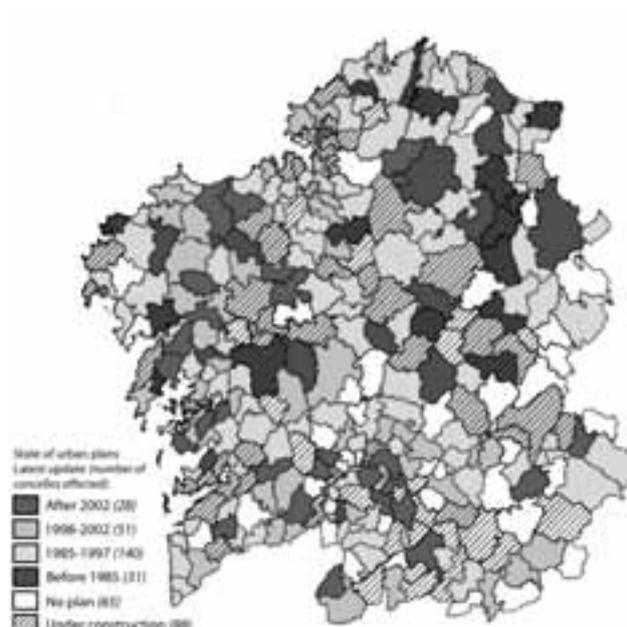


Figure 5. State of urban plans in Galicia (source: ppt Manuel Marey, USC)

of votes for the first time and governed together for four years. In this period many things changed. Instead of playing a central role in decision making they tried to decentralize policy making. The UXFOR policy emanates from this ideological change. Even though government officials tried to enroll locals as much as possible, most contact persons of collective managed forests were still closely related to either the socialist or nationalist party. The advantage was that these contact persons put a lot of effort in making the project a success. Nevertheless it was still hard to measure whether these projects and resources (like subsidy and technical support) that came with them were distributed evenly, or remained within socialist and nationalist lines. During the latest elections (2009) the PP regained majority of votes. For the UXFOR's this meant a sudden break. All policies were frozen until the new government has decided how they like to continue. Although most executing officials were replaced, at the background UXFORs remained active

and some actions (e.g. distribution of subsidies) were taken in retrospective.

Besides ineffective implementation of policy it must be noted that clientalism also results in more direct linkages between local actors and government, and a higher level of political commitment. To quote Patsy Healy (2006, p232): "In the context of the efforts to make government more responsive and collaborative with business and citizens, however, it should not be forgotten that clientalism has long been a way of linking government and citizen in a direct way".

A new kind of policy

During their governing period, the socialist and nationalist party decided to develop policy in a more participatory way. They also made an effort in developing a more spatial oriented and integrated kind of policy. Nowadays many plans suffer from a lack of coordination. Nevertheless this new policy-direction is not purely a socialist/nationalist idea. The European Union

invests a lot of money in Galicia. For their subsidy programs, inclusion of local stakeholders becomes more and more a preliminary condition. The Local Action Groups of the Leader-program are a good example of this (Keating 2001). Local Action Groups try to promote rural development at a local level. In such groups stakeholders of all sector must be represented.

One of the employees of the Xunta (the regional government) I interviewed in Galicia was working on redefining spatial policy making. She explained that there is a long way to go before a more coordinated spatial policy could be established. First of all many municipalities (concellos) do not have urban plans, or existing urban plans are not updated (fig. 5). Secondly, many sectoral policies are not integrated in an overall policy. The employee of the Xunta named an example in which urban expansion and new infrastructure were planned separately. First the new residential area was built, but the allocation plan was not updated to the

new situation. Later on a new infrastructural plan was developed, but it did not take the residential area in account. One of the main roads was located at the same place where apartment buildings were already built. The Xunta's first priority is to deal with issues regarding a lack coordination between different policies. The Xunta wishes to do this by making information and master plans more accessible for all civil servants involved. In consequence the Xunta wishes to inform local citizens better about urban plans in their direct environment. Information should not only become more accessible for policy makers, but also for local citizens. It is a twofold process.

Currently local citizens do not have possibilities to participate in planning procedures. Information about urban plans is often inaccessible for others than government officials, and citizens are only confronted with a new plan when implementation starts. In order to change this, master plans should be published online or be available at the town hall. In this manner local citizens do have the opportunity to express their opinions about land use changes, and object if necessary. Although a more participatory approach in Galicia is still in an initial phase, better and more accessible information is a start.

Also on other terrains a more participatory approach is developing. The UXFOR-policy is the first bottom-up type of policy developed in Galicia. For problems like land abandonment and ill-management of production forests, top-down policies only did not seem to be sufficient. By actively involving owners of small, non-productive parcels it becomes possible to manage all parcels together, as one large piece of land. In this way different problems could be tackled at the same time: forestry becomes more profitable, environmental issues like forest fires are reduced and local citizens are actively

involved regarding their environment. Yet there is a long way to go. Not only for the Xunta, but also for the citizens who are not really used to take part in the policymaking process (Leon-Alfonso and Ferrín Perreira 2007). For a long time this used to be the terrain of government officials and their political (social) network. Like with the abandoned houses in the city centres, people do not really seem to be actively involved. They have their own every day concerns and sometimes a very strong opinion about what should be done, but they do not see it as their task to change things. "Many people see the Xunta as a mama, this need to change", as one of the interviewees (an employee of the Xunta) said. In the UXFOR project I saw the Xunta also behave like a "mama". Local owners could join meetings to express their opinion about the future exploitation of their production forest, but in fact they just gave a mandate to the Xunta. No discussion was going on. Also to get more owners involved the government took a large part of the costs (if not all) for their account. In my opinion this made owners only less actively involved. They joined because they assumed it couldn't get worse, but also did not expect to make money. There was no direct stimulus to make owners more involved.

Although the example above was about rural Galicia, I do think parallels can be drawn with more urban areas. If there is no stimulus for gathering information about e.g. urban expansion plans I do not think people are willing to do this and contribute (or object) actively to these plans. Just making information more accessible will not be enough (after Healey 2006).

Getting thing done

What surprised me mostly about policy making in Galicia was the way policies were implemented and how official guidelines were dealt with. A Spanish

friend said to me: "the best thing I like about the Netherlands is the sky, the only thing that is not planned." During a lecture I attended one student once asked me what, in my opinion, was the most significant difference between the two countries. I answered that in the Netherlands everything is so organized and bounded by regulations that being innovative is almost impossible. In Galicia all these regulations seem to be absent; people had more freedom in running their business and did not have to spend so much time on paperwork. Well, the teacher answered, in Galicia we do have these regulations as well, only nobody lives up to them. For me this was an eye-opener. I did not know about the large number of sectoral plans at that moment. I only saw the abandoned houses, creatively parked cars and vegetable gardens emerging everywhere in the city (sometimes even with pig sheds, something unimaginable in the Netherlands).

In the above sections the lack of involvement of citizens and coordination between different policies is discussed. This is one side of the story. In practice things turned to work out quiet differently. Plans were not regarded as blueprints, but as a procedure that needs to be done. If reality turned out to be different than the plan, people dealt with it, instead of returning to the drawing table. Flexibility is everywhere. When the urban and infrastructure plan turned out to be incompatible, as mentioned in the third part of this paper, there was no policy crisis (well maybe some inconvenience). The plans were just put away in their drawers and people continued with what they were doing already: building a new urban expansion area.

This does, however, often lead to a large gap between what is done, what needs to be done and the policy that is developed. On the one hand flexibility can be regarded as a positive thing. On

the other hand it does not always lead to effective policies. Not every action is well thought of and a lot of effort is wasted if policies are not really taken seriously after developing them. Growing pressure for urban expansion in the urban rural fringe makes flexible planning less feasible (Vazquez Barquero 2006). E.g. increasing mobility asks for more strategic infrastructural plans, but also for more efficient allocation of industrial or commercial areas.

Synthesis

Historically policy making processes in Galicia tend to be very sectoral and take place within the political system. Absence of integration of different sectors (like rural, water, environmental, infrastructural, housing, economic policies), the scattering of many policy making agencies, and formation of policies mainly within political systems, make clear and effective policy-making almost impossible. On the other hand politicians and policy makers also always have been able to deal with unforeseen situations. In Galicia bureaucracy did not immediately lead to fixed inflexible policy making. Yet a better coordination between different policies is evolving. Also more participatory strategies are coming into being, but are in a very preliminary phase. Still a lot needs to be done. Especially in more urban areas the backlog in spatial policy is apparent. By actively involving citizens and better coordination I believe future plans could be more effective. However I also hope Galicia does not lose its flexibility in dealing with spatial policy making.

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Figure 6. Urban rural fringe (photo Marlies Meijer)

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Summary

This paper deals with four different themes that illustrate the spatial situation in Galicia, the policy making process and how is dealt with new, more participatory strategies. Spatial planning is not embedded in policy making procedures as in other parts of (northern) Europe, but executed through informal and political networks. On the one hand this leads to a flexible, easy accessible and dynamic approach. On the other hand developments are not always structured and policy making processes can be non-transparent. For my master thesis in spatial planning I spent five months in Galicia. The themes are partly written from my own experiences, completed with broader perspectives from literature and its implications for more urbanised areas