SEBAN Project

Sustainable Land Management of Peatlands and Coastal Heathlands in Norway (Phase II)

Campus Kristiansund Internship Program

Kristiansund kommune

Møre og Romsdal fylkeskommune

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Introduction

Today, land-use change—how humans change the habitats of species including deforestation, drainage, overgrowth, cultivation, construction, and damming, is a great threat to biodiversity both in Norway and internationally. The significant impact of biodiversity loss and degradation is concerning for both conservation efforts and the accomplishment of UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). To achieve the 2030 agenda at the local and regional level, it is crucial to recognize and make visible the importance of the social-ecological interdependencies between ecosystem services, biodiversity, and sustainable development priorities for policymakers across different levels and scales.

For this cause, Senter for bærekraftig areal- og naturforvaltning (SEBAN) developed a handbook together with the Campus Kristiansund Internship Program (CKIP) in 2022/2023. The goal of this handbook is to communicate the importance of preserving peatlands and coastal heathlands for nature and society to the public administration. Furthermore, the handbook is a tool with databases and digital solutions that municipalities can use in their sustainable management in municipal spatial planning. After the development of this handbook, SEBAN joined efforts with the CKIP cohort 2023/2024 to optimize ways to communicate the content of it to municipalities and the

public administration to engage inhabitants and politicians in their land management processes.

To understand the attitudes and perceptions of stakeholders regarding land management and specifically peatlands and coastal heathlands, the team developed focus groups with Hustadvika as the test municipality. How these focus groups were set up will be explained in the following "methods" section. From these focus groups with inhabitants, politicians and public administration, the communication plan presented in this document was developed. The aim of this communication strategy is to provide suggestions that enable municipalities to communicate better towards their inhabitants and politicians about the important issues of sustainable land management. The subgoals of this project were:

- Identify obstacles in communication among politicians, inhabitants, and public administration.

- Understand stakeholders' perceptions of area changes and prioritize potential management strategies and assess general awareness and knowledge levels regarding peatlands and coastal heathlands.

- Gain insight into how inhabitants want to be informed and involved in land management planning.

Methods

Methodology

This study employed various methodologies at different stages to develop a comprehensive communication plan for nature management as a project for SEBAN. The methodology encompassed document review, focus group discussions, and a final workshop session. Ethical considerations, including compliance with GDPR regulations to safeguard participant identities, were strictly adhered to throughout the research process.

Questions: Several questions were asked to understand people's attitude and perceptions of peatlands and coastal heathlands, and the challenges related to land management (urbanization and development). It was also necessary to understand the obstacles that hinder effective communication between different stakeholders. The questions include:

- Defining participants environmental awareness/connection to nature.
- Understanding participants' perception of wetlands and heathlands.
- Understanding participants perception on prioritizing planning vs nature.
- Listening to suggestions for how to approach the challenges.
- Understanding effective ways of including different stakeholders in the decision-making process.

Document Review: A thorough review of municipal documents and scientific literature was conducted to establish a foundational understanding of existing communication practices, relevant policies, and scientific research pertaining to nature management, particularly focusing on peatlands and coastal heathlands.

Focus Group Discussions: Three focus groups were conducted in the Hustadvika municipality, comprising inhabitants, politicians, and members from the public administration involved in urban planning and similar activities within the municipality. Focus groups were used as a qualitative data collection method because our aim was to facilitate interactive discussions, enabling the exploration of diverse perspectives and the emergence of nuanced insights.

Participants: The participants were selected to represent a diverse range of stakeholders directly involved with or affected by nature management decisions. Purposeful sampling method was used to map out individuals who should be part of the focus group. The shortlisted individuals with relevant backgrounds were then contacted through emails and direct phone calls. During the focus group, we had 4 participating politicians, 8 participants in the inhabitant group and 7 participants in the public administration category.

Public Administration: The administration constituted of individuals who work in different departments within the public sector in Hustadvika municipality, to be more specific, these departments are construction and property, municipal engineering.

Inhabitants: The inhabitant group consisted of individuals who are active members of society and belong to different local associations. Besides that, the sample was limited to the individuals who have knowledge or interest in nature and environment and those who are somehow affected by the changes in land management regulations. Organizations that matched the sample have been contacted and invited to participate in the focus group. As a result, inhabitants' focus group consisted of the representatives from Viltutvalget, Hustad Bondelag, Eldrerådet, Ungdomsrådet, Hustadvika Bondelag.

Politicians: The local politicians from 8 parties, such as Arbeiderpartiet, Fremskrittspartiet, Høyre, Industri- og Næringspartiet, Kristelig Folkeparti, Senterpartiet, SV, Venstre, were invited. However, the focus group was represented by Fremskrittspartiet, Industri- og Næringspartiet, Høyre, and Senterpartiet.

Objectives: Main Goal was to understand the attitudes and perceptions of stakeholders regarding peatlands and coastal heathlands, along with the challenges associated with land management, particularly in the context of urbanization and development.

Final Workshop Session: A final workshop session was organized, inviting representatives from the previous focus groups to engage in role-playing exercises. It was planned to have 2 representatives from every group. However, not all the previous participants could attend the final workshop day, so it was decided to invite other representatives. So, there were 2 other representatives from public administration group. Besides that, 2 politicians did not attend the final workshop day, which means that only inhabitants and public administration participated in the final workshop session.

Participants assumed different personas to simulate various stakeholder perspectives, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of communication strategies and

preferences. Besides that, participants were asked to express their opinions on current communication processes and to suggest their ideas for improvement.

Thematic Analysis: Thematic analysis was chosen as the primary method for analyzing the qualitative data gathered from focus group discussions and the workshop session. This approach allowed for the systematic identification, analysis, and interpretation of patterns, themes, and insights emerging from the qualitative data. By employing thematic analysis, the research aimed to uncover recurring themes, key challenges, and potential strategies for effective communication in nature management initiatives. Overall, this methodological approach enabled a holistic exploration of stakeholder perspectives, informed by both existing literature and direct engagement with key stakeholders. The findings generated through this process will inform the development of a communication plan tailored to the specific needs and preferences of stakeholders at the municipality level.

Analysis

Nature

Caring about nature. In the thematic analysis of the interplay between inhabitants and nature, a profound concern for the preservation of the natural environments emerges as a prevailing sentiment. Administration employees emphasize the importance of maintaining untouched landscapes, as reflected in Administration employee 6's call to discuss "*trackless travel in nature*" and Administration employee 1's dedication to beach cleaning efforts, which have resulted in the removal of countless tons of waste. Politician 1 emphasizes this with: *"I am worried, because beautiful nature is being destroyed (beaches, water, mountains). I like to go for a walk in completely untouched areas, but we have to drive far to find this."*

Threats to nature. Inhabitant 8 notes that *"there are nature loses at all points of intersection. Cabins, industry, climate."* Administration employee 1 highlights the impact of human activity, noting the debris left behind and the challenges posed by invasive

species, particularly on beach vegetation. Administration employee 4 underscores the intrusion of agriculture into forest areas, thereby changing their original condition. Tourism and nature. The tourism sector, while a significant economic driver, also presents challenges to the delicate balance of nature. Administration employee 2 acknowledges the pressure exerted on natural environments by tourism activities, highlighting the need to address the consequences of increased human presence in these areas. Inhabitant 8 also mentions building up areas with cabins, which affects nature.

Overall, this analysis paints a complex picture of residents' relationship with nature. It prompts reflection on how people can reconcile their desire to preserve nature with the realities of human impact and economic imperatives.

Agriculture

From the focus groups, it emerged that many of the participants see Hustadvika as a strong agricultural municipality, and that taking care of agriculture is important for many groups. Farmers and farming related stakeholders mention that it is currently very hard to expand agricultural land because of all the strict regulations to build on peatland and coastal heathland. Politician 3: '' *"Peatland conservation stands in the way of agriculture."* Similar opinion is expressed by Inhabitant 7: *"the protection of nature stands in the way of land to be cultivated.*

Most good agricultural land is already in use, and when farmers want to expand their fields, it is hard to find new locations that are close to their current places. It also takes very long for the application processes for new land use to come through. Politician 4: *"It is not easy to get vacant land nearby, and then there is an application process, it is difficult to expand near one's own farm."* Politician 3: *"The best areas were cultivated first."*

Economic Development

The focus groups highlighted a difficult dilemma between nature preservation and economic development. Many participants expressed a worry that nature preservation would prevent economic development in Hustadvika. Inhabitant 7 notes that *"the*

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regulations [on the land management] stand in the way of development". Politician 4: *"facilitation is needed: we must make arrangements that are acceptable to both nature and people – need to find a good balance that doesn't stop the development"*. Thus, arguing for that organization of land use is necessary, but should not stop development.

Additionally, several participants also expressed frustration about new restrictions on cultivation of peatlands. Politician 3: *"we have such large areas of bog, so it is a great resource to cultivate into farmland. There is frustration around the ban on new cultivation, as there are some who have no other options than new cultivation"*. Inhabitant 1 also concerned about restrictions: *"the regulations are getting to the point where you can't do anything because of the bogs. I understand that the bogs should be spared, for example, the deep ones, but if it is only half a meter, I have a problem calling it a bog."*

It was also expressed that new cultivation of peatlands is expensive. Politician 2: *"New cultivation has probably been declined because it is financially demanding to operate on bogs – the economy is under pressure"*.

Currently, the municipality doesn't offer the same number of opportunities for young people as competing and bigger towns and cities nearby. It was, therefore, expressed a need for diversifying the economy in Hustadvika, which is currently heavily dependent on farming, to prevent urbanization in the future (people moving from Hustadvika to bigger towns and cities). Politician 2: *"The next generation will not stay out here or take over farming. Arrangements for operating (fishing boat and farm) must be made."*

Another challenge to economic growth and development that was highlighted is the lack of space in the municipality. Administration employee 1: *''To develop the town we need to keep building and expanding, but to do so we must have space and there's not much space available at the moment.''*

Inclusion and Democracy

Based on the focus group discussion, different stakeholders with different knowledge capacity need to understand the communication materials such as maps, charts, and diagrams. Inhabitant 7: *"Engaging with animation makes it better to understand"*. Administration employee 2 specifies that communication materials should include enough information like *"background, context, municipal plan. ... Even if there are species [identified on maps]. Which species? Endangered or not? I want a lot more information to feel something. ... If there are hiking trails. Do people use these trails that we have a lot? Are there many other cabins in the immediate area, so that no more cabins are needed here?"* This also implies that all groups want to be informed and included in area planning but need information explained to them in a simpler way. Some of the participants also expressed the feeling of dissatisfaction with the current policy making process, Inhabitant 1: *"We feel like we're being overlooked/ignored and not included enough in decision-making"*.

Retaining local democracy is important, and inhabitants within the municipality have more in-depth knowledge about our local community and its problems than regional and national authorities - thus it is crucial that they are involved in decision-making and that decisions are not being made by regional/national authorities without including/informing them. Involving all stakeholders will also give a feeling of ownership, Administration employee 2: ***"****some politicians like to think for themselves and not listen to us. We have to get our wording right and see development in society***"****.** Administration employee 6: *"It has to be taken into account that it is political will that lies at the bottom and gives the direction. It is difficult to get your point of view to the politicians*." However, an opposite opinion also exists, for example, Inhabitant 8 has "mixed experiences about local government" and believes that the national leadership is better.

Regulations

A consensus amongst the focus group participants is that there are many rules and regulations that make it difficult for the municipality to make decisions and implement them. Not only is it challenging to adhere to the strong regulations when

building/cultivating new peatlands or coastal heathlands, but it is also difficult to upkeep the burning of coastal heathlands.

Another point that the public administration and politicians mention is that because of all the regulations, the municipality is not able to make fast and proper decisions, so often in-action occurs. This leaves a certain impression to the inhabitants. They can feel that the municipality is not making any progress and that they are unable to deliver on their plans and to keep the plans up to date.

Politician 2**:** *''That gives a certain impression to residents. The citizens feel that we are not making any progress, the dynamics are not in place. We are unable to deliver on plans and to keep the plans up to date."*

Communication

Based on the focus groups there is a need for establishing regular communication channels designated to sharing information about land management and areal planning. The municipality doesn't have that today. Administration employee 8: *" From an administrative perspective, it would be nice to establish some regular/clear communication channels that we can use to inform people about decisions. It would be nice to get some help finding and establishing such communication channels". This participant adds: "Social media, the newspaper and our website seem to be the best way of reaching out to people".* Establishing designated communication channels for land management and areal planning seem to be crucial to improve communication and inhabitant engagement.

The focus groups also showed that there is need for increased knowledge-sharing and awareness-raising among politicians and the wider population. Administration employee 1: *"Some people think it is much more important to have motocross facilities in forests and marshes. It's difficult to explain to them why it is not allowed to build down there. Trying to say something about natural diversity and such, but it is difficult to get them to understand".* Administration employee 2: *"Lack of knowledge and lack of follow-*

up and a change in mentality, both in the municipality and in the public sector".
Facilitator notes: *"They seem familiar with the fact that there is burning of KLH as a care, but that it is challenging and those who are not firefighters sceptical of burning".*

When it comes to responsibility, the participants agreed that the municipality is responsible for making information about land management and areal planning accessible for the public. Yet, there seems to be a consensus that individuals also have a certain responsibility to staying informed. Inhabitant 1: *"It is the responsibility of the municipality to ensure that information about land-use change is easily accessible".*
Administration employee 3: *"Agree, but it is not the responsibility of the municipality to ensure that all inhabitants read this information - we don't have the resources to go from door to door and inform each household changes - to some extent they have also a responsibility to read up on the information that is available to them".*

The public administration also agreed that internal discussions and agreement is crucial before presenting information/advice to politicians. When they internally agree on how to present something, they are more likely to be able to convince the politicians of importance of that topic. Administration employee 5: *"internal discussion before the politicians hear it. Everyone gets to have their say and then we choose what to present. Not just administration and politics, but also within the organization. Need to agree internally in the admin before presenting it to the politicians.''*

Results

After conducting the focus groups with the different stakeholders, we can make some conclusions as for what the different groups need and would like to see in terms of communication of land management.

Public Administration

The public administration that was present at the focus groups expressed the difficulties of the balance between natural protection, and development of the municipality. Not only the development of agriculture and businesses were mentioned, but also the relation of

tourism to nature. A general opinion emerged that it is complicated to communicate to the inhabitants why certain areas need to be protected, and why it is thus not allowed to build there. There is often a lot of resistance amongst the inhabitants when they have not been informed properly. It is generally understood that it is important to collaborate and share the big picture with all relevant actors involved.

Inhabitants

From the inhabitant groups, a general opinion appeared from the people running businesses and farms; Nature regulations stand in the way of development.
Next to this, another key point that emerged was the dissatisfaction with national guidelines, and the fact that it could be more beneficial to locally address the challenges regarding land management and make local adaptations of the guidelines. This in combination with the fact that the inhabitants often feel overlooked in decision-making regarding land management, shows the need to develop good collaborative communication platforms. The development of a collaborative arena could also contribute to more clarity about what land will have to be protected in the area or not, so inhabitants, business owners and farmers know what to expect from the area management, and there is a common understanding.

Politicians

The most important aspect the politicians group mentioned was that the identity of Hustadvika Municipality is largely based on it being an agricultural municipality. Many inhabitants are to some extent connected to farms and farming, and banning of expansion of Farmland can cause much conflict. The challenge for the Municipality is to build/create a more common narrative on the future governance of Hustadvika Municipality. Because such a large part of the population and growth of the municipality is based on natural resources so much. They mention that there is currently no good interaction between the use of the nature and the residents. The inhabitant groups are often forgotten in the decision-making processes, which also causes dissatisfaction and a less smooth implementation process of planning.

A challenge thus is in getting everyone on board to take part in this narrative, and to be ahead together before the changes in legislation come from the national or regional level.

Conclusion

In conclusion, all groups have their own preferences regarding area planning and nature management. However, they all see that compromises must be made to make decisions that are supported in the municipality. Currently, the groups feel like there is a lack of communication and rules and regulations are just imposed on the municipality from above. Especially with new and stricter regulations regarding nature management on their way, it is important to anticipate on them, and to make sure the local context is considered. A clear message from the focus groups is thus that the municipality should make efforts to create communication arenas where all actors feel included and where information can be shared. It should be seen as work that the municipality can already do to create ownership and engagement, and to get ahead with the process before stricter regulations come into place. It will be more challenging when those regulations are implemented, therefore it is important to come together before that to find compromises.