

Forest Policy Workshop of the Scandinavian Society of Forest Economics (SSFE)  
at the IUFRO Division VI Symposium: Integrative Science for Integrative Management  
Tuesday 14.8.2007, Saariselkä, Finland

<http://www.metla.fi/tapahtumat/2007/ssfe/>

## **Do citizens have a say in urban forest policy?**

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### **Abstract**

In the Helsinki Metropolitan area, collaborative practices are commonly used in order to incorporate citizens' needs and values into political decision making concerning urban forest and land use planning. This social information is collected on different levels of planning, including city-level strategies as well as local nature management plans, with the idea that it improves the quality of decision making on these levels. City-level policies, stated for instance in green area programs and nature management strategies, guide and restrict the policies to be implemented on more local scales such as city districts.

A challenge is that citizens often become active only in very concrete questions, while the solutions to these questions can be significantly predefined by earlier decisions, such as those in green area programs. Collaboration with citizens in earlier policy processes, instead, can be hindered by the intangibility of the policy questions. There is a need to know, when and how should social information be incorporated in the policy processes. Importantly, what, in fact, is the role of social information in these processes? What are the roles of citizens, landowners, political decision makers and planners in making the collaborative processes successful?

In a sub-study of the research project 'GREENDECISION - Integrating ecological and social information in urban planning' (Academy of Finland 2006-2008), we are studying these questions in two case areas in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area. By combining e.g. planning document analysis, interviews and focus groups, we aim to produce theoretical understanding and practical interpretations of the efficiency and quality of the planning and decision making system concerning urban forests. We also develop methods for evaluating the use of social information. Primary results will be presented on grounds of semi-structured interviews carried out with approximately 30 planners, decision makers, citizens and landowners in spring 2007.