

Short introduction by the presentation of the publication of SAPONI, 16-01-2012 at Alumni-Pavillon, ETH Zürich. Impressions and comments. Prof. Ir. Max van den Berg

ETH, Institute for Spatial and Landscape Planning took an important initiative on such an intriguing issue as Spaces and Projects of National Importance. Professor Bernd Scholl brought excellent experts from European countries together. Meetings of SAPONI Working Group were most interesting, creative and often innovative. We exchanged opinions and shared results with involvement. I am grateful to professor Scholl and his staff who made SAPONI possible and for the invitation to take part. I was impressed by expertise of my European colleagues. Working with them was a pleasure, their input was exciting and I am proud of the results.

- **How was SAPONI? With you as impartial spectators I want to share some learning**
In the beginning of SAPONI-meetings I did not know so much about spaces of national importance, specially not outside the Netherlands. I learned a lot during our sessions about experiences abroad and phenomena I was not aware of.
- **Language and communication is a learning process in itself**
We communicated mostly in English and a bit in German and French. Striking for me is that we use the same words but give it slightly another meaning. Words like “space, project, planning, region, water management etc.” International communication means to be very much aware of differences between planning cultures of countries, regions and disciplines. After a while we could cope with it better and better.
- **Scale and magnitude of SAPONI projects impressed me**
Imagine the Baltic sea with coastal territories as one project. In the beginning I could not catch the magnitude. But friendly I was explained about the numerous sub-projects, the coordination, the involvement of many, many actors and the sense of it. The Danube project, also with European involvement made me clear that every committed country is responsible and accountable for successful development of the whole project. And that some countries will make a better profit depending on the will to contribute substantial. The corridor railroad from Rotterdam to Genoa will have more added value if participants cooperate intensely. Eco-housing in United Kingdom and the spatial dimensions of energy innovations in Germany are inspiring for other countries.
- **Differentiation of issues, topics and projects was much greater than I thought.**
Ecocities in United Kingdom, railroad station areas, project Gran Paris, energy pilot projects in Germany differ enormous not to mention the three big scale projects I pointed out before. Presenters explained very well and we got the messages. We commented and criticized. We were able to grasp the structure and we found some system in the so different projects.
- **I was surprised about dynamic changes in systems and practice in European countries.**
Recently many countries changed laws, framework, systems and methods on spatial planning or are doing it. Sometimes decentralization is implemented (France, Netherlands). Regional and local levels get more influence. Regional planning is coming back in United Kingdom.

Centralization is advocated in federal states (Switzerland, Austria), because some issues can't be handled on local or regional level. In all countries a shift can be determined from public interventions to market operations. In Bundes Republic Germany national level makes use of informal authority in spatial planning to stimulate and enlarge awareness of national issues.

In most countries awareness of national and cross-border planning issues are growing. But not in every country projects of national importance are a political issue. Then regional importance or even European importance of space is stressed (Austria, Germany, Switzerland).

- **SAPONI meetings showed more cultural changes than I was aware of.**
Planning culture in most European countries is rapidly changing and in different ways. From content driven to process driven; from “imposing restrictions” to “searching chances”; from vertical to horizontal coordination; from government dominance to market forces. Negotiation, interaction and trust was often brought forward.
- **Do we need spaces and projects of national importance?**
No we don't. But practice in past and present has proven that we miss opportunities and chances by not distinguishing SAPONI's. With it we raise added value, we invent new sustainable specific qualities. We are able to reduce uncertainties. We make better use of scarce means. Cross border SAPONI's will stimulate European unification, competition and solidarity. It will combine forces of mutual interest and make them more effective.
- **Who is involved with spaces and projects of national importance?**
We all are, politicians, experts, entrepreneurs and citizens. Identification of areas of national importance may be done by anybody. A journalist, an artist or even a professor of ETH. Often an institution or interest group takes the first step. But at last it is the national government who has to become political precise and put it on the political agenda. They take over, decide and take responsibility for processes, strategy and direction. States want to be competitive in economic, environmental and social terms. National Governments feel responsible for safety and take care for weak or deteriorated areas. In both cases identification of areas of national importance is desirable in order to organize concentrated action to stimulate economy and quality of space and to make areas crisis resistant. Governments are also responsible for communication with all involved.
- **What type of strategy we need with SAPONI's?**
Mostly projects of national importance are of big scale, complex, long term, many actors involved, many interests taking care of. Implementation needs high sophisticated organization and complicated planning processes. Means represent power. Strategy is focussed on getting equilibrium between goals and means. National governments have to balance visions and implementation. National governments have to master the art of acting under pressure under difficult circumstances. Like complexity, uncertainty and risks to gain added value, quality of space and to make use of opportunities.

- **Swiss future is a challenge, is my last remark**

Switzerland is a small country with limited land resources in the near future. In a globalizing world cross border issues and spaces with national significance will be important. *Shaping these spaces will be a major challenge.*