

Boundary Dynamics in Natural Resource Management: The Ambiguity of Stakeholder Inclusion

La dynamique des frontières dans la gestion des ressources naturelles : sur l'inclusion ambiguë des « parties prenantes »

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

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Les articles publiés sur ce site le sont toujours dans la langue de l'auteur.

“We often experienced the river valley as a contemporary ‘battle field’ where interests, opinions, and visions about the future are diametrically opposed to one another.”

(Publication dedicated to the river of the case study, 2004)

Introduction

This paper discusses a case study in the domain of water management and nature conservation from the perspective of boundary dynamics. Multiparty collaboration is proposed as an organizational strategy to manage natural resources. This approach acknowledges the multiple perspectives of stakeholders, the differences in interest and power, and it provides a strategy for change in a domain with a high potential for conflict (Buckles, 1999). The first part of the paper outlines the theoretical insights and frames that underpin the case analysis. Then it discusses boundary issues in a project set up to design a plan for a river valley to solve problems of flooding and deterioration of nature. With this in-depth case study in a complex organizational setting,¹ we aim to contribute to empirical research on the perceptions of boundaries in processes of organizing (Paulsen and Hernes, 2003).

Theoretical framework

Multiparty collaboration: working across the boundaries

The domain of nature and water management is traditionally governed by public administrations. Conventional ways of managing based on hierarchy and control as an organizational principle are, however, losing their meaning (Koppenjan and Klijn, 2004). Public authorities realize that solving environmental ‘meta problems’ (e.g. flooding, pollution) calls for expert knowledge, while at the same time, a wide range of stakeholders wishes to participate in the process. In order to arrive at an encompassing definition of the problem domain and to develop optimal, sustainable and widely supported solutions with a fair chance of implementation, it is essential to include a wide range of stakeholders with a diversity of perspectives. This organizational strategy is called ‘multiparty collaboration’ (Gray, 1989; Huxham, 1996; Huxham and Vangen, 2005). Gray (1989, 5) defines multiparty collaboration as “(...) a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible”. It involves a process of collective decision making and negotiation among representatives of stakeholders of a problem domain, focused on the future development of the domain.

The issue of boundaries is critical in collaborative work, because a collaborative is under-organized. It is an 'emergent process' (Gray, 1989). There are few traditional structures and processes (e.g. hierarchy, structure, role, membership) to contain the uncertainty and openness of the process. A critical issue in this context is how the participants establish the boundary around the collaborative: who is included and who is left out? Does the collaborative represent the diversity, complexity and interdependence of the domain? The boundary of identity is an essential aspect in direction setting. Those who are included establish the problem definition based on their perceptions, interests and objectives, and consequently design the solutions. This confronts participants with the fear to lose their identity, to be ignored, to be overpowered by strong actors, or to be excluded from the process.

The system psychodynamic perspective on boundaries

An organization is a living system and boundaries make up its 'organizational anatomy' (Miller and Rice, 1967; Schneider, 1991; Zagier Roberts, 1994; Gould, Stapley and Stein, 2001). A boundary separates what is inside the system from what is outside and it regulates transactions with the environment (McCullom, 1995a). The survival of a system depends upon continuous interchange of 'commodities' (materials, people, ideas, values, fantasies) with the environment. A boundary is a 'construct'. It can be conceived in different ways and serve different functions (Huffington and James, 1999; Diamond, Allcorn and Stein, 2004). The conception of boundaries ranges from concrete to abstract, from real to symbolic, and from physical to conceptual (Ehrlich, 2001).

Boundary setting is an essential aspect of the process of organizing (Hernes, 2004). We study boundary setting from a psychological perspective. We consider a so-called 'observable boundary' as a reification. This refers, for instance, to physical, spatial and time indications that can be drawn on an organizational chart. A psychological boundary emerges when an individual or group marks a differentiation. Subjective boundaries are experienced and perceived by those inside and outside the system. They are enacted in the interactions among representatives and can be experienced at different levels: the intrapersonal, interpersonal, group level, the organizational, the intergroup or systemic level, and finally the inter-organizational level (Schneider, 1991; Wells, 1995; Ehrlich, 2001). We assume there is a relationship between the system features and the boundaries as they are experienced: the characteristics of the organizational context provoke particular dynamics and these dynamics in turn shape the organizational context.

Because subjective boundaries are of an experiential nature, we use an interpretive approach (Schneider, 1991). This perspective on identity is rooted in constructionism rather than in social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978), which assumes that social identity is not easily changed. We focus on the dynamics of identity developed through interactions (Huxham and Vangen, 2005). The focus of the case analysis is on the dynamic and paradoxical nature of the boundaries. A boundary is not a clear cut line, but a 'region' or a 'point of encounter'. It is subject to constant negotiation and definition in an inter-subjective process (Ehrlich, 2001). Boundaries separate and connect, constrain and release, restrict and enable, contain and create anxiety. *"Once boundaries have been drawn, the possibility of relationship emerges"* (Berg and Smith, 1995, 115).

Hirschhorn and Gilmore (1992) define the boundary of identity as: *"who is, and who is not, 'us'?"* It is the group's understanding of who belongs to the group and who does not (Redlich and Astrachan, 1975). The boundary of identity is based on values and identification and defines the identity of a group. 'Sameness' or 'difference' refer to professional identity or culture (e.g. engineers, civil servants), membership of a particular local group (e.g. a project group, a hunting club) or it may have a more personal origin (e.g. gender, religion). Social identity is expressed through rituals, symbols or stories and the development of social norms. The identity of the system is the abstract characterization of a unity that persists over time (Merali, 2002). The

group members can enact membership in their interactions with each other and with non-members. The boundary of identity forms the psychosocial basis of group structure and is part of group development (Hartman and Gibbard, 1974). Becoming a formal member of a 'task group' is relatively easy. It means being part of a group of individuals employed in an activity system (Miller and Rice, 1967). Psychological membership takes more time to develop (McCollom, 1995a).

We analyze the case from the systems psychodynamic perspective on processes of organizing (e.g. Huffington, Armstrong, Halton, Hoyle and Pooley, 2004). From this perspective working in a collaborative is influenced by rational, conscious as well as by hidden, emotional and unconscious motives. In collaborative work, groups share collective, unconscious assumptions about other relevant groups. *"These assumptions are manifested in both conscious and unconscious processes, including projections, attributions, and stereotyping which shape the ensuing quality and character of their intergroup relationships."* (Gould, Ebers and Clinchy, 1999, 700) The pioneering work of Menzies (1960) has demonstrated that unconscious anxieties are often reflected in organizational structure and design, which function to defend against the anxieties in the workplace ('social defenses'). We use this perspective to understand the emergence of the boundary of identity in response to the tensions provoked by the organizational experience. We analyze how the process was formalized and the way in which this triggered particular dynamics in the collaborative group.

The boundary of identity and challenges for multiparty collaboration

A first challenge is to set boundaries around the collaborative that are sufficiently firm. Collaboratives are often confronted with a fuzzy boundary of identity and an unstable group identity (Kramer, 1991; Vansina, Taillieu and Schruijer, 1998). In such a case, the collaborative remains an instrumental task group with fighting factions (Zagier Roberts, 1994). Direct interaction, joint work, and a relatively stable membership facilitate the process of group development and identification with the collaborative. It allows the group to develop into a so-called 'sentient group' or 'identity group' to which individuals are prepared to commit themselves (Miller and Rice, 1967; Alderfer, 1987; McCollom, 1995b). Firm boundaries protect the participants from too much stress and uncertainty; they reduce the openness and complexity of the process, and provide some predictability and reassurance. Boundaries can contain the tensions of collaborative work and enable the group to work productively. When the participants manage to create a safe 'transitional space' (Winnicott, 1971) they can engage in creative experimentation, innovation, and imagine scenarios without immediate binding consequences. It provides them with a temporary space where they can express their questions, concerns and hopes, work them through, and jointly design the future.

Groups often develop their identity through comparing and differentiating themselves from other groups, often a common enemy. In doing so the group defends against its shadow aspects by splitting them off and projecting them on an outside group (Gemmill, 1986, 1993). Strong identification with the group of 'insiders' and disregard of other groups may lead to in-group/out-group dynamics. If the boundary of a collaborative is too firm it turns into a barrier and shuts out a vital part of the domain. A group can, for instance, deny the importance of particular stakeholders because they are experienced as a threat. In doing so, the system retreats from reality. A rigid boundary may block off the capacity of group members to relate, empathize, or deal appropriately with others. 'Organizational silos' emerge as the result of fragmentation caused by rigid boundaries and confront outsiders with a high threshold (Stein, 2004; Hernes, 2004). The boundary can be experienced as a 'grey zone' where differences, separation and otherness are stressed (Diamond, Allcorn and Stein, 2004). When this tension is not contained, it may trigger defensive behavior (e.g. exclusion, scapegoating, or group think).

A second challenge is to establish adequately fluid and flexible boundaries. Boundaries need to be adapted to changing conditions in the environment (e.g. change in policy) and to changes in the collaborative itself (e.g. new member, shifting objectives). In a multiparty logic, a 'convener' invites stakeholder representatives to sit around the table. It is critical to include those stakeholders who are affected by the issue, who are needed to address the issue, and those who have the power to support or block collaborative action (Chrislip and Larson, 1994). The boundary around a collaborative is by its nature permeable because the members in their role as representatives bring in the interests of their constituency. A fluid boundary enables an inclusive process where all stakeholders who represent the diversity, interdependence and complexity of the domain can participate in the dialogue. In this organizational logic, boundaries are negotiated and not so much managed or controlled. However, a boundary that is too fluid can lead to confusion, over identification with others, and a loss of focus. The challenge is to support a sense of group spirit without disrespect for the potential contribution of other stakeholders (Hirschhorn and Gilmore, 1992).

A final challenge is to create a multifaceted collective identity. A collaborative is composed of representatives with different social identities (e.g. engineers, public officers, farmers, residents). The representatives come together precisely because they are different and because they hold different perspectives (Zagier Roberts, 1994). Diversity makes up the essence of collaborative work. Multiparty collaboration is about trans-disciplinary work, or working *with* diversity, and not so much about inter-disciplinarity. The challenge is to maintain the diversity around the table, and to arrive at sufficient common ground and shared values to enable change and productive work.

The case: wet feet and dry marshes

Antecedents and context of the case

The river under study used to have an important economic value for the region (e.g. shipping activities, water mills). As early as the 17th century, interventions to reduce meandering were implemented to improve the use of the river. Although there has not been any shipping activity for the last 100 years, the river was still, at the time of the project, under the authority of the Navigable Waterways Administration. The policy of this administration was damming up and deepening the river, and straightening its course. Controlling the river was in the interest of farming activities in the valley. A consequence of this policy was a low ground water level in the valley leading to a deterioration of nature. On a regular basis, villages were flooded, while at the same time the valley was dry.

In the '80s the idea of 'integrated' water management gained in importance. In this vision, water is managed as a total system guided by the principle of sustainability. The focus is on safety against flooding by giving space to the river, and preservation and development of nature. In December 2000 the European Water Frame Directive was issued. Flanders translated the European policy in the 'Decree for integrated water management' (July 2003). The European Directive promotes integrated and participative management of river catchments. At the time of the case study, different administrations managed surface and ground water, the natural environment, and land use affecting the river: the Flemish government, provinces, municipalities, and local groups of volunteers. Moreover organizations of different kinds were involved: governmental, semi-official and non-governmental. Responsibilities in water management were unclear and dispersed.

Water management is by its nature a problem domain where the involvement of multiple stakeholders with different perspectives, claims and interests is required. Water is a powerful symbol of interdependence because it connects all actors. It demonstrates the conflicts in use, claims and interests. Some stakeholders, for instance, use ground water to purify it for drinking,

while others use the river to drain effluent from their industry. A water system includes not only surface and ground water (quantity as well as quality), but also the plants and animals living in and around the river, the chemical and biological processes, the river banks, the bottom of the river and the technical infrastructure. It includes the ecological and economical functions of the river and the valley. The new policy states that the boundaries of a catchment establish the system responsible for managing the river basin (e.g. across national borders), and not administrative structures.

The case study concerns a section of one of the 11 river basins in Flanders. As early as the 90's, before the European Directive, the Flemish administrations of Water and Nature Management (established in 1990) carried out studies in this valley. They developed a digital model of the area, installed monitoring devices, and adopted software programs for modeling. The unique ecological value of the valley came to the foreground since farming activities were in decline due to world wide competition. Today a large part of the territory is protected area (e.g. European Bird and Habitat Directives) and in the hands of the Flemish administration of Nature and of environmental groups.

The case story

The departments of Nature and Water (Flemish Administration of Environment) initiated the study project (June 2003 - March 2005) in a joint effort. For the conveners (a core group of four public officers) it was the result of a long process. The study represented the 'the jewel on the crown' and in their letter to the local authorities, they introduced it as 'the ultimate study'. The aim of the project was to develop an 'integrated vision' for the river valley, with a focus on flood prevention and protection of nature. The study had to align with several other plans related to river management, area planning and nature development which were being developed at the same time. The negotiated outcome of the study was a plan for the valley, supported by the stakeholders, that could eventually be integrated in nature and river plans on a wider scale. The initiators structured the project to organize participation (table 1). Federal, Flemish and provincial administrations, local authorities, three consulting firms and a wide range of stakeholder groups in society were represented in one of the substructures of the project.

Table 1: Organizational design of the project

| Subsystems | Representatives of | Responsibilities and role |
|--------------------|---|---|
| Coordination group | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Flemish and administrations for Water and Nature - Provincial administrations for Water and Nature - External consultants | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Control the process - Disseminate information - Establish and facilitate sub-systems - Communicate with external consultants |
| Planning group | Public actors: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Flemish administrations in water and nature management - Provincial administration | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Develop vision for the valley - Take decisions |
| Steering group | Civil actors: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consultation |

| | | |
|-------------|---|---|
| | - Local authorities (5 cities and villages) | - Participation |
| | - Organized stakeholder groups (e.g. farmers, industry, environmental groups, forest owners, and angling group) | |
| Work groups | - Members of planning or steering group | - Work out proposals for concrete solutions |
| | - Other interested participants | |

The project was organized in three phases: (1) what do we have? (environmental study and sectoral analysis); (2) what do we want? (visioning process); (3) what are we going to do? (planning of specific interventions). In the first phase the consultants, in collaboration with public officers from the catchment and sub-catchment planning, interviewed the 'sectors' or groups of organized stakeholders (e.g. hunting group, industry, housing, tourism). The purpose was to make an inventory of the pressures and claims on the water system by different sectors. The result was an overview of bottlenecks and opportunities. The conveners and consultants communicated the results of the first phase to the steering group and the planning group in a first joint meeting in March 2004.

In the second phase, the conveners set up three work groups to develop proposals for solutions: recreation (e.g. align the claims of hikers, bike riders and horse riders on the territory), hydrology (e.g. reconnect meanders) and land use (e.g. solve problems of illegal weekend cottages). In the meantime the coordination group tried to develop a scenario for the river valley based on simulation studies. In March 2005, at the end of the 22 months, the coordination group organized a second meeting of the steering group where they presented their provisional plan for the river valley.

Research approach

The project had started six months before we negotiated our participation.² We collected data over a period of one year (November 2003-2004). In March 2005 we also attended the second meeting of the steering group. The initiators of the project gave us access to documents, meetings and we were allowed to interview stakeholders. They were interested in our experiences and ideas on multiparty collaboration and open to discuss and learn from our feedback. Our role was a combination of observation and interventions (Schein, 1987).

In an action research perspective, we made the following interventions:

- Interviews (5) with the members of the coordination group;
- Feedback of our findings to the initiators and consultants;
- Interviews (12) with a selection of stakeholder representatives (e.g. hunters, local authorities, environmental group, and farmer group);
- Feedback of our findings to the initiators and consultants and discussion of potential bottlenecks and opportunities;
- Workshop at the end of the year with some members of the coordination group and a small number of interested external actors (e.g. administration, a municipality) to discuss our observations; and

- Final round of interviews (8) with members of the coordination group and some relevant stakeholder representatives to reflect on their experiences.

Over a period of one year, we observed meetings of the coordination group (8), the planning group (2) and the steering group (2). Our aim was to construct a rich, local and contextualized understanding of this particular collaborative experience (Geertz, 1973; Yin, 1994). In the case analysis we discuss the following questions: (1) what was the nature of the boundary of identity that emerged? (2) Which dynamics emerged at the boundary? (3) What attempts were made to include stakeholders and to develop a multifaceted identity?

Case discussion

1. Identification with the project: the boundary of identity

The institutional context influenced the formal structures that were established early in the project. The conveners were concerned about the legitimacy of decisions taken in the project. They relied on legal procedures in the field of nature conservation to establish membership of the project, to define the role and mandate of the subgroups, and to organize the process (table 1). The ‘coordination group’ was at the heart of the project and of our research. The river valley as an ecosystem was characterized by a number of physical features, such as water and land, water quality and water quantity, and surface or ground water. These areas defined the responsibilities of the administrations. The intricate nature of responsibilities and authority in the domain was reflected in the project. The administration responsible for water quantity, for instance, was at the heart of the project, but the administration for water quality was only marginally involved (steering group).

An important aspect at the start of the project was the issue of ambiguous authority relations. The largest part of the river section under study was not under the authority of the department of Water. Although there had not been any shipping activity, it was still managed by the Navigable Waterways Administration. The transfer of authority over the river to the department of Water had been on the political agenda for many years. The initiators had started the project assuming that a transfer was imminent. They acted as if they had the authority to take decisions and did not include the Navigable Waterways Administration in the conception phase of the study. Originally they were not even a member of the coordination group. Exclusion of this critical partner raised questions about the legitimacy of the project and the likelihood of implementation. The representative of the Navigable Waterways Administration pointed out they still had the power to refuse implementation if they did not agree. *“But we don’t intend to do that. As long as we are sufficiently involved.”* (Interview). They felt it should have been ‘their’ project.

The boundary of identity was strongly influenced by identification with ecological values and by the way the conveners identified with their professional role. The study was the result of a joint initiative of the departments of Land and Water. Both departments had been working together in the valley since 1995 in a project on ‘Integrated water management’. Submitting a joint project had been an ‘unprecedented’ and ‘very fruitful’ experience.

“Writing together, paying together, that is not self evident and it does not happen very frequently!” (A convener, interview)

“Trust among us is 100%” (A convener, interview)

The project was inspired by common values and resulted in a shared strategy based on the ‘natural space for water’ vision. This strategy, addressing the complex interactions between water and the surrounding land, was promoted as an alternative for the old “infrastructure and control” approach. The conveners strongly identified with ecological values which they promoted as central in this study. Most of them had been, or still were, active in environmental groups and

they knew the valley very well. When they started working at the departments for Nature and Water, established in 1990, they hoped they were in a position to make a difference. The initiators invested far more time than originally budgeted in the project. The firm boundaries around the group of conveners, based on strong identification with the values promoted in the project, generated the energy and drive to commit to the project.

One of the initiators talked about 'our' river and 'our' valley. We often wondered who he was referring to. During the final workshop we organized, he made a passionate statement. It clearly illustrates the values of the conveners, their assumptions about stakeholder inclusion and how this influenced the way they managed the boundaries in the project.

"The objective of the study is not open to discussion. Nature conservation must be realized. The circumstances are favorable right now. This draws important boundaries for us and for everybody. I want to protect those boundaries. The participative approach must also take those boundaries into account. The project proposal has foreseen to work a little bit in a participative way. We must take the actors into account. The agricultural study, for instance, is carried out by an independent organization. So we know the concerns of the farmers. We wanted to do a similar study for recreation last year but there were no resources. We have carried out a forest analysis. The boundaries of the study are: the danger of flooding and nature conservation. The other actors are in the valley. We have to do some sort of interactive process and take a decision. Participative management is a flexible notion. Depending on the circumstances you have to define and organize the degree of participation. I'm not in favor of extreme participation. The problem definition had been defined a long time before the start of this study!! (...) If we reach consensus with all the actors: how much would be left of nature? I don't believe in it. Nature interests always conflict with many other interests of individuals and groups. Who defends nature against all those individual interests? (...) Nature conservation is a very weak sector. In public participation nature always has to give in." (A convener, workshop)

A second source of identification was the way in which the conveners made sense of their professional role. They were convinced that the administration 'knows what is best for the public' and that it has to 'defend the public interest'. For the conveners, the study was about 'policy preparation'. In their role of defenders of environmental values in the interest of the public, they took a central position in the project, both in the coordination group and in other subgroups. This central position was enacted and expressed in different ways. For instance, all meetings of the coordination group were held in the building of the administration for Nature. The documents of the project were presented in a folder with a dandelion on the cover, which for some, became a standing joke. At one point an informal 'restricted committee' was established, made up of the conveners, the consultants, and the researchers. This group of 'insiders' met several times to discuss the feedback from our interviews and observations. The group was safe enough to openly talk about the worries and hopes of the participants and about the opportunities and pitfalls of the project.

Not all the members of the coordination group identified with the ecological values advocated in the project (table 2). There was a split between, on the one hand, the conveners and some sympathizing administrations, and on the other hand, the Navigable Waterways Administration. The administrations had had several conflicts in the valley. Following a severe flooding in the valley in 1998, for instance, the Navigable Waterways Administration had carried out civil engineering works at the riverbanks without construction permits. After a formal complaint they had to take away the illegal dams because they did not fit with the new policy of water and nature management. The result was a hostile relationship in the valley between those in favor of the environment and those in favor of engineering interventions.

"Lately a hostile image emerged around the environmental movement, due to what the administration has done. The authorities act in a pretentious way. They ignore the people. Communication has fallen still. They used to need us to become big and strong. But society

changes, underneath it is boiling. (...) The water company, for instance, wanted to build a collector. They wanted to install the pipes in the streets. They bullied the people. They tell them ‘the environmentalists don’t allow us in nature, so therefore we are forced to go through your streets. There is no point in objecting, because those of nature are in control.’ (...) They have unnecessarily stirred up emotions. The engineers were rude. If there is resistance, they blame the environmental groups!” (A representative of an environmental group, interview)

Table 2: Differences between the two central groups in the coordination group

| Convenors: Water and Nature Administration | Formal authority: Navigable Waterways Administration | |
|---|---|---|
| Vision | - The river as an ‘eco-system’: river and land - Historical perspective: ‘natural river’ | - A ‘controlled river’ as a separate unit - Civil engineering interventions |
| Priorities | - Nature development - Safety against flooding | - Safety against flooding - Control of the river |
| Professional identity | - Bio-engineers and system engineers - Representatives of the public interest | - Civil engineers and hydraulic engineers - Experts |
| Political and financial power | - Low budget - No political support | - High budget - Political support |
| Method of influencing | - No political influencing Technical evidence to support discussion - Consultation of stakeholders - No authority over the river | - Political lobbying - Technical evidence as solution - Unilateral interaction based on expert knowledge - Formal authority over river |

The antagonistic relationship between the administrations resulted in distrust, mutual stereotyping, blaming and exclusion. The convenors blamed their rival for being incompetent, not knowing what happened in the field, a radical approach, making mistakes, operating like a barony, and for not having any ecological awareness. The Navigable Waterways Administration accused the convenors of being ‘fundamentalist’, unrealistic and unfair. A representative of the Navigable Waterways Administration remembered feeling left out during the meetings of the coordination group. He criticized the way in which the convenors positioned themselves and how they dealt with the process. His colleague objected to the stereotyping by the convenors.

“We are in a strange situation now. They are studying a river over which they have nothing to say. (...) They are quite fundamentalist. They talk with everybody and then they don’t take that into account. (...) Everything starts from their vision. And we have to adapt the river. That is the

world upside down! (...) I feel ignored in the coordination meeting. They take note of what I say, but they simply continue what they are doing. (...) Is there sufficient support for what they are doing? (...) I felt alone in a room full with green ghosts. (...) I have the impression they want to prove they are right. And on that basis take over the authority over the river. I just want to avoid they make a plan that cannot be implemented. I want to protect them against themselves. (...) They have no money.” (A representative Navigable Waterways Administration, interview)

“We have done some interventions there in the nineties that were not appreciated by some. We have lost part of our credibility with some administrations at that moment. (...) At the time the river came to us on instruction of the Ministry of Agriculture, in the sixties. It was our task to straighten the course of the river in order to create more potential for farming. We have fulfilled that mission. The result was that the water is evacuated more quickly. Now there are different and good ideas. The administration Water says: ‘Those people from the Navigable Waterways Administration have ruined everything.’ But at that time the vision was totally different! That is not our fault. Our vision changed a little later than theirs, but it did change in the meantime. (...) The image they have of us is totally wrong and has nothing to do with who we are today.” (A representative Navigable Waterways Administration, interview)

The conveners had a hidden agenda that provided them with extra drive. They wanted to prove themselves, hoping this would speed up the transfer of authority over the river.

“The study is an instrument to force a number of things. We say that the Navigable Waterways Administration is slow and incompetent. For our own credibility we must be able to do it and do it quickly.” (A convener, interview)

The initial exclusion of a critical partner, strong identification of the conveners with ecological values and with their professional role established a firm boundary around a small group of ‘insiders’. There was stereotyping and distrust on both sides. This led to tense relationships and splitting in the coordination group: the two subgroups had difficulty to perceive the other organization as both good and bad. The conveners wanted to keep control over the process and defend their values, interests and objectives. The small inner circle tried to provide the identity of the project and to push their agenda, even though they had no formal authority. The ‘identity group’ seemed to be narrowed down to the small group of conveners, supported by the external consultants and to some extent by the researchers. This informal grouping provided the conveners with a ‘potential space’ (Winnicott, 1971) where they could openly discuss their hopes, doubts, worries and where they could safely engage in learning and experimentation with ideas and future scenarios. As we will demonstrate, this made them more confident in the way they organized and facilitated the process.

2. Fluidity of the boundary: the ambiguity of stakeholder inclusion

The conveners struggled with questions and dilemmas related to stakeholder inclusion. How should we organize a participative process? Are representatives of groups and organizations able to make conscious and well informed choices? At what moment should we include the stakeholders? They asked us to present different models for participation and were very interested in ways to involve stakeholders. The conveners had designed participative procedures and structures in the project. They encouraged the participants of the steering and planning group to participate.

“We are going to involve everybody as much as possible. How are we going to do that? The Federal government takes the final decision. We are going to organize consultation and participation according to the guidelines. (...) This is an important decision process. It is the first time in 45 years that we think about this river. Now is the moment. Information will be available. If you want your voice to be heard: now is the moment to come forward. (...) Take active part, give us your name and participate in the work group discussions!” (A convener, first joint steering and planning group)

However, they were uncertain about how to organize participation without endangering ‘their’ project. A number of assumptions about their role, the role and potential contribution of stakeholders, and about participation in general prevented them from actively including stakeholders in the dialogue. We discuss the assumptions of the main representatives and the way they organized the process. We conclude this section with some boundary dynamics which we observed.

At the start of the project, the conveners assumed that the administration needed to come up with a waterproof plan, elaborated by the coordination group and the external consultants. They only felt safe enough to engage in a discussion with other administrations and stakeholder representatives with a solid plan. For them participation meant ‘selling’ the plan to the main stakeholders, establish sufficient support, and then organize a meeting for the planning and steering group. Therefore they organized several bilateral consultation meetings with the farmers and local municipalities to make sure they agreed on the scenario. The conveners wanted to avoid a public attack of their plan during a steering group meeting.

“You cannot just throw your plan for the lions. You have to prepare the terrain. The only question is: how? (...) The steering group must get a finished product that we can defend. We do not intend to discuss it with them.” (A convener, interview)

It was obvious for the conveners that the objectives of the study could not be questioned. The conveners consulted the stakeholders (sectoral analysis) and after almost two years informed them of the plans developed by the experts (steering group). ‘Participation’ was used as an instrument to prevent resistance. The conveners were defensive about their project because they feared that most stakeholders in the valley were against their plans. This was partly due to a history of conflicts between the administration and other stakeholders in the valley. It had resulted in mutual stereotyping and a focus on what divided the parties. One representative of a municipality, for instance, talked about the ‘unrealistic green boys’ of the administration, while someone from the administration blamed the municipalities for being ‘incompetent’ and ‘only interested in short term plans’ because of their political agenda. However, the sectoral analysis and our interviews demonstrated that most stakeholders were in favor of an ecological agenda. For instance, some hunters collaborated with the environmental group (e.g. shooting wild ducks in the valley). A small number of farmers was involved in a project to promote ecological tourism. Most interviewees did emphasize that other interests had to be taken into account as well.

“The green movement has missed a tremendous opportunity by positioning themselves in a diametrically opposed relationship to the farmers... By first going to the people you can avoid a lot of problems.” (A representative of a local authority, interview)

Ambiguous assumptions about the legitimacy and competence of stakeholders emerged. During the workshop most participants agreed on the importance and relevance of gathering everyone around the table. They argued it was not always self-evident to identify which parties were legitimate stakeholders. A representative of a municipality stated, for instance, that collaboration between government organizations is relatively easy because those parties are ‘organized and competent’. The conveners only wished to negotiate with representatives of ‘organized’ stakeholder groups and administrations. However, the conveners did not believe the representatives were willing or competent to represent the interests of their constituency. According to them, the representative of the hunting group only participated in the work group ‘recreation’ out of personal interests and not to defend the interests of his group.

“We want to get away from taking into account local and individual interests that oppose general interests. It is not democracy, otherwise you cannot achieve anything. (...) The local governments play an important role. I am a man of administrations. The governmental structures are the result of democracy. You have to negotiate with the representatives. I don’t want to worry about

all sorts of interest groups. The local governments are important. Everybody has to do his job. But in practice the local governments do not represent the interests of all societal groups. (...) The problem is: politicians want to score. There is a conflict between short term interests and the interests of the community and interests that transcend boundaries." (A convener, interview)

"Everybody in the area must be kept informed and from time to time must have the opportunity to say something. (...) Maybe it sounds pejorative, but the local authorities are only interested when they can score over a period of six years: industry zones, bike lanes, flooded houses, and when they have their face in the press. A federal plan and a study of two years do not fit with their priorities." (A convener, interview)

In the organizational design, they had deliberately separated representatives of public authorities (planning group) and stakeholder representatives (steering group) to avoid confrontation. They were uneasy about direct interaction and uncertain about changing their way of managing a project.

"We made sure the federal and provincial administrations were separated from the interest groups. (...) Public institutions speak differently in the presence of societal groups. (...) It is a steering group that does not steer. Something is not right... At this moment it is the only way. There is no tradition." (A convener, interview)

One of the insights in the workshop was that there had been no role negotiation or clarification of the expected contribution of the stakeholders at the start of the process. The participants realized that the stakeholder groups had not been aware of their potential impact on the process. All stakeholders had assumed the administrations would, as usual, take the decisions.

"It is important to draw the boundaries of participation and to clearly discuss expectations with the participants. Telling them what their role and input can be and what will happen with their contribution" (A participant in workshop).

The participants of the workshop considered consultation or involvement of the general public as irrelevant and not constructive. One public officer gave an example of an urban planning project where she had tried to directly involve the public. She had been disappointed because the only response she got was: 'not in my backyard'. As is the custom in Flanders, public participation is reduced to an existing formal procedure. It is a way of avoiding direct interaction with the public.

"Participation of the public is formally organized. That is the procedure of 'public inquiry'. The public has 60 days to look at the plans and introduce a formal complaint. (...) In such a process you often get the most stupid remarks." (A convener, interview)

Most stakeholders we interviewed argued that a unilateral plan from the administration would not solve the problems in the valley. They were in favor of participation and wished to contribute to the development of solutions.

"We became aware of the fact that we have to deal with the totality of the problem in a different way. If we only intervene to solve separate aspects of the problem, the problem simply shifts. (...) It is also important that it is more differentiated now. It is not about water, and that's it. No, it is about rainwater, wastewater, etc. We did not make that difference before and therefore we did not see clearly what the essence of the problem was. (...) We all used to sit on our little island. Now we work more easily across boundaries. For instance around mobility and water." (A representative of a local authority, interview)

"On the Flemish level the idea of participation and alternatives is getting accepted. Public officers were used to being left in peace. 'We know better!' Now they are under fire." (A representative of an environmental group, interview)

Particularly at the start of the project, the conveners perceived participation of stakeholders as a threat. A dilemma that came up on a regular basis was the 'timing' of participation.

"In the beginning the direction is not yet established. Is it worthwhile to undermine the process before it even started? (...) I see a tension between on the one hand wanting to have a finalized product that is clear, so we know what to communicate. On the other hand, however, once it is clear, there is no time left for discussion and consultation. That is a bottleneck." (A convener, interview)

The conveners hoped the results of the simulations and modeling process would reduce uncertainty and would provide them with solid, scientific information to choose the 'best' scenario. They assumed that a perfect technical solution would be acceptable to all stakeholders, and would solve potential conflicts in the valley. Because of a strong belief in a technical solution, the conveners did not consider stakeholder or public participation as a necessity and heavily relied on the expertise of the consultants. For them the study was an "*engineering contract*" and not a project focusing on "*facilitation of a process*" (a convener). This implicit assumption was reflected in the project proposal. There was no budget or plan for 'communication'. The consultants expected the public officers to deal with that part of the process. The conveners, however, could not specify how they wanted to organize the 'communication process'. It seemed as if they had assumed that the technical scenario and the legal procedures and structures would be sufficient to manage the process.

A number of role assumptions also influenced how the conveners dealt with the process. During the workshop they talked about the tension of being engaged in a double role. The initiators primarily identified with the role of stakeholder, defending the interests of their administrations. They also found themselves in the role of 'convener' of the process. This role refers to one or more stakeholders who create a forum for dialogue among the stakeholders and persuade others to participate (Gray, 1996). They felt uncertain in the role of convener because it was unfamiliar to them and they lacked the skills and experience to facilitate a multistakeholder process. Some realized this double role could lead to a confusion of interests. Indeed, many stakeholder representatives we interviewed did not perceive the initiators as neutral and credible facilitators of a 'participative process'. For many the study was a vehicle for the administration to push the environmental agenda. Many stakeholders felt left out, not heard, they did not know how to take up a meaningful role, and they did not identify with the project.

"I have the impression that it is private business between the engineers and the administration. That is how I feel it. There is a lot of decadence, inertia and it is an arrogant administration." (A stakeholder, interview)

"It cannot be one-sided. The valley is in the first place a natural reserve, but it also has other sides." (A stakeholder, interview)

"The danger is that someone says: we know best" (a stakeholder, interview)

In the course of the project, the initiators decided to split the two roles. Two senior administrators took up the role of convener and president of the meetings. This created space for their collaborators to defend the interests of the administrations. They also handed over presidency of the 'work group recreation' to an acceptable partner in the project. This enabled them to participate as stakeholder in the group.

According to the conveners, the external conditions were not favorable for a participative process. The conveners realized that decisions were taken in places they had no access to. This undermined the credibility of the participative process. For instance, in the course of the project, a new Minister for Environmental Affairs, who was known to support farmers, was appointed after the elections. They feared that this shift would endanger the priority of the project and the chances of implementation. With the new minister, the transfer of the authority

over the river became unlikely. To add to the turbulence, the administrations were in the midst of a reorganization process. The status of the project was uncertain: nobody knew what would happen with the outcome of the study.

“The most important question of the stakeholders was related to the legal character of the study: how binding are the results? (...) The fact that it is called a ‘study’ is confusing. It sounds as if it is without engagement. The vision that will be developed... is it legally valid?” (A representative of a provincial administration, interview)

In the course of the process we observed some boundary dynamics expressing the ambiguity of the conveners to open up the boundaries of their identity group. A first observation was the dominance of the technical discourse. This created a gap between experts and laymen. For instance, when the consultants and specialists of the administration presented the models and scenarios for the valley, the participants of the planning and steering group complained it was too ‘technical’. The members of the ‘work group hydrology’ also needed a fair amount of technical expertise to be able to follow the discussions (e.g. read maps, interpret results of simulation, and understand the consequences of an intervention). This created a threshold for laymen to participate.

“To what extent can you disconnect the technical solutions from the participative process? To what extent are laymen interested in the technical part of the process?” (A public officer, workshop).

The technical tools were not designed as communication tools, but merely as technical instruments to discuss technical problems among experts. There was little attention for a ‘translation’ of technical language to the wider group of stakeholders. The result was that the consultants had a central role and a strong impact on the agenda of the project. As they carried out the sectoral analysis (interviews with organized stakeholder groups), they had the contacts, they possessed the knowledge and they were the ones crossing the boundaries. The simulations seemed to function as a transitional object (Winnicott, 1971) that helped them to contain the anxiety stirred up by the openness and complexity of the process. It provided the participants with a ‘plan’ to talk about’ and it facilitated the change process. The technical tools and solutions gave the participants some security in an extremely complex, highly visible and open process with an unknown outcome.

We were also struck by the uncertainty and fear of the conveners to engage in direct interaction with the stakeholder representatives. It seemed more comfortable for the initiators to work out solutions among experts and to avoid direct interaction with the actors in the valley. Although the planning and steering group formally represented a wide group of stakeholders, they were not used to keep responsibility around the table and to provide a forum for open dialogue. The conveners did not consider the stakeholders as legitimate and competent partners in the problem solving process. At one point, the coordination group did decide to organize a joint meeting of the steering and planning group. In the design of the meeting, however, they tried to avoid direct interaction. It was a long, technical slide presentation and there was hardly time for questions or discussion. The president of the meeting evacuated the few questions that came up to the work groups later in the process. The conveners stated it had been a strategic choice to only use the steering group for information sharing.

On reflecting back on their experiences, the participants of the workshop admitted it took courage to assemble potentially adversarial groups around the table. They feared they would not be able to deal with conflict and resistance. Due to the institutional context (‘the way we do things here’), the initiators argued they favored a ‘minimal’ form of participation. The firm boundary of identity around the small group of insiders reflected a top-down vision on participation. The ‘internal’ stakeholders decided to cross the boundary to inform or consult ‘external’ stakeholders (Finn, 1996). The conveners felt more comfortable with bilateral contacts

and negotiation. The downside of this approach was that it reinforced the belief that the project was an adding up of individual interests. It did not allow stakeholders to realize that their claims on the river valley needed to be restricted and aligned with those of others. By limiting the role of the stakeholders, they did not have a chance to become aware of their interdependent relationships and to experience the diversity of interests in the valley and the many different claims on the ecosystem. This reduced the complexity in the process and shut out a large part of reality. The consequence was also that a number of issues were not thoroughly discussed or avoided (e.g. water quality and compensation for the farmers to clean up polluted soil, financing of the technical interventions of the plan).

This ambiguity of inclusion and exclusion was also mirrored in the coordination group. For the conveners the 'ideal scenario', or so-called 'maximum' scenario, was a plan that fully integrated their ecological interests, without too many compromises. Paradoxically, in order to arrive at a 'natural' environment, many technical interventions were required (e.g. deepening the river, restore meanders, dismantling dams). The conveners wished to restore the valley to the situation of 50 years ago, even though there were many changes in the environment (e.g. more concrete surfaces, more rainfall, and more residents in the valley). The 'minimum' scenario, defended by the Navigable Waterways Administration, mainly focused on flood prevention and consisted of few additional interventions. This led to a paradoxical situation. The 'maximum' scenario turned out to be a unilateral scenario in the interest of one group of stakeholders (ecological interests). The 'minimal' scenario was a more inclusive scenario because it tried to take the interests of a maximum of stakeholders in the valley into account.

The conveners had been looking for ways to foster broad support for an ecological perspective on the development of the river valley, without questioning their objectives. Allowing other voices in seemed like a threat to their identity and to their objectives and solutions. Because of this anxiety some defensive dynamics emerged: a split in the organizational structures (planning/steering group), tightly controlled interactions, avoidance of an open dialogue, exclusion of stakeholders, stereotyping of 'outsiders' who were experienced as threatening, and projection of their inadequacy on others. Strong identification of the conveners, with the values promoted in the project initially resulted in a rigid boundary to avoid the threat of stakeholders watering down their ideal scenario.

3. Attempts to bridge diversity: steps towards a multi-faceted identity

The initiators were aware of the fact that policy makers had given them the opportunity to work out a qualitative and balanced plan. The project provided them with time and resources to foster support and deal with resistance. We will discuss how the coordination group, and the initiators in particular, used this opportunity and how they tried to loosen the boundary.

The project benefited from existing relationships and previous experiences in other projects (e.g. joint management of natural reserves by the administration of Nature and the environmental group). The conveners welcomed social scientists in their project. They were open to scrutinize their way of working and interested in alternative approaches. Our presence enabled the conveners and some core actors to use the informal 'restricted committee' and the workshop as a space to reflect on their assumptions and practices and to learn from each other.

The 'sectoral analysis' contributed to the process of loosening the boundaries. The findings (bottlenecks and opportunities) were integrated in later discussions and plans. It was carried out by the external consultants jointly with a representative of the Province, and the manager of the river under study. This approach helped to work across the boundaries and was welcomed by the municipalities and other sectors. After a year the initiators organized an extensive individual survey of all farmers in the valley. Although this consultation happened a year too late because of funding problems, it did help to establish a relationship with the farmers and to take their interests into account.

At the start of the project, the relationship between the initiators and the authority over the river was antagonistic. Soon after our feedback from the interviews, the conveners asked the Navigable Waterways Administration to participate in the coordination group. The representatives became regular members of the coordination group. At a one moment in the project, the Navigable Waterways Administration tried to take control of the process. They came to the meeting of the coordination group with five (instead of the usual one) representatives, including a senior manager. He criticized the accuracy of the scientific measures carried out by the consultants and suggested to duplicate the calculations in their laboratory. To emphasize his message he had brought two representatives of the laboratory along to the meeting. His interventions were direct and quite intimidating.

“Everybody around the table wants more space for the river. But if you go public with water levels that are higher than before, we lose face. You need more certainty before you start talking to the local authorities! (...) Politically it is impossible at this point to implement this plan, because the Minister supports the farmers association. In addition to that, the consultants admit their programme is full of bugs. My proposal is to make sure we are 100% certain before we start talking about this plan, in order to avoid panic.” (General manager of Navigable River Administration, coordination group)

At that point there was a shift. The initiators refused to cancel their appointments with the local authorities and farmers and they insisted on continuing the process even with imperfect data. One of the conveners explicitly referred to the discussions we had held the day before during the workshop.

“I am sure extra checking will not change anything fundamentally, even if you find a little mistake here and there. The challenge remains the same: how are you going to communicate this to the local authorities? If we postpone it for two more months to check the figures, the issue is still the same and we will only have lost time. (...) We have learned the opposite in a workshop yesterday: the more unilateral we develop our plan, the more resistance we can expect from external actors. And the less opportunity will be left to take their concerns into account. Therefore I strongly plead for communication with the local authorities as soon as possible.” (A convener, coordination group)

The conclusion of the meeting was that consultation of the key stakeholders would continue as planned and that a representative of the Navigable River Administration would join the conveners on their visits. Gradually the relationship seemed to improve. The initiators eventually acknowledged that their plans had been too idealistic and not well grounded in scientific evidence. A more realistic and constructive relationship with the formal authority of the river and an integration of competencies and insights increased the likelihood of an acceptable, technically sound and realistic plan, and it enhanced chances for implementation.

The work groups, established in the course of the project, also contributed to increase the permeability of the boundary around the collaborative. Although not foreseen in the initial design, they proved to be the most suitable context to work across the boundaries of different interest groups (e.g. recreation: industry, tourism, nature conservation, local authorities). The work groups consisted of members of the planning and steering group and other interested or relevant actors and were a cross-section of types of stakeholders. These smaller groups allowed for direct interaction and for ‘relational practices’. Relational practices enable different parties to engage in actions and interactions: through ‘content’ they engage in a ‘relation’ (Bouwen, 2001; Wenger, 1998). The work group recreation, for instance, organized a trip to a project in a natural reserve to learn from that experience. The work group hydrology visited particular parts of the river to see what the effects of different scenarios would be in the field. For the conveners it was a new experience to involve ‘outsiders’ in the process while the scenario was not finalized yet.

“We don’t even know where we’re going. We try to stay on top of the process and we attempt to involve others from that position.” (A convener, interview)

As the process moved along, the conveners cautiously tried to integrate the voice of other stakeholders. At the end of our research, the conveners were seeking to find a balance between on the one hand, defending the objectives of their constituency and the values of their study, and on the other hand, the legitimate claims of other stakeholders in the domain and the restrictions and realities in the environment (e.g. financial aspects). They gradually became aware of the necessity to enlarge the boundary of identity in order to arrive at an encompassing assessment of the problem domain and to work out optimal, realistic and sustainable solutions for the river valley.

Conclusion

This paper analyzes the efforts of a group of public officers to develop an integrated plan for a river valley. We have documented the assumptions of the key representatives and the dilemmas they were facing when confronted with the wish and need of stakeholders to participate in the process. The boundary of identity proved to be a useful concept to demonstrate how strong identification with the values and interests of a central party hindered the inclusion of the stakeholder voices. Loosening the boundaries was experienced as a threat to the passionately defended ecological interests of the study and the identity of the initiators. The process was characterized by ‘management’ and control of the boundaries and not so much by ‘negotiation’ of boundaries. Within the 22 months of the project, the conveners did not succeed in developing a multifaceted identity of the study with which a wide group of stakeholders could identify. Although strongly opposed by some, the values of the initiators remained dominant in the process. As the process moved along, the conveners did try to loosen the close boundaries they had drawn around the collaborative. They gradually succeeded to let go of control and to adapt their ‘idealized’ vision of the future.

This case study demonstrates that the conveners of the change process were faced with several challenges in managing public policy issues (Anderson and White, 2003). Because technology was so complex, they needed to collaborate with external experts. They experienced the effects of globalization, in the sense that they needed to adapt their way of managing environmental issues as a result of European policy. There was pressure, from policy as well as from the stakeholders, to manage the process in a ‘participative’ way. The conveners seemed caught between policy makers, the technical experts and the stakeholders in the valley. While they were defending their interests and values, they were also looking for an appropriate role and a new identity. The project was a search process in how to design and facilitate a complex process with an uncertain outcome, involving the relevant stakeholders concerned by the problem domain.

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