

Knowledge management in complex policy processes

Managing for certainty, consensus and consolidation

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Abstract

Policy processes requires knowledge as input to make decisions. Knowledge can deliver the rational foundations for choosing a policy option and prevent policy makers from silly decisions. Knowledge also lays the base for argumentation and is therefore a helpful resource to debate and defend policy options.

In this paper, an analysis is given of the role of knowledge management in policy processes. In order to do so we want more clarity about the question: what is knowledge and what role does knowledge and subsequently knowledge management play within policy processes? To start with the second question, there are at least three key functions for knowledge in policy processes. The first is to find the truth about the effectiveness and appropriateness of policy options. In order to take decisions, policy makers and politicians want insight into uncertainties, costs and benefits etc. So, knowledge management has to organise the production of relevant and valid knowledge. However, this knowledge is seldom undisputed. Actors with different frames of reference has different interpretations of the 'reality' and knowledge is often used as argumentative ammunition in policy debates. Report wars are often the order of the day. So, there is also another ambition for knowledge management: reaching consensus or shared interpretations about the relevant 'facts'.

Many accounts of the role of knowledge in policy processes stops on this point (see Van de Riet, 2003; Van Eeten & Ten Heuvelhof, 1999). There is, however, another important aspect of knowledge management. We can call it the dimension of *consolidation*. The first and second ambition can lead to totally solitary policy processes, distinct islands in the enormous ocean of public policy, society and private interests. Policy processes have a history and they have a future. In order to fit a policy process within this ongoing development, there have to be fruitful couplings, backward and forward.

Some of these couplings are juridical, organisational or otherwise. But important couplings can be reached when the involved actors and their affiliated organisations, are willing to mobilise their past experiences (for the backward couplings) and when they are willing to develop their expertise upon the experiences derived from the current policy process and use these in future projects. We now can conceptualise the ambition of consolidation as expertise management: trying to influence the mobilisation, development and use of expertise of actors and organisations within the wider policy environment of a policy process.

Definitely, behind the three central ambitions: certainty, consensus, and consolidation, are very different notions about the first question we stated, what is knowledge? In table 1, we have summarised the main differences.

Element	Ambition	Certainty	Consensus	Consolidation
<i>Knowledge</i>		Explicated facts, synthesised in reports	Shared interpretations between participating actors	Mobilised expertise from actors and their organisations
<i>Philosophical background</i>		Positivism; rationalism	Post-positivism; the argumentative turn	Pragmatism
<i>Focus of knowledge management</i>		The quality of the report	The quality of the process	The quality of the trajectory
<i>Learning as</i>		Cognitive	Social	Experiential
<i>Results of knowledge processes</i>		Validated facts, uncertainty reduction	Shared knowledge, ambiguity reduction	Capacity building, trajectory expertise

The possibilities for knowledge management to realise these three ambitions differs for each of them. The quality of the product can be managed to some extent. The same holds for the quality of the process. However, there are many ‘unmanageable’ aspects when it comes to realise high quality knowledge and broad consensus about the interpretation of it. But most limited is the role for knowledge management when it comes to the ambition of consolidation. The underlying conception of knowledge, as a highly personal and changeable asset, give few opportunities to manage this. Knowledge management is supplemented by spontaneous processes of self-organisation.

Content of the paper

This paper starts with arguing that knowledge management of policy processes in essence have three ambitions: *certainty* about the facts, *consensus* about their interpretation, and *consolidation* of relevant experiences. In the light of current approaches of policy analysis, the challenge of consolidation is presented here as an often neglected but crucial object of knowledge management. A theoretical elaboration is given about the different (philosophical) backgrounds of these ambitions. A case study of the policy process around the Long Term Vision on the Western Scheldt is presented in order to illustrate these theoretical notions. This policy process was organised by ProSes, a Dutch-Flemish project organisation which has to deliver a concrete package of measures to raise the safety in the estuary, to enlarge the ecological values of the system and to deepen the fairway to the Port of Antwerp. After that, specific attention is given to the managerial value of spontaneous self-organising processes in order to realise the three ambitions of knowledge management for policy processes. The conclusion elaborates upon the relation between knowledge management as intended action in contrast to knowledge management as self-organisation between semiautonomous actors within complex and dynamic processes.

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