

Deconstructing the stakeholder concept

- Extended abstract -

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Many regions in the world are becoming predominantly vulnerable to the impacts of a changing climate and may need some form of adaptation strategies to deal with it. When dealing with adaptation strategies special attention has been drawn towards decision processes through which the capacity of authorities, experts, interest groups and the general public is addressed. The underlying rationale is that through participation is possible to increase the capacity of collective action and, in doing so, to increase the capacity of a social system to better respond to climate change and react towards eventual adversity (Webler et al., 1995). However, participatory processes are plagued by assumptions and judgements about the behaviour of stakeholders, their role and function in a policy making process, that unavoidably influence the results of decision making. In this paper we address this issue, and explore the concept of behavioural system in selecting stakeholder groups, arguing that it is an indispensable milestone in the process of developing adaptation policies to deal with the uncertainties associated to climate change.

Deconstruction is a process of carefully analysing and making apparent the assumptions, judgments and values that underlie social arrangements and intellectual ideas. Participation in decision making processes is dominated by the existing social arrangements and intellectual ideas of the individuals or institutions involved in the process; this means that the assumptions, values and judgments are the basis for their behaviour in any future decision making process.

In the case of the stakeholder-concept, socially constructed definitions of stakeholders have varied throughout the last decades. In general, the literature on stakeholder concept and stakeholder involvement suggest that we may find wide-ranging groups that have the right and are entitled to participate in decision making processes without making any distinction among stakeholder groups. Usually we could say that this is done to reduce the complexity of making choices, suggesting that all stakeholder groups have the same goal (Hill 1996,

Brink 2000). So, in the literature we find stakeholders as a “grey mass” under which many different social groups are understood. They are described as an intrinsic part of decision making, e.g “a new species in the ecosystem of decision-finding and governance structures and processes” (Hemmati, 2002:2). Yet, the problem starts when these stakeholders suddenly are more than just a grey mass and behave in such different ways that the “so good known” expression “including stakeholders” in decision finding and making processes becomes a trouble and must be complemented with conflict resolution (Aureli and de Waal 2000). To this end, it is necessary to recognize that the effectiveness of any adaptation strategy depends on the acceptance of those that are affected by it. What we suggest is to take into account stakeholder behaviour as a way to classify stakeholders groups. As such we propose the idea of behavioural system to identify stakeholders and its decision processes. These processes reflect how groups behave. In this paper we explore the concept of behavioural system and argue that it is an indispensable milestone in the process of developing adaptation policies to deal with the uncertainties associated to climate change.

Usually in the literature power is given to the “right” that some groups might have in decision making processes. Another argument pro participation is that by participating in creating a solution, a sense of ownership is developed and the solution would be more efficient. If we answer the question by the “rights”, we can divide the “stakeholder concept” in an ethical-normative, in a strategic and in a behavioural component. The ethical-normative component build the legitimate basis for deciding which group have to be involved in the process and which rights they are entitled for. Additionally, the strategic component might suggest us which groups have the capability to be involved. In this case, the component “power” will be very important for deciding which groups should participate in a particular process. These first two components can be find in general in the literature on “stakeholders and their involvement” starting already by Freeman (1984). Finally, we have adapted the behavioural component as an indispensable part of the concept, which builds the socially constructed context for actions of a group under a collective scheme.

Out of our experience with different projects in which stakeholder involvement was a necessity and our reflection on these implications two questions came to us: How does stakeholders, that are engaged in the design of a decision, balance their behaviour as reflective involvement in their various communities of practice with their behaviour as joint engagement in decision design within a political context? And can we include past behaviour of stakeholders in policy design to ensure a smooth policy making process?

Dealing with uncertainty to climate change, then, is a change of belief that influences behaviour at a systemic level. In this approach we consider decision making as a process

embedded in a social environment, shaped by particular cultural perceptions and shared beliefs about the cause and nature of resource management and planning decisions. Socially constructed context for actions to react to climate change are given by behavioural system acting under a collective scheme. Thus, collective schemes outline the accepted definitions of what is usual or unusual, i.e. what is out of place or congruent. So far, collective schemes are outputs and inputs to the socially embedded knowledge that succeed upon group practices and can be the same across different stakeholder groups. Thus, the transitions and the acceptance of new policies are determined rather by behavioural systems than by the so-called stakeholder groups. Under this paradigm, behavioural systems and its processes become an inseparable part of planning uncertainty under climate change and developing adaptation policies.

Analysing stakeholders as behavioural systems is based on the premise that stakeholders as participants of a process are complex systems. As such, changes in one aspect (belief) within the decision making process necessarily will affect the on-going decision process. Our argumentation is based on the comparison of different case studies involving a wide range of stakeholders in which different stakeholder groups acted as same behavioural groups. We looked explicitly at the assumptions, judgements and values underlying their decisions. We limit ourselves to the topic “water and climate change”. Examples from different European projects will be presented. These projects were implemented in the same time. We focus on year “2008”. During the conference, a short introduction to the projects will be done and the matrix for classifying behavioural groups will be explained to the audience. Main aim is to support the discussion around this issue.

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