Political Reflection

17-06-2022 – Group 7

Introduction

Policy making based on analysts' advice is not straightforward or merely technical: The decision-making process and all the actors involved have a great influence on the implementation of policies. How and if technical advice is optimally used, and by extent if policies reap the expected results, depends highly on the political process while implementing these policies (Cerna, 2013).

Looking at the Overijssel river flood problem, such a political process was simulated by having the key actors and their employed analysts discuss this problem in debates, using a model simulating the system and substantiating different policy options.

Within that debate our role was being analysts for the transportation company, and we even represented them in the first debate. However, we have written our report to advice Dike Ring 1, Doesburg (referred to as the client from now on). Therefore, even though we have generated political insights from multiple perspectives, this political reflection will predominantly be written from the perspective of the Dike Ring Doesburg. To be able to write from that perspective well, Dike Ring 1 was contacted to understand their objectives.

Based on our experiences in the debate as analysts and literature the following challenges might arise when Dike Ring 1 takes the advice through the decision-making process. The first challenges are related to the issues surrounding proper use of scientific analysts' advice, the last two is more policy related and based on our personal experience in the debate.

Challenges & Tensions

The power of quantification. The manifest of Saltelli et al. (2020) warns for the power of numbers. Within the debate the group was stuck on the death rate for too long. It was not clear if the death rate was per year, per region, or something else. The group took a long time discussing this number, because the assumptions and its meaning were unclear. When bringing advice to the policy table it should be made clear that uncertainty is involved in these numbers and their values may vary in runs, preferably by stating the assumptions underlying these numbers as well. As an analyst one is not participating in the actual debates, so when numbers like these take the spotlight and are almost the centre of the debate, analyst are not there to explain that this number is also just an estimation.

Knowledge of the model. When pleating a certain policy strategy based on model figures/numbers, it is imperative to fully understand what the figures/numbers are saying and how they were retrieved. Policy makers did not create the figures and numbers, which makes it hard to explain the figures beyond the information they have gotten from the analysts. As van Enst et al. (2014) states it: There is a lack of knowledge on the politician's side. This can severely slow down the policy-making process as analysts are not present to fill the knowledge gaps. This was the case in the debates for the Ijssel, where analysts were called upon to explain numbers or figures. Next to unclarity, it also makes it hard to hard to fact-check facts and figures of other parties. During the debate when actors made statements based on certain numbers, they were hardly fact-checked. This made it quite easy to just throw around statements of which, afterwards, some actors even stated that they had been invented altogether. According to Pestel (1982) when politicians are faced with for example elections, they tend to simplify complex problems to obtain fast results and fix easier problems. Fact-checking requires a lot of information about assumptions and input of the model used by the other parties. This materialises in models losing their power as almost any desired output can be facilitated by tweaking the model (van Enst et al., 2014).

(Un)clear definitions. When advising and discussing a policy, it should be considered that the actual technical specifications of these policies are understood. When these actors disagree over things as context or possible outcomes a problem of ambiguity arises (Stirling, 2010). For example, the definition of the room for river policy appeared to be very unclear during the second debate. Where will the river be widened? Or will it be deepened? And how? Different definitions might lead to parties agreeing or disagreeing to something they do not actually agree to. Not introducing and aligning the visions of the different actors on the system and how they view it leads to misunderstanding (Pestel, 1982). Furthermore, when all actors run scenarios with different specifications of the policy in mind, their result will not be comparable.

Objectivity of the analyst. While advising policy makers by creating models and simulating the real-world problem, it is hard to stay objective as an analyst. Real world problems are never fully captured in a model. Resulting in a model based on numerous assumptions. While analysts try to stay objective and substantiate these assumptions with scientific knowledge, it remains impossible not be biased. Thereby, analysists have to do with the employer-employee dependency. Since one is working on behalf of someone else, it is all the more difficult to remain objective. Even though they are trying, scientists automatically supply their policy makers with knowledge within their own normative forms (Sarewitz, 2004). One's view on the world is always of impact on how problems are framed and systems are demarcated. Automatically the modelers bias is thus incorporated in the model and its result. This leads to models not being 100% objective and thus open to interpretation.

False promises. While trying to implement your policy advise, there are stakeholders with other interests and objectives. This requires compromising and making agreements on ways to compensate the actors that are disadvantaged. Within the debate these kinds of agreements were made as well. However, the compromises were often(too) easily made by promising things which are not that simple. For example, for Room for the River in Dike Ring 1 farmland will be removed and opposition from the client was easily countered by promising to just add the land elsewhere. Which in reality is not possible. While entering the policy making phase it is good to be aware of false promises being made to keep other actors satisfied. Using a lot of counter facts and/or promises as a counterargument to disqualify points made, is an example of strategic use of scientific knowledge according to Van Buuren & Edelenbos (2004).

Smaller actor. Since dike ring 1 is one of the most flood prone areas within the areas considered, their position within the debate is more vulnerable and the consequences of the outcome have more impact on their safety than it might have on other areas. This leads to one of the specific challenges for dike ring 1: being the most vulnerable one in the actor arena. Next to that, Dike ring 1 is a rural area. Which means that other actors consider them a smaller less powerful actor, see figure 1. Thus, their position is a hard one to be in. Within the debate this was solved partly by being represented by the province, but within the province, the three dike rings represented by them had different objectives as well. Furthermore, dike ring 1 was paired with dike ring 2. Due to having less power it can be harder to accomplish implementing the most preferable policy for the client.

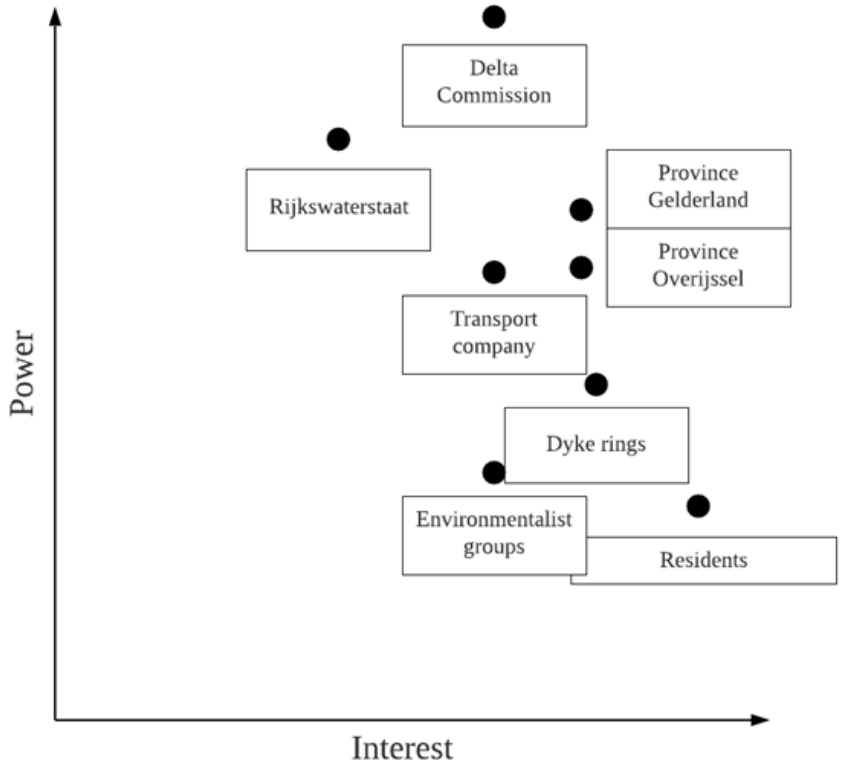

Figure 1: Mendelow's Power-Interest Matrix, applied to key-actors of the Room for the River Project

Representation. Another challenge that both Dike Ring 1 and we encountered during the decision-making process was good representation. Elaborating on the example mentioned above: the farmers were represented by their dike ring and then the dike ring was represented by the province. When arriving at the point of the relocation of the farmers there was some objection from the province. However, they were easily satisfied by getting compensation. When it might well be the case that the farmers will not actually accept the money. In this case representation was not sufficient and thus the need of the farmers was not acceptably argued. This challenge was also noticed when, during the first debate, we as analysts had to represent the transport company because they were not present. The lack of information on their needs resulted in us poorly arguing their objectives.

Strategies to overcome challenges and tensions

This section will explicate how the eight challenges mentioned beforehand can be tackled and which measures were taken in the analysis to account for some of these challenges. Some of the measures are implemented in our analysis. Others are more focused on the policy process part and would be our advice to the client to have a stronger position within the debate.

Strategy objectivity. We have a unique position having experienced the debate as the transport company, as analysts of the transport company and writing the report as the analyst for Doesburg. This resulted in us having a good understanding from both the roles as active actor and analyst. With the first debate we practiced dividing the political and the scientific, by stating facts and not perse giving an opinion. Within this report, we aimed to attain objectivity by including various numbers, figures and methods, thus leaving the client to see the results for themselves. Next to that, multiple

scenarios were tested, to again provide a better-informed strategy to our client from different views. While taking these measurements to ensure a high level of objectivity, we were still aware that 100% objectivity is impossible to achieve (de Bruijn, 2015).

Strategy clear explanation of model figures and facts. To provide the client with a thorough and scientific base to argue their preferred policy strategy, it is necessary to supply understandable advice. To prevent the client from being unable to answer counterarguments, potentially invalidating the model and its results, visualisation of the data was done with simple and easily readable figures. Furthermore, the units used within the measurements were explained and the explanation of the figures was detailed. If the project would continue, a short briefing on how to explain the model to other actors would be included in the analysis presentation.

Strategy improving the position of the client. To better advise the client, which was different than our client during the debates, a thorough understanding of their objectives and the actor playing field in general is necessary. This was accomplished by connecting with the client. As such, it was made clear that representing people in Doesburg is the main objective. Hence, the farmlands being used for Room for the River without compensating the farmers was not an option. With this in mind the analysis could be focused on finding a policy framework that aligned with that objective. Furthermore, an actor scan was carried out. Appendix A included in the report, includes information about all the actors involved in the policy making process. Obtaining an overview of the relationships and actors at hand in this problem made it easier to understand the position of the client. It ensured having clear criteria and experiments to be executed, to provide a strong scientific frame for the client to enter the policy process.

Define definitions upfront. Another strategy that could have been implemented but was not done in our case due to the client not being our initial client during the debates, concerns the specification of terms. One of the challenges that became apparent in the debates was the lack of consensus on certain terms and or specifications of policies. Specifically, the practical implications of Room for the River were undefined and caused a lot of unnecessary debate. As an analyst it should be first instinct when such a policy or vague term is encountered to notify the actor. Because advising on a policy based on a model in which the policy might be wrongly defined, is counter effective (Stirling, 2010).

Strategy reflection

To make sure the advice given is not improperly used, common challenges and tensions were introduced. Based on literature and personal experiences gained throughout the course -debates these challenges were deepened. To cope with and overcome those challenges, strategies were proposed. Some of which were partly integrated into the report and others that could have been implemented in hindsight, but were not due to various reasons such as time constraints, or changing our problem owner.

The strategy of being as objective as possible as analysists, by providing a mostly factual report trying to exclude as much bias as we could and being transparent about choices made, has succeeded well in our opinion. Realising that full objectivity is not possible as stated earlier, doing the most was the goal. Staying objective while representing the transport company during the debate was less successful. Most of the times the question could be factually answered or diverted, but some direct questions about which policy we preferred were less easy, since our client had explicitly asked us not to give anything away. One way to have mitigated this, was to have stated what we wanted but at the same time have clearer leverage, or to have something others want from you. For instance, having evidence that people would lose their jobs and that would be bad for the economic prosperity of the region. Furthermore, it is hard to say if the clear communication of the model and its results was a successful strategy, because in our opinion this is done best by communicating with the client in real life and this was not possible. But all tables and figures were

descripted. However, now it was not possible to explain the assumptions behind the model and results, which we would have done in real-life.

Aligning with the actors' views could have been done better. As mentioned above real-life communication works way better for achieving clarity. Their objectives were only obtained through mail and one short meeting completely in the beginning. We did execute an actor scan as mentioned, to correctly place them in the playing field, though that was harder with them being a relatively small player.

One final point of a more general reflection. Everyone seemed quite in line in terms of objectives in the beginning. Everyone wanted to make coalitions, everyone wanted to prevent flooding, prevent loss of life etc. However, once it came down to prioritising within the debate, the tensions really became clear. Where 'preventing flooding' meant dike heightening for one actor, the other thought it was clear they meant 'room for the river'. This is part of the political game that not everyone wanted to give away their strategy at first. This is not a bad thing per se however, it is useful to know that if you knowingly keep things behind, you might also lose momentum.

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