



# Reframing long-term controversies in transboundary river management. *The intermediate role of puzzling and powering in tackling wicked problems*



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## ABSTRACT

In this paper we analyze how the process of visioning about ‘wicked’ long-term policy issues developed as a result of co-evolving processes of “framing”, “puzzling” and “powering”. In this article we discuss a case of cross-border joint visioning on multi-purpose land use planning in a multi-stakeholder process on the transboundary river Scheldt, whose estuary is shared by the Netherlands and Belgium, in which three different rounds can be distinguished, showing a different logic to organizing the processes of framing, puzzling and powering when the focus on the long term diminishes. This analysis helps us move beyond an often naïve perspective of beyond multi-stakeholder processes. We conclude that productive interaction between framing, puzzling and powering is more easily realized in situations of drafting a long-term vision, compared to situations in which long-term visions have to be translated in shorter-run implementation projects.

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## 1. Introduction

River management is no longer an issue of managing the water between the river banks only. Prompted by social and environmental concerns, river managers have started to look beyond the water to include land-use planning and people, to arrive at more integrated approaches to land and water management. This increases the number of stakes and knowledge claims considerably (Warner, van Buuren, & Edelenbos, 2012).

Land-use planning normally affects a wide variety of stakeholders. Giving these a voice in multi-stakeholder processes (MSPs) (Warner, 2007) with a view to more integrated and legitimate long-term results has been in vogue since the late 1990s. Notably Healey (1998) and Innes and Booher (1999) have been influential in promoting a consensus-building approach in complex multi-actor arenas such as land-use planning. Guided by a constructivist approach they advocate frame reflection, in recognition of the fact that negotiation always involves a strategic game of framing and re-framing. The reintroduction of value rationality in long-term planning processes, in which values are put center stage, is a way ‘to counteract the pure instrumental rationality that pure instrumental rationality that encourages an analysis of trends and extrapolates them in order to arrive at conceptions of social and economic futures’ (Albrechts, 2004: 749).

As Mitchell (1990) has noted for integrated water management, integration can be more productively arrived at when contemplating the future rather than the present. Multi-stakeholder processes likewise seem to be highly suitable for long-

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term visioning processes based upon joint frame-reflection and reframing. In multi-stakeholder literature, collaborative, often Habermasian consensus-seeking approaches to governance are presented as the preferable alternative to an adversarial approach. But why would parties involved go for that? Conflicting parties will still calculate the costs and benefits of different avenues of dealing with conflict: litigating, alternative dispute resolution or walking away (their 'BATNA'). They may 'power' and 'puzzle' (Hecló 1974) as an alternative or complement to consensus-building. Without underestimating how much the focus on reframing and the possibility for changed self-understandings adds to our understanding of multi-stakeholder negotiation processes, we therefore concur with Flyvbjerg (1998) who has influentially argued for bringing politics back into planning studies. In this article we therefore claim that for competent long-term visioning and conflict resolution not only frame reflection and fact-finding is necessary, but also powering, 'fighting' (Warner & van Buuren, 2009a).

We shall refer to the three central activities within a (conflictive) long-term visioning process as *reframing*, *puzzling* and *powering* (van Buuren, Vink, & Warner, 2014), and analyze how powering, puzzling and framing relate in different stages of a substantial transboundary river management process, from visioning to implementation, when the focus on the long-term diminished. *Frame reflection* is the process in which actors learn about each other perceptions, values and interpretations with regard to long-term developments and desired futures. *Puzzling* is about the process of fact-finding and information gathering, about realizing 'negotiated facts' which are acceptable and authoritative for all involved actors to be used as underpinning of policy agreements. *Powering* concerns the concrete debate about what to decide. In the present article we discuss interaction strategies used to organize the processes of framing, puzzling and powering in their mutual interaction, applied to a concrete case, and pay special attention to time frames/framing: the time horizon against which actors draft their strategies. After presenting our theoretical framework, we present a case of a rather controversial policy process in three 'rounds' (visioning, treaty-making, and post-treaty politicking) in which different routes were chosen to deal with the delicate process of framing. This can be seen as a sign that there is a relation between the way in which the tracks of framing, puzzling and powering are integrated and the results of the governance process. We conclude our paper with some preliminary insights and questions for further research. We shall first update the history of visioning for the transboundary Scheldt estuary at the start of the millennium. Our earlier work of the case in hand (van Buuren, 2006; Warner & van Buuren, 2009a), focused largely on the lead-up to the Dutch-Flemish agreement of 2005. After 2005 however, when the focus turned to translating agreements in implementation projects, Scheldt politics developed a rather different dynamic (Roovers, 2012), an aftermath that continues until today. The same holds true for the process of visioning preceding the agreement of 2005. We will therefore describe three clearly identifiable 'rounds' of policy negotiation (Teisman 1995) separately and compare the dynamics of framing, puzzling and powering in these different rounds, especially to find out how the dynamics of puzzling, powering and re-framing evolves when the focus on the long-term diminishes.

## 2. Methodology

To analyze the case and elaborate the co-evolving dynamics between the processes of framing, puzzling and powering, we applied an in-depth qualitative comparative case study design. For the first round we were able to conduct a longitudinal case study in which the first author observed approximately 30 meetings during the policy process. In addition some 20 in-depth interviews were conducted, and numerous documents were analyzed. Preliminary findings were extensively discussed with members of the project organization. For a detailed description, see van Buuren (2006, 2009).<sup>1</sup>

In the interviews we asked the respondents to walk us through the policy process in detail. Especially they were asked to reconstruct the negotiation process, their own problem frames and the development of the fact-finding process. We also asked them to reconstruct the way in which their problem frames evolves and to explain these changes by examining the role of political power, or the findings of the various research projects commissioned.

For respondents it is often difficult to acknowledge that they changed their problem frames due to bargaining or due to new factual insights. After all, acknowledging that you have changed your beliefs would seem to imply that your former beliefs were incorrect. However, respondents can often describe such a development very well in other actors. We have cautiously drawn on the latter.

For the second round we could rely upon various existing analyses (Verhallen, 2012; Roovers, 2012). In addition we were able to reconstruct the development in problem frames and to devise the temporal linkages which can be found with developments in the processes of powering and puzzling drawing on secondary material like newspaper articles and policy documents. Brief, we reconstructed the processes of powering, puzzling and frame reflection, analyzed the evolution in the frames actors used and try to relate developments in these frames to the evolution in both the processes of powering and puzzling.

A particular frame type in this respect concerns time frames, both pointing forward and back in time (Eshuis & van Buuren, 2014). Should we sacrifice the present for future, or for a longing for the past—if so what should be the reference point? '(T)emporal scale can be thought of as divided into different "time frames" related to rates, durations, or frequencies'

<sup>1</sup> The findings are corroborated and the interpretation partly inspired by unpublished Ph.D. research on the river Scheldt visioning by the late, great Annemiek Verhallen, Wageningen.

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