



# Puzzling stakeholder views for long-term planning in the bio-economy: A back-casting application



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## ABSTRACT

Planning long-term actions in the South of Italy is often characterised by a 'vicious circle of non-participation'. Stakeholders are increasingly not aware of the relevant role they have in supporting policy-making processes, even if they are usually keen to express their opinions. The aim of the study is to suggest policy-makers and practitioners a way to change their approach to long-term strategies definition in areas with traditionally scarce experience in stakeholder participation and where 'good governance' often lacks. On the whole, empirical results are very positive. The study allowed us to combine both puzzling and powering required by long-term strategies with a positive effect on the democratisation of the policymaking. In particular, both the e-mail survey and the workshop were important moments to sharing knowledge with experts, to putting together the different visions from stakeholders and to drawing possible policy actions (puzzling). Moreover, the backcasting timeline that clearly indicates the sequence of events and the involved stakeholders, and the strategy's validation questionnaires can be intended as a step towards a guide as to how power can be organised for each stage of the process (powering).

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## 1. Introduction

Many rural areas in Europe struggle with depopulation and a declining economy. They therefore seek new development opportunities. Bio-based industries can form such a new development opportunity (Krajnc & Domac, 2007). From the policy-making point of view, this is a typical long-term policy issue presenting tricky governance challenges. In particular, the development of a bio-based industry is a long-term, complex socio-technical (political) process involving many stakeholders on multiple levels and sectors (Munda, 2004) that could have large impacts on the region. As all long-term issues, bio-based industry development is affected by uncertainty. Therefore, the identification of the most appropriate strategy should be based on the involvement of all stakeholders (Patel, Kok, & Rothman, 2007), preferably through a 'participatory method'<sup>1</sup> that takes long term processes into account (Antunes, Santos, & Videira, 2006; Lopolito, Nardone, Proserpi, Sisto, & Stasi,

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<sup>1</sup> In particular, van Asselt Marjolein and Rijkens-Klomp (2002: 168) define participatory methods as "methods to structure group processes in which non-experts play an active role in order to articulate their knowledge, values and preferences".

2011). These 'social experiments' involve bringing stakeholders together so they can talk about some specific issues, become informed about them, and arrive at a strategy for taking action (Webler & Tuler, 2002). Participatory backcasting can help in decision-making processes that deal with long-term goals (van de Kerkhof, 2006; Carlsson-Kanyama, Dreborg, Moll, & Padovan, 2008; Kok, van Vliet, Bärlund, Dubel, & Sendzimir, 2011; Robinson, Burch, Talwar, O'Shea, & Walsh, 2011), such as the development of a bio-based industry.

Since uncertainty that accompanies long-term policy definition creates highly complex governance challenges, in the strategy definition process, powering and puzzling have been considered the two most relevant driving forces affecting the final outcome (Vink, Boezeman, Dewulf, & Termeer, 2013).

Ideally, participatory processes should empower participants to have an impact on policy, but this might be quite difficult in regions where a participatory tradition is lacking (Varela-Ortega, 2011). Participatory approaches to supporting policy-making are widely adopted in Northern American and Northern European countries, while in Southern Europe there is often considerably less experience. A possible explanation is that in Southern Europe, for cultural reasons, decision-making processes are generally under the control of politicians (democratically elected) and famous and powerful experts (i.e. technocrats nominated by political groups and strong lobbies). The result is the enabling of strong lobbies and relevant opinion makers that affect the decision-making process and defend some particular interests while neglecting others. In the South of Italy, for example, political representatives or experts nominated by political groups are often acting on behalf of stakeholders in long-term decision-making. On the contrary, a more direct participation would lead to a more general and indirect strategy to pursuing common interests.

What happens in the South of Italy can be called a 'vicious circle of non-participation'. Stakeholders are increasingly not aware of the relevant role they have in supporting policy-making processes and are less and less able to provide any sort of contribution to policy and economic strategies, with the risk of the failure of the policy itself in the long term (Odugbemi & Jacobsoon, 2008).

Our work is based on the hypothesis that in Italy stakeholders are usually keen to express their opinions and to discuss openly. For example, in the study of Carlsson-Kanyama et al. (2008), it emerges as in Italy, during the workshops, the number of ideas per participant is high compared to participatory workshops in other countries. Therefore, they need a structured technique that is able to foster their participation, stimulate the interaction, and provide a coherent and effective synthesis of the process, leading to a validated strategy which could represent a consistent support for public decision-makers and policy-makers. Participatory backcasting has been proposed as such a tool (van Berkel & Verburg, 2012; Carlsson-Kanyama et al., 2008; Svenfelt, Engstrom, & Svane, 2011).

The aim of the study is to suggest policy-makers and practitioners a way to change their approach to long-term strategies definition in a region with traditionally scarce experience in stakeholder participation. In the study we propose an adapted participatory backcasting methodology to improve stakeholders participation in dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity of a long-term issue such as bio-economy in the South of Italy. The main challenge relies on the fact that either stakeholders or policy makers are very sensitive and active in the quest of short-term policy solutions. Meanwhile, the interest in long-term problem specification related to new issues (such as bio-economy) is very poor.

To date, the literature related to experience with this topic is still scarce, so we hope it could contribute to strengthen the awareness of the usefulness of stakeholders' participation in long-term planning processes in the Mediterranean countries. This should be able to guarantee both puzzling and powering processes required by long-term strategies.

The novelty of the proposed study lies on an approach to stimulate stakeholders participation and to depict a draft on how to organise stakeholders coalitions on future issues such as the development of bio-economy in rural areas. Bio-economy is a rather new and poorly defined topic, affected by many uncertainties that make it a quite tricky and unattractive topic for policy makers. Therefore, in such a situation, the real challenge is not only to increase the participation rate<sup>2</sup> but also on stakeholders' participation and engagement on the definition of a long term strategy.

This is especially relevant in Italy, where stakeholders are often reluctant to attend participatory workshops and if they do, not for the whole length and time of which traditional participatory backcasting approaches need.

The paper will mostly concentrate on the first two pillars, regarding the mechanisms suitable to favourite the different groups of citizens (i.e. stakeholders), leading to the formulation of a common vision.

The structure of the proposed participatory approach aimed to increase participation and engagement by parties that otherwise might be badly represented or have no role in long term strategy definition. By combining a voting mechanism (selecting alternatives) and a participatory workshop (provided that good facilitation should guarantee a balanced playing field), we aim to structure the puzzling, giving the more silent actors an equal vote to the more dominant actors. The modified back-casting guarantees that the same stakeholders participate to puzzling. In addition, a preliminary contribution to powering is represented either by putting actions on the timeline (it gives an idea on when and with which stakeholders to organise power coalitions) or by broadening the consensus through the involvement in the strategy validation of absent stakeholders. Finally, we evaluate the stakeholders' satisfaction by analysing stakeholders' feedback about the workshop.

<sup>2</sup> This participatory approach was modified to reduce the length of the workshop, which intended to involve more stakeholders than usual.

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