Innovation Ltd. Boundary work in deliberative governance in land use planning

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Summary

Deliberative governance of land use planning is a form of governing in which government interacts with businesses, non-governmental organizations and citizens to collaboratively solve problems. Deliberative governance theory builds on literature in which more horizontal forms of decision making are advocated. Moreover, deliberative governance theory promises more credible decisions due to an improvement of the quality of these interactions between interdependent actors.

This thesis answers the question if these more horizontal forms of governing become more credible to participants. I studied three experiments with this deliberative approach: Creative Competition as a case of citizens participation for redevelopment of the Bijlmerpark in Amsterdam (the Netherlands), the Dairy Gateway Project for sustainable regional development in Wisconsin (USA), and the Protein Highway Project for sustainable agroclusters and regional development in the Middle-east of the Netherlands. These experiments had a deliberative design that consisted of rules of conduct and strategies of interaction. I selected the American case as a countercase to the two Dutch cases. In this thesis, I established whether participants in these experiments engaged in reflective conversations through which they started to believe in deliberative governance as an alternative to hierarchical government steering.

Boundary work as a conceptual framework

To establish if deliberative governance gained credibility, I studied if participants in experiments with it enacted it. Therefore, I first of all, understood government and deliberative governance as two competing discourses, e.g. two sets of ensembles of ideas, concepts, and categories that were being produced and reproduced in practice. Second, I considered the experiments to introduce a deliberative governance discourse into a context in which the government discourse was dominant. Third, I introduced boundary work as a conceptual framework to study how these two discourses in the communication of participants struggle for dominance and credibility. Boundary work is the discursive way by which actors change or maintain a more frozen dominant discourse. It is both a transcending of meaning in boundary concepts and a demarcation of discourses. Boundary concepts align, in this case, elements of government and governance discourse. This creates a sphere of engagement for participants in which they can collaboratively investigate new meanings of a discourse. In contrast, demarcations are a way to maintain the credibility of a discourse. An actor can claim that something does or does not belong to a discourse. This way a discourse can become stronger or weaker.

Fourth, I studied the participants responses to these two types of boundary work. Did they accept, contest or reflect upon the boundaries transcended or drawn? Based on the responses I established what sorts of conversations evolved from boundary work. When boundaries were accepted, a normal conversation evolved. When participants contested boundary objects and discursively demarcated their subdiscourses either a conflict occurred or a reflective conversation developed. Last but not least, I established the results of these three different types of conversations: was dominant and more frozen government discourse disrupted? Did deliberative governance gain credibility?
CREDIBLE DELIBERATIVE GOVERNANCE?

All three projects aimed at a more horizontal and deliberative way of governing. Only in the Dairy Gateway project this form of governing became more credible. In the Protein Corridor project governance discourse gained credibility. In Creative Competition participants enacted the deliberative governance discourse during the project but in the end believed in a hierarchical way of governing.

In addition, I found that the offers that consultants wrote for these experiments were boundary concepts. Governmental organizations, consultants, experts, businesses, citizens and environmental organizations interpreted the experiments in various ways but were able to cooperate. However, in the course of the experiments struggles for a dominant interpretation of these offers and concepts in it occurred. These became visible by looking at boundary work of participants. The pattern of boundary work that evolved was related to the deliberative design of the experiment. Such a design includes the agenda of the experiments, the rules of conduct and the strategies for interaction. This design influenced the moments at which and the way participants were able to inquire the new deliberative governance discourse. For example, on some occasions consultants were able to stimulate participants to reflect on the various interpretations they had of the project or concepts part of it. The combination of a deliberative design and the pattern of boundary work that evolved from it enabled deliberative governance to become credible.

In the two Dutch project, Creative Competition and the Protein Corridor project, a coalition of experts, consultants and civil servants introduced the boundary concepts such as a feasible plan, experts, innovation, scenarios, and cluster development. The different interpretations of these concepts remained unspoken but as a researcher I could reconstruct those. For example, feasibility to some participants meant a financially and technically robust plan only, and to others it was also a democratically feasible plan. In both Dutch projects the members of the coalition and other participants demarcated their interpretations in the course of the projects. In the redevelopment of the Bijlmerpark this happened at the last meeting. At this meeting the alderwoman and members of the city council demarcated their government-interpretation of expertise as academic experts and a feasible plan that meant a technically and financially feasible plan. In the Protein Corridor project two members of the change coalition entered a conflict about the interpretation of cluster development, innovation and scenarios. They included other participants of the scenario development meeting. A governance interpretation gained credibility: participants agreed that businesses and government were able to cooperate to initiate cluster development that benefits the agrosector in the region.

In the American project, the Dairy Gateway project, a different pattern of boundary work evolved. Possible members of the change coalition entered into a conflict about the interpretation of one of the boundary concepts stewardship. One of the environmental organizations questioned whether industrial farmers were able to be stewards of the land. They demarcated their interpretation that these farmers could not be stewards. A fracture line occurred. The environmental organization left the coalition but others continued, including some environmental organizations. In the deliberations with farmers, their neighbors, farmers’ representatives and environmental organizations, facilitators created settings in which participants enacted the deliberative governance discourse. For example, participants had to sign a document to commit to dialogue and chairs were rearranged into a circle rather than a theater setting. In addition, facilitators — or others — created a sphere of engagement by introducing the boundary concept stewardship. Participants were invited to contest this concept and reflect on its meaning. Indeed they openly interpreted it from a government discourse, or sub discourses that are elements of it, such as a farming subdiscourse, environmental discourse. These demarcations did not result in conflict but led to reflective conversations. At the end of these conversations, participants together decided how to proceed a collaborative inquiry into the meaning of stewardship and ways to implement it.

The study of boundary work in this thesis demonstrates that credible democratic deliberative governance is limited: it occurs only in experiments that stage reflective conversations. To be more than an “innovation business”, participants have to be encouraged — by the setting and the incentives from rules and regulations — to transcend boundaries around frozen discourse. Moreover, a deliberative design and facilitators that redirect conflict into reflective conversations are of great value when they do so. They enable critique and empathy in conversations and consensus in outcomes. These are vital ingredients to create credible, innovative and democratic decisions.