

THE COMMUNICATIVE IDEOLOGY AND *EX ANTE* PLANNING EVALUATION

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1. Introduction

Public planning in Western Europe has changed considerably in the last decade. The economic and political climate has provided public authorities with a new set of goals and expectations. These include the assumption that new large-scale infrastructure and urban revitalisation projects are essential for preserving the current level of welfare in the rat race with other municipalities/regions/countries. At the same time public authorities are faced with generally diminished resources. In reaction many authorities have found it necessary to use marketing and communication techniques to attract private investments (see Ashworth & Voogd, 1990, 1994). Similar communication techniques are also being used to oppress counter-forces of those with different opinions. Academic planners in Western Europe, however, are more and more convinced that planning should be a process of facilitating community collaboration for consensus-building (e.g. see Balducci & Fareri, 1996; Healey *et al.*, 1995; Voogd & Woltjer, 1995; Woltjer, 1996a).

New approaches are now being advocated, and sometimes also followed, that suggest a fundamental break with the planning methodology of the past. Traditional professional expertise seems to be losing ground. According to Healey (1996) the planning community therefore needs to engage in vigorous debate and research on the forms and methodologies of this new situation.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the consequences of the emerging situation for the future use in spatial planning of so-called *ex ante evaluation methods*. These are methods for comparing the characteristics of various choice-possibilities in an explicit and systematic manner. Many so-called 'formal' methods have been developed in the last twenty-five years to support this task. How useful are these methods, which focus on the quality of decisions, in an emerging planning practice primarily focusing on the quality of decision-making?

The structure of the paper is as follows. In order to understand the changing context of planning practice, the rise of the 'communicative ideology' will first be briefly discussed. In addition a typology is given of different planning arenas that may occur.

This typology is further used for discussing the usefulness of evaluation methods. The paper finishes with some concluding remarks.

2. The Rise of the Communicative Ideology

The relations between participants of the political process have been changed over the past *decennia*. The growing welfare and increasing individualism have disillusioned many citizens with political parties. The *Representative Democracy* (cf. Korsten, 1978) is more and more under fire. The rise in general levels of education has made many citizens less slavish followers of 'party views' and the number of floating voters has increased considerably. Political parties have had to adapt to this situation. By using the full arsenal of marketing techniques they try to attract the necessary voters. Abstract ideologies are no longer seen as appropriate for selling 'political products'. A fundamental discussion is no 'news' and not suitable for television. The competitive struggle for the voters in this - for political parties - 'post-ideological age' is now done by focusing on fragmented wishes of the electorate and by creating a favourable public image for the party's spokesman. This is a game of 'Old Maid': the most important task of politicians seems to be avoiding mistakes that may harm their public image and at the same time pointing at 'obvious' mistakes by others. Hence, public opinion has become a very dominant factor in political decision-making. Political debate is reduced to exchanging a couple of 'one liners', suitable for broadcasting at 'prime time news'.

Politicians are on their guard. While society is becoming more and more complex, they are taking care not to burn their fingers by complex societal problems. For such problems often involve unpopular measures and this may harm their career. This results in a paradoxical situation that if politicians go their own way based on ideological motives, they are accused of not listening to their voters, and if they follow public opinion they become impotent. In both cases traditional 'party politics' is losing ground. Hence, there is talk of 'a gap' between citizens and politicians. This gap can be seen as the main cause of the crippled functioning of democracy.

This change in political climate has also affected planning theory and - more important - spatial planning in practice. It is fascinating to see that many 'neo-marxist' ideas about communicative planning from the roaring sixties and early seventies re-appear in recent planning literature. However, for many of my academic generation the idealistic opinion of Habermas (1973, 191) that '*Den kommunikativ angelegten Planungstheorien liegt ein Begriff von praktischer Rationalität zu grunde, der am Paradigma willensbildender Diskurse gewonnen werden kan*' could not compete with the challenges that in those days were offered by the seemingly more realistic development of computer-assisted methods and theories based on scientific rationality as presented by, for instance, Chadwick (1971) and Lichfield *et al.* (1975). It was very difficult in the 1970s to imagine governmental influence reduced to a 'referee' in a game, where according to 'Habermasian criteria' all players should be fair and square and able to play the game. Clearly, the rebuilding of the country after World War II was

seen by many Dutch planners as a proven success of a strong public planning, for a large extent based on the principles of rational planning (see also Faludi & Van der Valk, 1994).

Obviously, this experience is not the same for countries like the USA, which traditionally have a decentralised, more liberal, planning system, which is 'dominated by working class realists with a low regard for missionaries' (cf. Dyckman, 1961). Also in the 'pre-Habermas period', i.e. before his major work had been translated into English, much planning-oriented literature was published in the USA that stressed the importance of social pluralism and bargaining (e.g. see Dahl & Lindblom, 1953). This is not surprising for a country where democracy appears to have degenerated to 'Hollywood show level' and where legal bribery exists since interest groups actually can buy political attention and political favours. For European outsiders it is fascinating to see how 'neo-marxist' ideas are linked with this 'capitalist' market democracy. It has resulted in many new ideas about communicative planning - for example see Fischer & Forester (1993); other good overviews are provided by Sager (1994) and Healey (1996).

The widespread renewed introduction in Western Europe of, what I prefer to call the *communicative ideology* in public planning, was only possible because of the fundamental societal changes as discussed above. The growing social complexity needed a new - but simple - philosophy by which people come to terms with the world around them. This is an ideology, being pervasive sets of ideas, beliefs and images that groups employ to make the world more intelligible to themselves. Hall (1977) asserts that an ideology only operates by being openly embedded in commonsense wisdom. It is commonsense wisdom in the Netherlands, and probably elsewhere, that public discussions between political parties are more and more replaced by discussions between interest groups. Discussions, that are often fed by - or based on - one-sided research outcomes and normative expert views. Representative democracy is clearly changing into *participatory democracy*.

The magic word for narrowing down the gap between 'citizens and politicians', and embraced by all actors in this play, is called *communication*. Evidently, 'good communication' is a goal that is giving everybody warm feelings given the 'inclusionary ethic which underpins the approach' (cf. Healey, 1996). Political parties, governmental bodies, interest groups, now all stress the importance of communication, leaving the innocent citizen with an avalanche of 'news letters' and invitations for 'information evenings' and 'open days'. Promotion, persuasion and propaganda have been discovered as communication tools. Marketing has become an ordinary public planning concept, but also other institutional groups are using its techniques (Ashworth & Voogd, 1990, 1994).

Clearly, the communicative ideology has its limitations. Although planning practice in the last decade certainly has moved in a direction that vaguely resemble some 'neo-marxist' ideas of the sixties, the Habermasian dream of 'discourses' based on 'fair play' is still an unattainable ideal. What is left is an uncertain world, where facts seem to be replaced by values. Often values of those who have the money and the power, whose

local egoism seems more important than principles of sustainable development. Will there be a place left in this world for old-fashioned planning expertise, such as the clarification of consequences of different choices and planning options by means of *ex ante evaluation methods* that follow the logic of scientific rationality? In answer to this question, in the next section 'this world' will be first further elaborated, by distinguishing a number of different planning arenas. In addition what is precisely meant by *ex ante evaluation methods* will be outlined. These methods are then to be compared with the various arenas.

3. A Typology of Planning Arenas

If we consider the communicative ideology in relation to the variety of situations that occur in spatial planning, a large number of *planning arenas* can be distinguished. By planning arena is meant a configuration of actors that are involved in a product of planning. Since it is realistic to assume that each planning arena has its specific characteristics, a judgement about the usefulness of *ex ante evaluation methods* can only be given in relation to these characteristics.

For clarity the following limited set of criteria will be considered here for defining different planning arenas:

1) The territorial level of planning

Local planning has an entirely different nature than regional planning. Due to its close distance to the actual users of space, the local level is much more open for consensus-building approaches than the regional level. Evidently, almost all examples in literature about communicative planning deal with the local level. Regional practice has also its variations, since the regional level itself is multi-leveled again, e.g. province (or county), state, European Union.

2) The level of legal regulations

For a large number of well-defined situations strict legal regulations exist that define both the procedure to be followed as well as the format of the resulting products. An example is the Environmental Impact Statement, that is required for a given type of project. Also other Acts, such as in the Netherlands the Environmental Management Act and the Housing Act, provide constraints that will restrict freedom of planning. However, there are also situations where such legal constraints are negligible and/or avoidable.

3) The power structure of actors

It is difficult to make a straightforward classification for this criterion given the complexity of social power structures. However, for the purpose of this analysis a distinction is made between a hierarchical, i.e. 'top-down', power structure and a mixed

power structure. A hierarchical power structure implies that a higher level authority is able to empower its wishes on a lower level. In a mixed power structure there may be one or more dominant actors, but they are unable to exercise full power over other actors.

4) The level of integration of planning

Planning can be focused on one administrative sector, such as housing, recreation or traffic infrastructure, but it can also be comprehensive, i.e. focusing at integrated developments.

5) The level of abstraction of planning

A distinction is made between the strategic level and the operational level. The strategic level is operating with a long-term perspective, whereas the perspective of the operational level is implementation-oriented.

Based on these criteria, in Table 1 a typology of planning arenas is given. It illustrates the complexity of spatial communicative planning, because the simple assessment in two categories of each criterion already results in 32 different arenas. Obviously, this amount will exponentially increase if more variables are taken into account. On the other hand, the theoretically derived arenas of Table 1 are not equally important. The presence of certain arenas will, because of national regulations and cultural differences, certainly differ per country. For this reason, further comments will be solely based on the Dutch situation (see also Faludi & Van der Valk, 1994).

4. A Typology of *Ex Ante* Evaluation Methods

The current methodological 'state of the art' of *ex ante* plan and project evaluation is the outcome of developments in various disciplinary and scientific areas. Selective overviews can be found in, for example, the following books: Lichfield, Kettle & Whitbread (1975), Nijkamp (1980), Kmietowicz & Pearman (1981), Voogd (1983), Fusco Girard (1987), Shofield (1987), Nijkamp & Voogd (1989), Shefer & Voogd (1990), Nijkamp, Rietveld & Voogd (1990), Janssen (1992), Lichfield (1996).

Already before World-War II various attempts have been made to perform a systematic evaluation of intended government policies (e.g. see Nijkamp *et al.*, 1990). 'Cost-benefit analysis' have long been in many countries the preferred methodology for *ex ante* evaluation. This emphasis on *monetary evaluation methods* gradually changed in the sixties, thanks to the influential publications of Lichfield (1970) about the 'planning balance sheet' and Hill (1968) about the 'goals-achievement matrix'. Their pioneering work has had an important impact on a generation of planners. It was not so much the technical 'sophistication' of their *descriptive overview methods*, but more their

'power of conviction' and 'transparency' in reducing a choice-problem into manageable judgement criteria - goals and objectives - and impact ratings.

TABLE I. A typology of planning arenas for spatial planning

territorial level	regulations level	power structure	integration level	abstraction level	#
local	formal product and process regulations	hierarchical	sectoral	strategic	1
				operational	2
			comprehensive	strategic	3
				operational	4
		mixed	sectoral	strategic	5
				operational	6
			comprehensive	strategic	7
				operational	8
	relaxed formal regulations	hierarchical	sectoral	strategic	9
				operational	10
			comprehensive	strategic	11
				operational	12
		mixed	sectoral	strategic	13
				operational	14
			comprehensive	strategic	15
				operational	16
regional	formal product and process regulations	hierarchical	sectoral	strategic	17
				operational	18
			comprehensive	strategic	19
				operational	20
		mixed	sectoral	strategic	21
				operational	22
			comprehensive	strategic	23
				operational	24
	relaxed formal regulations	hierarchical	sectoral	strategic	25
				operational	26
			comprehensive	strategic	27
				operational	28
		mixed	sectoral	strategic	29
				operational	30
			comprehensive	strategic	31
				operational	32

A very interesting aspect from the point of view of communicative planning is that in the sixties and early seventies the idea existed that an 'aggregation' of impact scores should not be done by planners, but that it primarily should be a political task. However, this did not work very well. The vast amount of information from a spatial impact analysis always raised questions like 'what do the planners/consultants recommend?'. This gave the impetus for the application of arithmetic *multicriteria evaluation methods* in planning practice, that were able to provide such a recommendation (Voogd, 1997).

The critique of these kinds of approach in the sixties and seventies mainly focused on the technocratic method of their use. Especially the use of arbitrary numerical weights, the fixation on 'hard', i.e. numerically measurable, criteria, and the 'optimization' characteristics were good targets for criticism (see Chadwick, 1971; Lichfield *et al.*, 1975). This critique evoked an avalanche of new multicriteria methods, that were capable of using both 'soft' and 'hard', as well as 'mixed' impact data (e.g. see Nijkamp *et al.*, 1990).

Another, more recent, line of work is in the field of *Decision Support Systems* (DSS) (e.g. see Janssen, 1990, 1992). The post-war advances in computer technology have favoured the introduction of computer-based choice models in spatial planning. These DSS-models are especially advocated for less structured choice situations. However, a DSS approach is not in contrast to multicriteria methods, but rather complementary. Specific man-machine interfaces should create a 'learning process', so that the 'decision-maker' is growing towards the 'best' choice. In Voogd (1985) the interactive learning approach in public planning has been criticized because of its conceptual simplicity. For instance, the assumption that a pluriform society can be represented by 'one' individual decision-maker, interacting with his or her computer screen, is in reality extremely naive. Nevertheless, the technical possibilities of a DSS-approach are very interesting and for 'routine' decisions certainly attractive. Unfortunately, there are not so many 'routine' decisions in spatial planning.

5: Evaluation Methods Versus Planning Arenas

There is no properly documented empirical knowledge yet about the usefulness of various explicit evaluation methods for consensus building. The evaluative remarks in this section are therefore only based on more than twenty years of personal experiences of this author with practical applications of these methods.

Monetary evaluation methods, descriptive overview methods, multicriteria methods and DSS-approaches are all based on the assumption that the impacts of a policy proposal can be assessed for all relevant variables of the proposal. They differ in the way this assessment is done and in the way the results are presented. However, in the literature about these methods it is usually assumed that the impacts can be assessed by experts, whether in a qualitative sense or quantitatively. Some DSS-approaches enable the use of opinions rather than empirical data as input for such an assessment. But in all

cases the point of departure is the application of scientific logic for measuring the effects.

If a communicative ideology is pursued, however, it may very well be that impacts are subject of debate and that consensus about the size of the impacts is sought. Hence, 'professional data' will be replaced by 'negotiated data'. In principle, all categories of evaluation methods can deal with this type of information. Whether the planner, involved in performing the evaluation, can live with it is another issue, but it should be no problem for the communicative ideology since he or she can communicate it ...

A big problem for the application of many evaluation methods within the framework of the communicative ideology is the *lack of transparency*. All methods are in principle professional tools, designed as an aid for skilled planners. And since participants in a communicative planning process do not need to obtain any certificate before participating, let alone be academic planners, professionals have to come down from their ivory towers. It will depend on the kind of planning arena, whether they can stop 'half-way' down the tower, or whether they have to sink 'to the bottom'. In the latter situation, the only evaluation method that will be acceptable as a vehicle for discussion is no doubt a simple overview method, i.e. an evaluation matrix where options are mutually compared by means of a number of criteria. Any aggregation of this matrix may be considered to be 'too difficult'. If the elevator of the ivory tower can stop 'half-way', i.e. in arenas where only planning and political professionals participate, it is essential that the *concept* of the method can be clearly explained¹. In addition, the acceptance of the method in this arena will depend on its credibility. This depends among others on: has the method been used elsewhere, has it been accredited by independent experts, who is applying the method and under what circumstances, and - above all - are the results of the method flexible enough to allow different - political - interpretations? Looking at the planning arenas of Table 1, it is difficult to give a straightforward appraisal of the suitability of *ex ante* evaluation methods. However, it is possible to highlight per component a preferred situation for systematic evaluation methods. This is done in Table 2, where the dark compartments represent a high probability that systematic evaluation methods might be useful.

The assessment of the components of the planning arenas in Table 2 is based on experiences in The Netherlands, but it is probably rather universal. Since it is virtually impossible for regional authorities (i.e. provinces, national government) to have a 'discourse' with *all* relevant and interested groups, there will always have to produce documents or plans that account for the preferred policy actions. In other words, always alternatives have to be presented and also a reasoning why a particular alternative is most preferred. Evidently, this will never be done by just pointing at 'fruitful meetings', 'inspiring conversations' and 'deepening discourses' among - usually professional -

¹ Looking at successful methods in the past, it seems reasonable to suggest that a method will be successful, i.e. become 'fashionable', if the structure is very simple and easy to grasp, while the appearance looks very complex. This enables less talented brains, once they understand the simple structure, to flaunt their acquired wisdom.

representatives of regional interest groups, civil servants and political representatives! There will always be a need, and hence an attempt to justify such decisions by applying 'traditional scientific methods'. *Ex ante* evaluation methods, such as briefly described in the previous section, belong to this category.

TABLE 2. Suitable characteristics of a planning arena - in grey - for explicit evaluation.

territorial level	regulations level	power structure	integration level	abstraction level	#
local	formal product and process regulations	hierarchical	sectoral	strategic	1
				operational	2
			comprehensive	strategic	3
				operational	4
		mixed	sectoral	strategic	5
				operational	6
			comprehensive	strategic	7
				operational	8
	relaxed formal regulations	hierarchical	sectoral	strategic	9
				operational	10
			comprehensive	strategic	11
				operational	12
		mixed	sectoral	strategic	13
				operational	14
			comprehensive	strategic	15
				operational	16
regional	formal product and process regulations	hierarchical	sectoral	strategic	17
				operational	18
			comprehensive	strategic	19
				operational	20
		mixed	sectoral	strategic	21
				operational	22
			comprehensive	strategic	23
				operational	24
	relaxed formal regulations	hierarchical	sectoral	strategic	25
				operational	26
			comprehensive	strategic	27
				operational	28
		mixed	sectoral	strategic	29
				operational	30
			comprehensive	strategic	31
				operational	32

At the local level the relation of authorities with citizens is much more direct. Evidently, you can not convince citizens that a change in his or her neighbourhood is necessary by just pointing at cost-benefit ratios or evaluation rankings. Practice teaches that at the local level consensus can only be reached by following an 'open planning process', i.e. by starting a 'discourse' with all interest groups concerned. Traditional evaluation methods can hardly fulfill a role in this process, perhaps with the exception of 'overview methods' for structuring a discussion.

The use of evaluation methods is also determined by existing formal - legal - regulations, notably the *Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)*. In 1985 a general directive for EIA has been adopted by the Council of the European Union (EU). Consequently, as of 1988, a ruling on environmental impact assessment must be applied in all EU countries (e.g. see Arts, 1994). The formal application of EIA is confined to those decisions in the field of physical, infrastructure and economic planning which are likely to have the most detrimental impact on the environment. The cases in which an EIA has to be carried out are listed in a general administrative order. The Dutch legislation on EIA has appeared to be very influential in the way *ex ante* evaluation has been performed in Dutch planning practice in the eighties and early nineties. This legislation provides strict rules regarding the way alternatives should be distinguished and evaluated, however without providing strict methodological guidelines. Many EIA-studies in The Netherlands use some kind of multicriteria evaluation (see Mooren, 1996). However, although EIA has a central position in Dutch planning, it hardly played any role in actual decision-making. The most obvious example is the expansion of Schiphol Airport. The Dutch Government made its decision about the location of a new runway, even *before* the EIA was available and formally published (see also Voogd, 1987).

Especially the planning of infrastructure projects, such as railways and highways, is in the Netherlands based on a hierarchically organised power structure. It clearly represents all characteristics of a 'top-down' approach (see also Niekerk & Arts, 1996). An hierarchical top-down approach is often too rigid to fit well to societal dynamics (Niekerk & Voogd, 1996). However, as Dutch practice illustrates, professional impact assessments like EIA, can relatively easily be linked with such an approach but so far they hardly solved actual problems related to capricious decision-making because of autonomous behaviour of authorities and societal groups. According to the communicative ideology, a bottom-up approach would be much better able to include the criteria and needs of local actors. This would imply the recognition of a mixed power structure. However, it is questionable whether explicit *ex ante* evaluation methods can play a proper role in this context. The most probable stage for such analysis is after local authorities have got an agreement about the projects to pursue.

Sectoral planning is usually associated with a strong emphasis on 'technical issues'. Although the consequences of many technical choices can be very well subject of a public debate, this is very often only possible after a proper 'translation' of the underlying technical details. Multicriteria methods can be, and actually are used for this

purpose. This is not only a Dutch experience, but also in the USA - the political market economy pre-eminently - this can be witnessed (e.g. see Maimone, 1994). It is surprising, given the multidimensional complexity of plans that aim at integration of various sectoral perspectives, that in the Netherlands multicriteria methods have been hardly used in local and regional comprehensive planning, such as land-use planning.

Strategic planning is a matter of designing possible long-term perspectives and creating the necessary commitments on a preferred strategy. A limitation of the communicative ideology in respect to strategic planning is that abstract issues seldomly raise enough public attention for a balanced 'discourse'. For instance, strategic decisions in the field of infrastructure are in the Netherlands - and probably also in many other countries - often made without proper public and political discussions about the choices and their consequences. A major reason is the fact that such decisions are usually too vague, too abstract, to be properly valued. Only in the operational stage, participants really start to question the desirability of strategies (Niekerk & Voogd, 1996). Evaluation methods can be useful in strategic planning for visualizing the consequences of various long-term strategies, and they are for this reason often used, but they are certainly not able to overcome this fundamental problem.

6. Some Concluding Remarks

The analysis in this paper of the usefulness of evaluation methods in various planning arenas illustrate the fact that nowadays most planning processes in the Netherlands refrain from applying systematic evaluation methods. It can be concluded from Table 2 that out of 32 theoretically distinguished planning arenas only 1 arena, viz. number 17, has all suitable properties for an optimal use of explicit *ex ante* evaluation methods. In other words, by far most planning arenas have one or more characteristics that favour an approach based on the communicative ideology. If we combine this observation with the general observation in section two that the society is moving from a representation democracy to a participation democracy, then the general conclusion can be drawn that in the next decade evaluation methods will have a limited use in spatial planning. This does not imply that planners refrain from these methods but it strongly depends on the field of planning whether analytical methods, and hence also evaluation methods, are being used. In the Netherlands evaluation methods are mainly applied in sectoral planning fields, viz. environmental planning, mineral planning, infrastructure planning and water management. These fields still operate from what nowadays might be called a 'classical' planning paradigm based on the appreciation of professional knowledge. In urban and regional planning, viz. urban design, urban renewal, strategic regional planning, etc., evaluation methods are hardly popular, although sometimes an evaluation matrix is used.

The future will probably be for new evaluation methods that focus on a permanent discussion between, or among, the parties concerned. By means of such methods all

essential moments of choice should be emphasized and brought into discussion. Already in the 1970s informal evaluation procedures have been developed, for instance by Bleiker *et al.* (1971) and Manheim *et al.* (1974), for making choices in concert with, and by mutual arrangement with, all parties involved. More recently, a constructivist paradigm for evaluation is presented by Guba & Lincoln (1989), which should offer empowerment and enfranchisement of stakeholders, as well as an action orientation that defines a course to be followed.

However, it should not be neglected that such participation approaches, based on the communicative ideology, are also subject to a number of handicaps. A summary of these of many years ago is still valid (Voogd, 1983, 19):

- In many cases it will be highly problematic to place great demands, for a relatively long period, on the time of the various participants. This implies that it may be very difficult to find the proper persons (c.g. see also Woltjer, 1996b).
- Only few of the potential participants have the ability to disclose their often dormant views.
- Not everyone wants to nor can participate actively. But everyone has the right to know for what reasons choices are made or not made. However, if decisions are made in such deliberation meetings, the value system underlying the choices might remain unknown to the outside world.
- The law in some countries, including the Netherlands, does not allow decision-making without paying attention to legal arrangements in case of petitions, and time for disposition, and such.
- The role of the expert and of expertise will change, which may affect the ultimate quality of the decisions.

These handicaps can be expanded and elaborated, but they will never become efficacious for refraining from consensus-building. It will be a major challenge for planners in Western Europe to cope with these handicaps and at the same time resist the current tendency to follow the US 'socio-political market approach' in all respects.

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