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***Long Term Strategizing for Sustainable Development:
Discussing the difficult linkage between prospective and planning endeavors***

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Our contemporary societal context is characterized by a profound ambiguity when it comes to long-term policy making: we observe an acceleration of technological, cultural, economic and societal developments, while we simultaneously have to cope with individual patterns of behavior and institutional mechanisms which reveal an inertia to adapt to changing conditions. Coupled with growing interdependencies between the systems and dimensions of public action, activities linked to planning, programming and strategizing have (re)gained¹ importance and prominence with public authorities (Barbieri 2000). The growing interest for planning exercises is apparent at many levels from local to global and in conjunction with many themes and sectors, but has more particularly grown in matters linked to multidimensional environmental management (e.g. such as in the domain of climate change (see for instance Rotmans *et alii* 2000) or transport (see for instance Elzen *et alii* 2002)). Consequently, a very large importance, both by academics and public authorities, is given today to issues linked to planning for sustainable development (Voss *et al.* 2005).

Typical planning exercises in the domain of Sustainable Development (SD), such as for instance the European Union's Strategy for SD (EUSDS), have active time horizons of 4 to 6 years, meaning that they develop public policy priorities and actions for the next 4 to 6 years to come. Given the many long-term challenges in the realm of SD, such short- to mid-term planning is felt as unsatisfactory when it comes to providing the necessary structure, coherence and guidance for deeper institutional and societal change. Alternative processes and concepts (e.g. Transition Management, Adaptive Management...) have thus recently grown on this ground, trying to develop contemporary long-term planning in the realm of SD by including stakes such as participation, integrated assessments, envisioning, scenario building, knowledge assessments. From this it follows, that long-term planning for SD is intensively linked to, and is meant to include, large scale prospective exercises (such as futures studies, foresight initiatives, backcasting exercises...).

However, such (long-term) prospective exercises are not easily integrated into the public authorities' planning activities. The reasons are many, but on the foreground public planning authorities seem to remain suspicious towards prospective exercises, because even if such

¹ We recall here that planning, and especially long-term planning, was very strongly developed in many countries during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, but fell out of disgrace with the stumbling of the Soviet Union. For some civil servants, of the older generation, the current revival of planification exercises, even if these are conducted very differently and with a different background, is thus highly suspicious, or alternatively is looked at cynically.

prospective exercises “start from the causal relationships judged relevant, their combination and connections rely on a hypothetical model which cannot be scientifically validated (...). What matters is that the statements on the future are structured along and shown by following a scientific construct, i.e. that the structure of reasoning is clarified, transparent and submitted to critic and review.” (De Jouvenel, quoted in Theys 2005 : 407, our translation). More pragmatically, prospective endeavors have been described as consisting “essentially of a way to combine into a working procedure, different tools (or methods) to develop facts and discuss ideas.” (Mermet 2003, our translation). Prospective exercises, such as long-term envisioning, seem to be felt as being only weakly robust in scientific terms, because they are relying mostly on procedural robustness and are value-laden. As a matter of fact, the terms of reference of a prospective exercise may quickly reveal what has been described as *baroque complexity* (Theys 2005), i.e. a combination of objectives which are unrealistic or even antagonistic: “ideally, one strives towards a prospective, which relies on validated scientific knowledge – while allowing to question them; which enounces clearly the plurality of world visions – while developing consensual trends; (...), which does not mirror the simple opinions of the moment – while being participatory (...)” (Theys 2005 : 408, our translation).

On the basis of the results of a study developed for the federal Belgian authorities, we discuss in the present paper the linkages between the necessary prospective and envisioning exercises, and the processes for long-term strategy development for SD. In the study, both ‘phases’ (i.e. the prospective and the planning phases) have been analytically decomposed for 7 long-term, large-scale, multidimensional and participatory planning exercises. This analysis has revealed patterns and schemes (e.g. feedback loops, dead ends, mutual reinforcements...) which will be discussed.

In the second part of the paper, we report on the constraints, limits and opportunities (of linking long-term planning to prospective exercises) as they were identified during the study with a stakeholder group, composed of members of the public federal authorities and civil society.

Finally, we present and discuss what could be termed ‘linkage-scenarios’, meaning a variety of procedures, with their strengths and weaknesses, which allow for an improved linkage and articulation of prospective studies (i.e. envisioning) and long-term planning for SD.

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