

The Belgian Platform for Indicators for Sustainable Development: an evaluation of a process oriented science-policy interface

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It has been repetitively affirmed that the implementation of policies for sustainable development (SD) would inevitably call for the creation of "hybrid institutions", e.g. organisations, which are able to bridge the gap between Science and Policy. The arguments in favour of such hybrids are many, but are notably rooted in the inherent multi-level uncertainties linked to SD. These confront Science with the challenge to communicate efficiently and effectively on highly complex issues and interrelationships where our knowledge can be very partial (i.e. both, incomplete and value-laden), but where stakes are high (Funtowicz et al. 1997). Among the many tools and processes developed to address the challenge of simplifying information in order to make complex phenomena perceptible to policy-makers while enhancing and enabling communication and collaboration between different stakeholders (see also Adriaanse 1993 or Rotmans et al. 1997), indicators for sustainable development (ISD) are among the most prominent tools to inform decision-making and evaluate SD-policies as well as their outcomes. The hybrid character of ISD is further enhanced by the fact that ISD are meant to act as powerful instruments to communicate with and to the broader public.

Today a substantial number of scientific actors are involved in the development of these kinds of ISD, whether destined for decision-makers, administration or the broader public. Despite the large acknowledgment of various degrees of the necessity to conceive ISD as participative processes for collaborative learning, scientific developers of ISD seem rarely able to address adequately the needs of those who shall use these ISD.

In a number of countries attempts have thus been made to establish an interface between the users and developers of ISD, to increase the participation of different actors in the development of ISD, to improve the collaborations between users and developers and to raise the awareness for ISD in sustainable development strategies and policies. The Belgian government took a similar initiative towards bridging the gap between Science and Policy on the very specific issue of ISD. In this paper we will elaborate on the experience of this initiative and identify success factors as well as hindrances.

In the context of a research funding programme on SD (initiated in 1996), the Belgian federal government (i.e. Belgian Science Policy) created in 2001 the "Platform for scientific collaboration on Indicators for Sustainable Development" (PISD). Four institutions are involved in the management of the platform: two university research centres and two institutional study units, all together representing the three regions as well as the federal level. On top of the Science-Policy splitting of the Platform's management members, the Belgian Science Policy decided thus to consider the relatively complex Belgian institutional setting, and provide with the platform for a bridge between the different regional and federal

actors. In addition, the Platform is meant to communicate information on ISD from the international (esp. European) level to the Belgian and regional levels.

The aims of the Platform were broadly defined around the organisation and improvement of different types of information exchanges. More specifically the Platform was, and still is, to :

- perform the follow-up and analysis of scientific, political and administrative activities with regard to indicators;
- facilitate the accessibility and comprehension of these activities for the different types of actors;
- stimulate information- and experience-exchange and between actors;
- identify weaknesses and strengths of research activities with regard to the demand;
- promote Belgian expertise on the international level.

Being without a clear outcome-oriented mandate, the Platform is characterised by its process-oriented nature, acting as facilitator, digester, organiser, informer... A number of its activities are focused on a continuous broadening and deepening of the network of users and developers of ISD, by enhancing their general understanding of the challenges and threats to be addressed when constructing or working with ISD.

During the four year period the activities of the Platform have included the elaboration and organisation of :

- seminar cycles on thematic (the six priorities of the EU Sustainable Development Strategy) and transversal (e.g. methodological) issues regarding ISD, which acted as periodical gatherings for the ISD-community in Belgium ;
- discussion notes and working papers on a series of issues raised by ISD were diffused widely and participated to the improvement of the knowledge-base regarding ISD;
- a website functioning as the main information exchange tool;
- an international conference and colloquium;
- an inventory of ISD-developers and -experts;

Besides these hands-on activities, the experience gained by the Platform members, both from the content-side and process-side, which resulted in an in-depth knowledge of the ISD-landscape in Belgium and Europe, were valued by the authorities as they integrated Platform-members into a series of federal policy-processes on ISD.

The paper which we intend to present will elaborate further on the strengths and weaknesses of the four years of experience of the Platform. More generally, we will discuss the characteristics of a series of different types and organisational forms of "hybrid organisations", which will lead us into the construction of a typology of Science-Policy interfaces, and discuss to what extent these interfaces are adapted to their mission-statement and context. On the other hand, we will place the Platform-expertise into a more general theoretical framework in order to distil and discuss the success factors and the difficulties encountered. To a certain extent, this will allow us to draw lessons for the establishment of Science-Policy interfaces in the field of ISD, and more broadly in a certain branch of policy-making, and to enlighten the subject from the broader perspective of process-oriented interfaces between Science and Policy in the context of sustainable development.

References

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