



The acoustics of social learning

Designing learning processes
that contribute to a
more sustainable world

Arjen E.J. Wals,
Noor van der Hoeven
and
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This essay is made within the context of the national programme Learning for Sustainable Development. The programme is set up by a number of Dutch Ministries – Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality; Housing Regional Development and the Environment; Education, Cultural Affairs and Science; Economic Affairs; Transport and Public Works; and Foreign Affairs/Overseas Development – as well as the Dutch Provinces and the district water boards, the latter of which are united in the Dutch Union of District Water Boards.

Learning for Sustainable Development contributes to a society in which citizens, companies, organisations, and authorities learn about sustainable development and are desiring, willing, and able to contribute to it. In line with the goals of the UNECE strategy on ESD and the Decade for ESD, the national program creates effective learning processes in order to enable judgments and choices in favour of sustainable development. Learners at all levels will be encouraged to use systematic, critical and creative thinking and reflection in both local and global contexts.

More information about the programme:
http://www.senternovem.nl/Leren_voor_duurzame_ontwikkeling/english



INTRODUCTION

Chaos frequently emerges in an (improvising) jazz ensemble, but structure rules. Everyone makes up part of the whole and that whole is, if it sounds good, more than the sum of the parts. Every musician has his/her own experiences and competencies, but also intuition and empathy. The ensemble doesn't know how things will sound ahead of time, but its members instinctively know when things sound good. They have faith in one another and in a good outcome. Leadership is sometimes essential and therefore provided by one of the musicians or a director, or it sometimes shifts and rotates. The music is sometimes written down, though this is often not the case, and everyone simply improvises. If it sounds good, then the audience will respond appreciatively, that is to say, those who enjoy jazz music (and not everyone does...). People from the audience sometimes join in, changing the composition of the ensemble. The acoustics of the hall in which the music is played is important as well: not all halls sound alike and some have more character. A concert may also be recorded to serve as inspiration elsewhere, though this does not happen often...

Social learning processes remind one of an improvising jazz ensemble. They too are intangible in a certain sense, and are therefore not easily controlled. Success often depends on the people concerned and on the manner in which they became involved. There are ideas regarding which direction the participants want to go and there are even recurring patterns, but the ultimate result comes about little by little. Sometimes the conditions are optimal and the process brings out the unique qualities and perspectives of everyone and results in surprisingly novel solutions and actions. Indeed, in social learning too the whole is more than the sum of its parts.

This essay is about the possible significance of social learning in realising transitions towards a world that is more sustainable than the present. Making use of and strengthening social learning is particularly important where it concerns jointly looking for meaningful, supported and feasible solutions for challenges with respect to which no one has a monopoly on wisdom. There is quite a lot of uncertainty in the quest for a more sustainable world regarding both the objective as well as the path towards its realisation.

“Despite the fact that people are highly motivated, sustainable development is yet to become generally accepted in the Netherlands. In order to achieve this, we need to focus more on identifying and overcoming existing barriers and on reaching the whole of the Dutch population. This is the only way to have the focus on sustainable development be decisive for the mainstream of policy decisions, investments on the part of the business community and decisions and activities on the part of citizens.”

(NSDO Maatschappelijke Verkenning, 2002)

In policy circles, but certainly outside these as well, 'social learning' is increasingly referred to as a manner in which to actively commit people to far-reaching processes of change. Social learning can be explained in a number of ways. In essence, it is about bringing people of different backgrounds together. The ensemble of perspectives, knowledge and experiences that is brought about in this way is necessary in order to come to a creative quest for answers to questions for which no ready-made solutions are available. It also provides insight into the significance and the role of social learning in realising a society that is more sustainable than society today. In addition, this essay provides useful means for organising and evaluating social learning. Social

learning is viewed here as an explicitly organised activity. Although informal forms of social learning that come about more spontaneously when people meet one another do indeed exist as well, these do not fall within the scope of this essay. We want to offer some stepping stones for making careful use of social learning prompted by the challenge of sustainable development. We do so on the basis of a number of questions:

- Why is social learning essential to sustainable development?
- When do we speak in terms of a social learning process?
- How does it distinguish itself from other more participatory approaches?
- Precisely which situations (questions, challenges, problems) require a social learning process and which ones do not?
- How do we create an environment in which social learning processes are likely to succeed?
- And what does an environment of this kind look like?
- When can we say that a social learning process has proved to be successful?
- Which competencies are essential if social learning processes are to succeed?

These questions are essentially important to policy, programme managers and those who either carry out or assess projects. With this insight, they will have more to go on when determining whether or not and when it is meaningful to breathe life into social learning processes, how to go about getting social

learning processes underway and when determining the criteria that are to form the basis for assessing social learning processes.

In this essay, for the sake of convenience – after all, reality is difficult to capture reality in a diagram or model – we have framed social learning using a learning cycle consisting of a number of phases in which each phase, in turn, is made up of its own learning cycle. We discuss a large number of considerations, forms of help and pitfalls, but there are undoubtedly more than discussed here. The essay does not examine the tools that are available for the purpose of strengthening social learning. Various methods are available and can be used for each phase. References to sources are included at the end of this essay in which these kinds of ‘tools’ are introduced and described, among other things.

Generating this essay was, in itself, part of our own learning process. We were assisted in this respect by a panel of experts and the members of the study circle ‘Social learning can be stimulated and learned’ (see Appendix 1).

Finally, this essay was originally written from a Dutch point of view, using examples drawn from a Dutch context. The extent to which this angle and these examples are unique and context-specific remains to be seen. We suspect and hope that parts of the text and some of the examples provided will resonate with readers from other parts of the world as well.



SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT NEEDS SOCIAL LEARNING

If there is one thing that everyone agrees on with respect to sustainable development, it is the fact that there is no agreement as to what the concept exactly implies. There is more consensus on the *nature* of the change that is necessary if we are to be able to gear ourselves towards sustainability. For the most part, this concerns discussions on more fundamental changes in the manner in which we live, work and spend our leisure time, et cetera, and on the kinds of values that we pursue. In other words, sustainable developments concern system innovations that require an integrated redesign of products, lifestyles, processes and structures. It costs a lot of time and energy to realise changes of this kind. It is about 'doing better things' and not so much about 'doing things better.' The question regarding what exactly is 'better' or more sustainable is normative and subjective and also depends upon the context in which the question is raised.

Appealing vagueness

Seen from the viewpoint of learning, there is an appealing vagueness to sustainable development, as people can therefore interpret sustainability in interaction in a way that is tenable and workable in their own environment. Nonetheless, three significant sustainability dimensions are often distinguished: the economic, the ecological and the social-cultural dimension. Sustainable development can be described for each of these dimensions, but it is precisely their interrelation that is found to be problematic. Sustainable social development (*people*) is aimed at the development of people and their social organisation, in which notions such as social cohesion, justice, liveability and health play an important role. Sustainable economic development (*profit*) focuses on the development of the economic infrastructure, in which the efficient management

of our natural and social resources is important. A sustainable ecological development (*planet*) is all about the development of the natural ecosystem, in which maintaining our natural resources plays an important role¹. These three domains of sustainable development need not be conflicting, yet they are at odds with one another in practice (Rotmans, 2003).

Learning systems

Sustainable development involves processes of change in society that contain at least these three dimensions. Systems thinking – seeing connections, relating functions to one another, making use of diversity and creating synergy – may offer support in realising a society that is more sustainable than is presently the case or that we currently anticipate. Apparently it is very important that we understand systems of communities and that we begin to think (again) in terms of relations and connections. We can learn a lot from eco-systems in our quest for sustainability. Eco-systems are based on networks, mutual dependency, flexibility, resilience and, if we add it all up: sustainability. According to Fritjof Capra, one essence of sustainable development can be found in the manner in which eco-systems are organised and can deal with disruptions (Capra,

¹ The so-called 'triple bottom-line (PPP)' notion leaves room for criticism as well. Some refer to it as a 'wolf in sheep's clothing'. After all, the 'P' of profit has quietly become one of the pillars of sustainability whereas more and more people are of the opinion that a key to sustainable development is not the capacity for economic growth, but rather *restricting* the capacity for economic growth. More and more often we can observe the 'P' of profit being replaced by the 'P' of the more inclusive 'Prosperity'. The key to a system innovation towards sustainable development is perhaps parting with thinking in terms of growth and the market...

1994, 2005). It is not about the individual principles and elements, but rather about the system as a whole that is constantly in motion and developing and that, as a whole, makes up more than the sum of its parts. 'Healthy' eco-systems are actually learning systems.

The question is whether people too are capable of forming a learning system that can cope with the challenges that we as a society face within the scope of sustainable development. Looked at ideally, social learning is a way to arrive at a 'learning system' in which people learn *from* and *with* one another and collectively become more capable of withstanding setbacks and dealing with insecurity, complexity and

risks. Such learning requires that we not only accept one another's differences but are also able to put these to use. This need not imply that people constantly have to call on social learning processes. After all, as is the case in eco-systems, periods of relative stability and calm can alternate with periods of increased dynamics and a greater degree of insecurity caused by a disruption or a new challenge. It is particularly in a period of dynamics and insecurity that one must rely on the learning ability of the system and, with that, on social learning. A period of stability and calm will once again present itself once the system is able to cope with the disruption as a result of its learning process (Hurst, 1995). This pattern is shown in Figure 1.

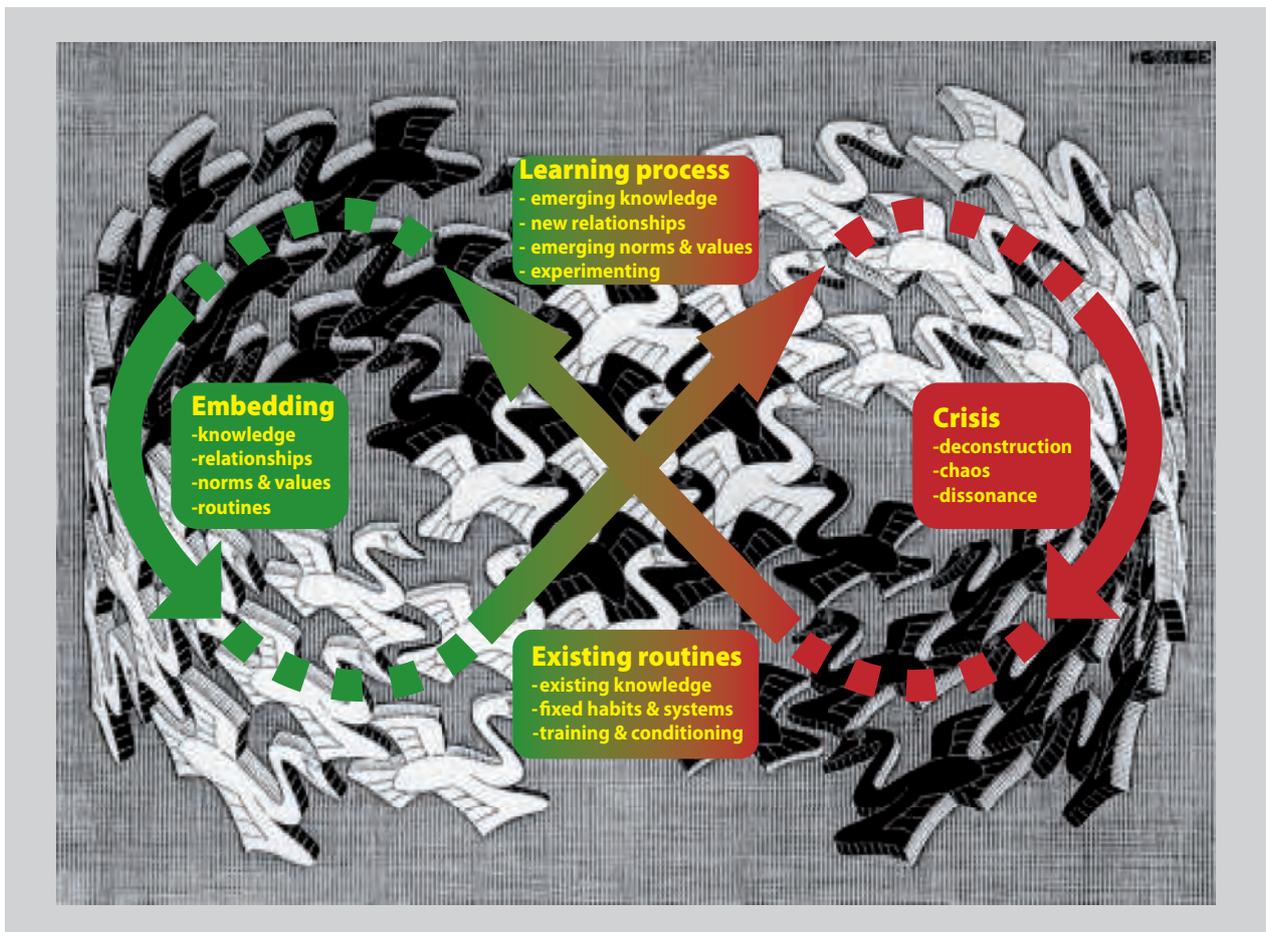


Figure 1. A learning system (based on Hurst, 1995).

Search for new meaning and direction

Social learning is not, however, prompted by the risk society alone. More and more frequently, we find ourselves running into the limits of material growth. As a result, we think more and more about the meaning and sense of our existence. The existing 'points of co-ordination' and 'beacons of security' are no longer adequate when coping with the challenges that we now face. For example, legal,

fiscal, economic and persuasive measures may offer a solution in the short term, but they no longer suffice in the long term. We must dare to lay goals, schools of thought and theories on the table in order to ultimately free ourselves from our daily untenable positions and routines. Only then will we be able to handle complex challenges in ways we can look for a meaning that we can all relate to meaningfully, and which consider the integrity and interests of other species and entire ecosystems.

KEY FEATURES OF SOCIAL LEARNING

Contrary to the concept of sustainable development, there is no appealing vagueness with respect to what is meant by social learning. There is rather a need for a more univocal meaning in order to prevent everything people do together in interaction being called social learning. In this essay, social learning refers to a special kind of learning that contributes to realising the learning society that is essential in realising a more sustainable world. The phenomenon of social learning is described and explained in several ways: sometimes as an almost inevitable emerging phenomenon between people in interaction, sometimes as an instrument that one can design and strategically deploy in processes of change. Here we will try to converge towards a common interpretation.

As said before, social learning both characterises and contributes to a 'learning system' in which people learn from and with one another and, as a result, collectively become more capable of withstanding setbacks, of dealing with insecurity, complexity and risks. Such a system needs people who not only accept one another's differences but are also able to put these differences to use. More and more often, 'social learning' is introduced in organisations and companies as a means to actively involve people in far-reaching processes of change (Bradbury, 2007; Cramer and Loeber, 2007; Lund-Thomsen, 2007). There are various ways to describe social learning, but it is essentially about bringing together people of various backgrounds and with different values, perspectives, knowledge and experiences, both from inside and outside the group or organisation, in order to engage in a creative quest for answers to questions for which no ready-made solutions are available. Social learning is a process in which people are stimulated to reflect upon implicit assumptions and frames of reference, in order to create room for

new perspectives and actions. The most important characteristics of social learning are:

- it is about learning from each other together;
- it is assumed that we can learn more from each other if we do not all think alike or act alike, in other words: we learn more in heterogeneous groups than we do in homogenous groups;
- it is about creating trust and social cohesion, precisely in order to become more accepting and to make use of the different ways in which people view the world;
- it is about creating 'ownership' with respect to both the learning process as well as the solutions that are found, which increases the chance that things will actually take place; and
- it is about collective meaning making and sense making.

This need not imply that people will constantly need to revert to social learning processes. After all, as is the case in eco-systems, periods of relative stability and calm can alternate with periods with increased dynamics and a greater degree of insecurity, the root of which is often a disruption or a new challenge. It is particularly in a period of dynamics and insecurity that one must rely on the learning ability of the system and, with that, on social learning. After this time of turbulence a period of relative stability and calm will once again present itself once the system is able to cope with the disruption as a result of its learning process (Hurst, 1995). As our society and the organisations that help shape it are presently not in a period of calm and security, but rather in a period of dynamics, upheaval, stress and insecurity, an appeal is now being made to the ability of people and organisations to lay existing routines, norms and values on the table. This requires what Argyris (1990) refers to as the second order or 'double loop' learning, which demands reflection and deliberation on the

relevance and tenability of underlying background theories and normative considerations. This does not, or only scarcely, occur in actual practice however, as people unconsciously use defence mechanisms (defensive routines) (Argyris, 1990) to prevent themselves from losing face with their colleagues or to avoid the uneasy feelings of doubt that long-fostered assumptions are perhaps not correct. And so we often ignore (unwelcome) information that collides with our views and expectations or we dismiss this information as irrelevant or false.

Coping with insecurity

The outcome of social learning processes can never be fixed ahead of time and things never go according to plan. To some this is very disappointing and unsettling. Others deal with uncertainty and indeterminacy much more easily and can readily adapt to changing circumstances, new insights and new discussion partners. It is advisable to point out the uncertain nature of a social learning process to those involved early on when considering utilising social learning. It may also be wise to involve people who, by their nature, are already somewhat oriented towards uncertainty and who are not likely to avoid risks. This, in addition to employing people of various backgrounds, is perhaps an important factor in the recruitment and selection of personnel in organisations that want to deploy diversity in the quest for (system) innovations aimed at sustainability.

Social capital and resilience

Social learning overlaps a lot with interactive and participatory processes, but it is not the same. While other interactive and participatory approaches often depart from (in part) pre-determined goals and are aimed at hard (read: measurable) results, social learning processes are more about the softer results (read: difficult to measure), such as the “chemistry”, the energy and the creativity that can come about

when a heterogeneous group of people meet one another in a “good” way. This “chemistry” or social capital is considered a precondition in creating a robust system that is capable of dealing with setbacks. Whether or not a system can make use of diversity and can deploy conflicts and tension constructively (largely) depends upon the available solidarity or social cohesion between people. A healthy system also generates a certain degree of trust and safety, so that people will more easily open up to one another and are less frightened of being held accountable for “errors” or alternative views, as a result of which social learning processes are more prosperous. Moreover, a healthy network is, as pointed out before, resilient. Opposites and differences, which will undoubtedly manifest themselves in a process of change, do not result in a group falling apart or in the stagnation of the learning process. More than that, in a healthy learning system they will trigger reflection as opposed to impulsive (re)actions.

Is social learning a guarantee for sustainable development?

We previously argued that social learning processes are essential to sustainable development. The question is whether social learning is a guarantee for sustainable development. This is not naturally the case. It strongly depends on the social context in which the social learning occurs, upon the manner in which the learning process is organised and on the conditions that apply, as well as on those who are to assess the extent to which the outcome is considered sustainable.

We can increase the probability of a sustainable outcome by influencing the circumstances and the context. We will run through the various phases of a social learning cycle in the next paragraph and we will provide recommendations for setting up and facilitating a social learning process.



PHASES IN SOCIAL LEARNING

There are no recipes or blueprints for successful social learning within the context of sustainable development. The circumstances, challenges and parties involved are simply too different for this to be the case. Nevertheless, Figure 2 shows a social learning process in the form of learning cycles. The large circle reflects the macro-learning cycle with a number of different *phases* in the process. These phases are shown in the figure as separate compartments for the sake of clarity, but it is not always easy to distinguish between the phases in actual practice. An interesting metaphor in this respect concerns the course of the *seasons*: there are, to be sure, official dates that mark the transition from one season to the next, but in reality these

transitions are not fixed and are not so obvious due to changing weather conditions and gradual natural changes. Each phase includes a smaller cycle (roundabout signs) that indicates the importance of reflection in each phase. Each phase also includes a symbol of two-way traffic with the 'environment', the context, which is different in each situation. Adequate communication must ensure that the perspectives that are shared regarding the problem and the directions in which solutions can be found are shared on a scale that is broader than only among the participants in social learning processes. Explicit attention is required for the relationship with the formal, legal decision-making process.

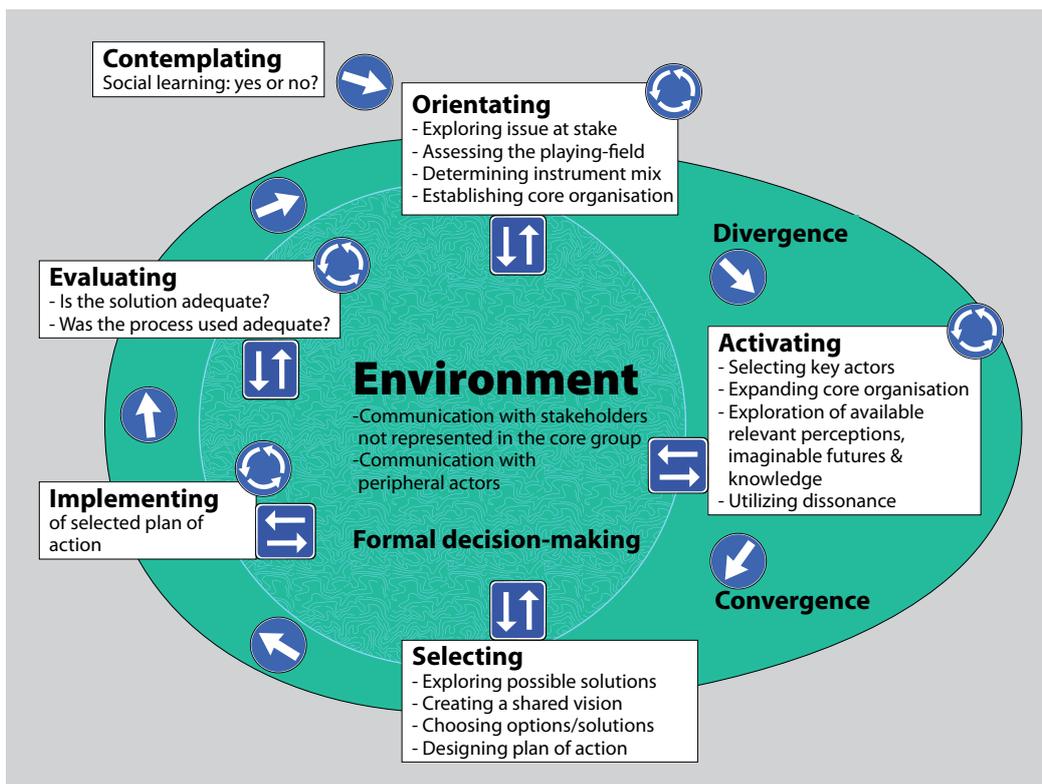


Figure 2. Macro and micro-learning cycles in social learning processes.



We will describe the following overlapping core activities of social learning processes one after the other in the following paragraphs:

- contemplating: a social learning process or not?
- orientating: exploring the problem, analysis of playing field;
- activating: in larger context, involving more people, multiple perspectives;
- selecting: making choices regarding directions towards solutions;
- implementing: execution of the solution(s);
- evaluating: assessing the process and the results at their true value.

Contemplating: look before you leap

Before deploying social learning to achieve changes, it is important to carefully determine whether or not putting an emphasis on social learning is the most obvious path to take. This aspect must be considered in a preliminary phase, in which a decision is to be made either in favour of or against emphasizing the use of. We should stress that some social learning is likely to take place regardless, no matter the outcome of the decision. What is at stake here is the decision whether or not to intentionally introduce and reinforce social learning as a means to create change,

During this phase, policy-makers, programme staff, project managers and advisors reflect upon the strategy to be pursued, at which time they carefully examine the questions and considerations as described in the previous paragraph.

Instrumental or social learning?

The type of change (improving or changing routines or changing starting points and systems) may lead to a learning process that is either more instrumental or more social in nature. Instrumental learning in this respect refers to learning solutions that have been devised by others and are generally imposed from the top down. We cannot distinguish between instrumental and social learning in such black-and-white terms in reality and all kinds of intermediate forms are found.

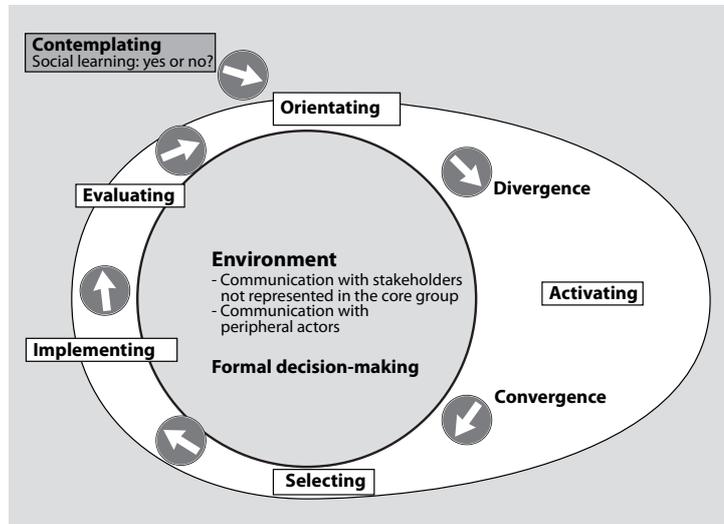
In order to determine whether social learning is a form of learning to which one can/must appeal in realising change, it is advisable to determine ahead of time just how certain one can be about the desired change and the effect of the possible solutions that are already available (see Table 1, the change matrix, column A).

Table 1. The change matrix.

Column A Certainty axis	Column B Type of goals	Column C Type of Intervention	Column D Intervening role	Column E Results axis
Much certainty regarding direction towards solution	Closed / pre-determined / established	Transmission	Instruction	Hard results (accent on concrete <i>products</i> and measurable changes)
		Instrumental transfer	Training	
		Emancipatory co-creation	Coaching	
Little certainty regarding direction of the solution	Open / to be determined in dialogue / flexible	Transformation	Facilitation	Soft results (accent on <i>processes</i> and quality of the learning environment)

Finding an answer to this question is an important part of the start of a project and defines where a project can be placed on the certainty axis. If we know for sure what is good and what is bad for mankind, because such has been demonstrated through scientific research (position at the top of column A), then we can more easily proceed to establish clear-cut goals. And so imposing such goals is then the more obvious course to follow (by means of public relations, campaigns, but also in the form of regulations, subsidies, et cetera). It should be pointed out in this respect that issues that appear to be clear now often prove to be more complex or different from what we first believed (scientific knowledge and insights also change and are not always univocal). If we (dare to) recognise the fact that we have no certainty (bottom part column A) and that we actually face a collective quest, then other goals (column B) and interventions (column C) will be suitable. All of this, in turn, has consequences for the link between people and the process of change. If we consider a position at the top of the matrix, then the participants will for the most part undergo an intervention, with not much say in the process of change. If we consider a position at the bottom of the matrix, then an appeal will be made to the active contribution and the capacities of people, and the participants will have extensive influence on both the process itself as well as its direction. Or, in other words, if we find ourselves at the bottom of the matrix, as well as in an uncertain process of change, then a social learning process is the more obvious choice. However, if there is certainty regarding both the way of reaching a solution as well as the solution itself, then an often intensive and time-consuming process of this kind is not the obvious course to take and one is more inclined to rely on training and convincing people and teaching them new behaviour, and/or unlearning old behaviour. Finally, the positioning of a desired change in the matrix below also has consequences for the type of results that are aspired to and the kind of monitoring strategy and evaluation strategy that is used (Column E).

The pre-phase ends with the decision to opt for a certain change strategy. If social learning is put forward as an important process in realising the desired change, then a start can be made on further familiarising with the main problem/challenge.



When do we opt for social learning? A few examples from practice

Below a few examples of situations in which social learning occurs are provided in order to gain a better idea of when social learning might be emphasized.

Relationship agriculture-environment-nature

The past years have seen a spirited debate in Flanders and in the Netherlands concerning the relationship between agriculture, the environment and nature. Policy decisions in the sphere of limitations on manuring and regional development in particular have strengthened this social debate. Whereas consultations regarding agriculture were primarily an internal matter between the government and representatives from the sector, the agricultural sector is nowadays obliged to break open these internal negotiations and to justify itself to other groups in society. The government is attempting to steer this development, partly by means of establishing all sorts of committees on a municipal and regional level. With these environmental committees, nature committees and regional landscapes, the government creates a number of forums where local actors can work out concrete actions in the sphere of sustainable regional development through consultations and co-operation. The relationship between agriculture, the environment and nature is mainly an issue within the regional landscape committees and the committees that draw up a municipal nature development plan. In this way, the government aspires to base its environmental policy not only on enforceable norms (permits, for example) or economic instruments (ecological tax, for example), but also on the communication and planning activities of the population itself (Wildemeersch, 1997; Wildemeersch et al., 2002).

Water conservation in Limburg

Around the middle of the nineties, more and more people in the Dutch province of Limburg began to sense that farmers were wasting and polluting too much water, while so much could be accomplished with water management. Farmers, on the other hand, felt trapped as a result of the many regulations. Moreover, they too suffered the consequences of a shortage of water in the summer months. The various parties met for the purpose of finding a solution, this subject to the explicit condition that the solution would have to lead to results. In addition, the parties would have to operate within the statutory rules and, above all, all farmers were to be treated equally. This resulted in many details, and so finding good solutions cost a lot of time. A covenant between the LLTB and the province was established. It was agreed upon in this covenant that the LLTB would make sure that eighty percent of the farmers in the regions concerned would install dams. It became clear in 2001 that this goal would not be achieved and the regulations were then simplified. In addition, more emphasis was laid on advising individual farmers. More information: <http://www.waterconservering.nl>

Rustenburg Oostbroek

Rustenburg Oostbroek is a pre-war district in the Dutch city of The Hague with 8200 homes and 18,000 people. The layout of the district was inspired by the ideas of the famous urban developer Berlage. As a result, the district has a character of its own with many special details. A district plan was drawn up for Rustenburg Oostbroek. The original re-structuring plan of the municipality, which included the demolition of quite a few housing blocks, met with heavy protest on the part of the residents. The plan was adjusted considerably in response to this protest. Many residents have proceeded to make plans with respect to their future; they are selling their homes and moving to locations elsewhere in the region. Newcomers with a different lifestyle are purchasing the vacant homes. The district is gradually changing. Rustenburg Oostbroek has a good social infrastructure. One example of this concerns the extremely active owners' organisation: Bewoners Organisatie Rustenburg Oostbroek (BORO). The structure of this organisation is characterised by a board and a number of reasonably independently operating work groups and street groups. The organisation regularly justifies its activities to the residents by means of a few district meetings per year, their Internet page, and particularly via the district paper 'Oog voor de wijk'. All of the work groups grew out of the discontentment with the (demolition) plans in the initial proposals for the district. More information: <http://www.denhaag.nl/smartsite.html?id=36603>.

A frequently recurring situation in the Netherlands that is suitable for social learning concern problems affect rural areas in which various actors, such as farmers, nature protectors and property developers, have been in conflict with one another for years. A new opening in this respect is the fact that the agricultural sector offers less and less job security in the long term, and so farmers are forced to look for new avenues for survival. As a result they are quite eager to learn.

Another example concerns issues related to water management. Social learning formed a basis for the project Water Conservation 2nd generation in the Dutch provinces of Noord-Brabant and Limburg.

Issues on a more local community and neighbourhood level may also require social learning processes. These often concern processes that aim at improving the liveability / sustainability in a specific neighbourhood or quarter. An example of a process of this kind is described in 'Zet een boom op in de wijk' (Verreck and Wijffels, 2004) which features one community's attempts to improve the quality of life in the Rustenburg Oostbroek area of the city of The Hague using a sustainability perspective.

Orientating: exploring the problem, the playing field and methods

If it is concluded, having determined the nature of the change process, that it is important to make use of social learning, then an initial exploration of the change process is very important. The change process and the corresponding 'problem area' are carefully and tentatively explored by a selected group that will then identify the most significant interested parties and players and will gain an impression of the institutional and political leeway and support that is available. Aids that are relevant in this exploratory phase are described below.

Establishing a core group

The first thing to do is to establish a core group, the task of which will be to carefully examine the context of a social learning process: the prior history, the relevant actors, the nature of the issues at stake, et cetera. The core group must be comprised of people

who have feelers in the environment in which the social learning process is to take place in order to ensure that the participants are a miniature reflection of the existing interests and perspectives.

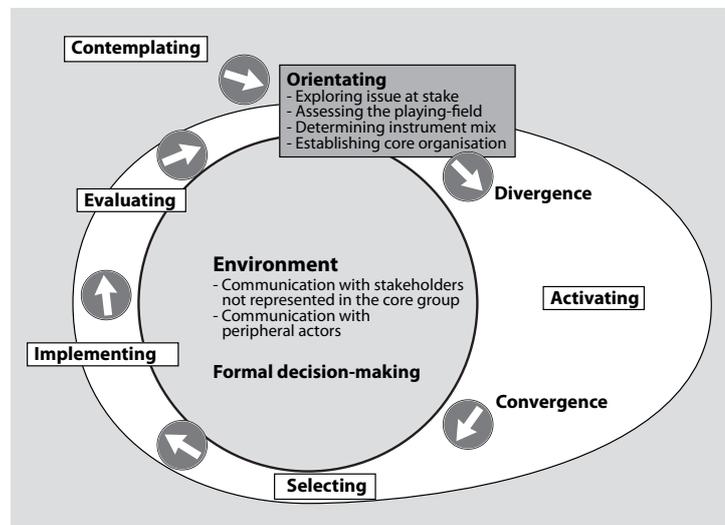
Investing in process facilitation

Whether or not social learning is successful depends upon the quality of the process and, with that, the quality of the process facilitator. He/she must be able to do virtually anything. A number of the qualities referred to are described below. It would be exceptional to find someone who has all of these qualities. And so a team of which the members offer complimentary (facilitation) skills will generally be required. But it is also quite conceivable that such qualities can be (partially) found among the participants themselves. The trick then is to uncover these qualities and mobilise them.

The process facilitator has a crucial role as someone who:

- keeps the process open (ensures access to the process, openness regarding the agenda, transparency of the process);
- guarantees security (protection against risks resulting from participation);
- knows how to deal with conflicts that arise;
- has no interests with respect to the outcome;
- monitors progress;
- ensures sufficient stimuli, challenges and a 'sense of urgency';
- can articulate and show how progress has been made;
- can keep the focus on the choices that have been made and the path that has been chosen.

The process facilitator must also make sure there are suitable work styles (role-playing, excursions, simulations, et cetera), materials (flip-overs, image material, PowerPoint, et cetera), feedback mechanisms (newsletter, website, progress reports), and he or she will also have to monitor the external relations (contacts with those granting subsidies, the environment of the process, interested outsiders). A process facilitator is: a good listener, sensitive to signs (political, emotional), a good manager/organiser, breeds trust, a good navigator in areas of



tension, a good discussion leader, an animator and has no hidden agenda.

Participants in social learning processes often want to discuss matters with one another on equal terms and it is not always appreciated if someone from the group, no matter how much expertise he or she may have, takes the lead and rises above the group for the sake of leading the process in the right direction. It is therefore often advisable to call in a process expert who is not part of the group, but is still accepted by everyone. Process facilitators who only care about the process and not about the content often become

Social learning not always a success

It is evident from the SLIM project (Social Learning for Integrated Management and sustainable water consumption in river basins), a European study into sustainable water management, that social learning is not always successful (<http://slim.open.ac.uk/page.cfm?pageid=aimshome>). In a case in the river basin of the Aa in the Dutch province of Drenthe, the polder platform, an administrative consultative body, proved unsuccessful in reconciling the many opposing opinions regarding the future of the area. An informal platform then came about in addition to the official consultations. This platform aspired to focus less on dividing the cake and more on baking a cake together. But this platform also failed to be an unqualified success. "We learned from both cases that our platform approach is not always the solution, and that it can even result in stagnation, particularly if the parties adopt official standpoints", says one of the stakeholders. "This may be the case if, for example, there is ample consultation, but little room for concrete experiments in practice. A second inhibiting factor will occur if the representatives in the platform become too detached from their supporters. There is then a risk that they will blow the whistle on the representatives (Röling, 2005)".

too distanced from the participants to adequately carry out their task. For a successful process, opting to hire a process facilitator and selecting someone is a decision that should lie with the group, rather than being imposed externally (by the municipality that grants a subsidy, for example).

Cultivating involvement and commitment

The degree to which people feel committed to or involved in a change or development is often a decisive factor for the quality of the results achieved. In general, one can say that a high level of involvement results in more willingness to think along and to participate in the process. If we consider “involvement” then we can distinguish between various forms. First of all there is what we might call *problem involvement*, which refers to the connection a participant has with the problem or issue at stake or the extent to which people are touched by the challenge or the problem. For example, not everyone will feel involved in improving the green areas in residential areas. Secondly, there is *process involvement*, which refers to the extent to which people feel comfortable with and are challenged by the methods and modalities of interaction. For example, a process may be inspiring, democratic and accessible, but also demotivating, hierarchical and

elitist. Finally, there is so-called *other involvement*, which refers to the extent to which people feel committed to the other participants in the process. People may be understanding, open and show solidarity towards others in a process, but may also be distrusting, closed and lacking empathy and understanding for perspectives other than their own. Social learning is more likely to succeed if the participants can view their own interests in relation to other interests or in any case put these in perspective.

Ideally, all three forms of involvement are optimal in a social learning process, but in reality this will seldom be the case in reality. The process facilitator will have to consider all three forms of involvement and must initiate activities to keep all three at a high level.

Communicating with the periphery

It is quite crucial to also include those who stand at a distance and do not actively participate. One can do so by means of frequent communication regarding what is being discussed and in which direction the process is headed and by ensuring that there are no or as few as possible barriers to stop others from becoming actively involved. Some pointers that may help to involve these “outsiders” include:

- take advantage of topical themes / hot items;
- link up with people’s own concerns, perceptions and understandings of the issue at stake;
- link the themes to concrete actions;
- offer a realistic action perspective (actions must be feasible);
- the underlying goal must be and remain clear-cut although it may change in time;
- support information for implementing the actions must be comprehensible and accessible for all those involved (adapted freely from: SME MilieuAvisseurs, 2000).

Not only do the members of the core group learn, in an optimal social learning process aimed at sustainability, others around them learn along with them as well. The core group should not be an exclusive group of extremely capable and motivated people who lose touch with their own base. We often see a small group of very committed people

A learning network

SME Advies, together with the Van Hall Institute provides the training course ‘Environmental communication in practice’ since 2000. Upon completing the course, the students often remarked that they also learned a lot from one another. Which is why SME has established the Network Environmental Communication for all of the former students (and a few colleagues).

The goal of the network is to strengthen the contacts with co-professionals, exchanging practical experiences, learning from one another and acquiring additional knowledge in the sphere of environmental communication. The (more than 50) members of the Network exchange information, questions and tips via an email-group that has been set up especially for that purpose. This email-group is used to ask questions concerning, for example, communication plans, waste projects, instruments for evaluation, et cetera. In addition, a network afternoon get-together is organised once a year on a subject that the network members choose themselves.

emerge, that is sometimes very creative in generating fantastic solutions, but which do not resonate at all with other, less involved residents or other interested parties, such as the municipality, the water board or the architect. People who stand on the sidelines and who also have interests must be involved as much as possible. Interim steps, choices and results must be shared time and again, both officially in the form of a newsletter, minutes, a website or neighbourhood paper, as well as informally: at home, at the local bakery, at school or at the sports club. Not only is the internal communication within the core group important, but the same goes for the external communication with the periphery. If the group of active participants form a clique that then becomes too detached from the people who are to work with the plans, ideas, new perspectives of action, et cetera, later on, then the wider impact of social learning will be limited.

Hooking up with existing initiatives and capacities

It is important, if we are to learn from one another, we realise that various initiatives do not compete, but rather strengthen one another. This also applies to the capacities and the energy behind the various initiatives. The party submitting the project or the initiating party must make it evident that it is familiar with comparable initiatives elsewhere and that it is open to creating synergy. It can be wise to hook up with existing informal networks or processes, as these are often made up of enthusiastic and creative people.

Fine tuning expectations

When can the outcome of a social learning process be defined as successful? The answers to this question often prove to vary considerably. Moreover, this question is usually asked too late or not at all. However, if people have the opportunity to lay their expectations on the table early on in the process, then it is possible to adjust the unrealistic expectations that might be present and thus prevent disappointments later on. Whereas one person may have an ecological, sustainable and perma-culture based living environment in mind, the other may focus mainly on a safe and green playing area without

the use of tropical hardwood... People often also have different perspectives on how much time certain changes should take. While one person would like to see a new playground built using FSC-certified wood the very next day, the other may be thinking more along the lines of a period of three years. There may also be differences in terms of the spatial scale that one has in mind: whereas the one may only consider the neighbourhood itself as becoming sustainable, the other may view the neighbourhood as an integrated part of the world and may see all kinds of lines running from the neighbourhood to elsewhere in the world.

Checking the institutional leeway for change and innovation

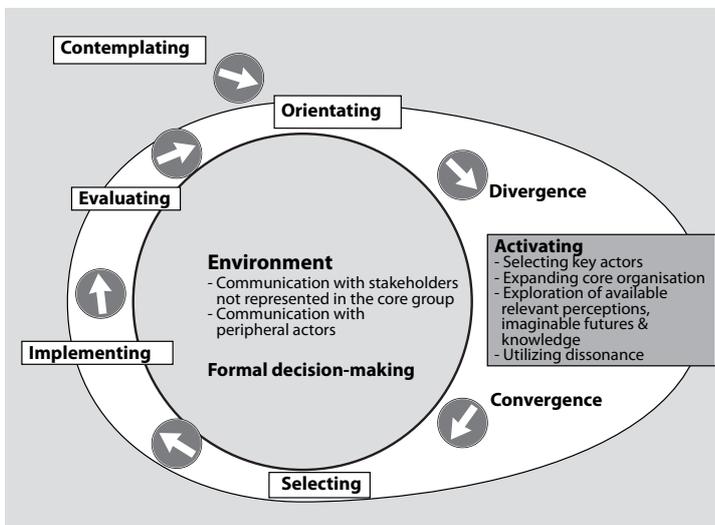
Social learning can result in creative solutions for challenges that are collectively experienced. If, upon translating these solutions into concrete actions and perspectives of action, it is found that the proper authorities have not issued a mandate for the realisation of the plans, then this will lead to frustration. Political support and official procedural leeway are therefore a must in social learning processes and the government should therefore be involved from day one. This also requires that the commissioning party and/or the management accept the uncertainty that results from a social learning process. After all, it is difficult to determine the outcome beforehand.

Activating: releasing energy and creativity

Following the initial phase, which is often started by a relatively small group of people who share a vision with respect to the process that is to be completed, there is generally a period during which other interested parties should become involved and the diversity and creativity in the group should be utilised.

Expanding the organisation

As previously pointed out, it is essential during the orientation phase of the problem/challenge to establish a core group that is to assess the playing field and the existing room for change. Once



Images and imagining

In order to generate creativity it is not only important to ensure diversity among the participants in terms of their perspectives, values, images, et cetera, but also to involve 'free thinkers'. Free thinkers are people who think 'outside the box'. They are notably creative and are not afraid to present ideas that at first glance seem without prospect. If the organisations and/or associations involved do not have freethinkers of this kind at their disposal, then it may be appealing to involve freethinkers from a totally different world (someone active in the field of visual arts, for example, or the theatre) who can release creativity in the others.

A great diversity of knowledge and experience contributes to creative solutions that, in time, can lead to a more sustainable society. One can also opt for methods of working that encourage people to be creative (making posters, scale-models, the use of visual material, et cetera). It is crucial in this phase to create room for images and imagining, and for scenarios and directions for solutions, or in other words, room for divergence.

Many of the considerations that are examined in the starting phase continue to be of importance in the activation phase. The involvement of participants, the composition of the organisation (the core team, the sounding board group, etc.), the facilitator, checking the institutional leeway that is still present and bringing expectations in line, all continue to require attention. What makes this phase different from the previous phase is the fact that more people are now involved, more perspectives regarding the original problem will be formulated and more interests will be at stake. These interests will often prove to be conflicting, but unexpected coalitions can be expected as well, because people and groups discover they share the same sub-interests.

The activation phase will often include the following activities:

- examining the available knowledge, experiences, images and ideas of the participants (make these more explicit);

there is some clarity in this respect, it is necessary to actively involve more people who are to then become co-supporters of the process. Who these people are and the manner in which they become involved depends upon the situation and the aim of the project. There is sometimes a 'sounding board' group consisting of people who react and think along from different perspectives and backgrounds, but who take no part in making decisions regarding subsequent steps. Another possibility is the establishment of a 'steering group' consisting of people who jointly represent the most significant interests and perspectives and who are involved in making decisions on which steps to take next. There are at least two criteria for the composition of support groups of this kind that differ somewhat from, for example, more common sounding board or steering groups: (1) members should possess high levels of energy and involvement and a high degree of group diversity. The participants should preferably also have (collective) competencies such as the desire to be leaders and visionaries, ability to look further than one's own field/world, and the ability to work with others. Furthermore they should have the desire and capability to invest time and, finally, be able to introduce and pass on the developed vision(s) within their own constituents and/or networks.

Of course, it will be a challenge to find participants of this kind. We must in any event be careful not to select people merely on the basis of their expertise or based on their ability to defend a certain interest, as often occurred in the past.

- putting participants into contact with one another (confrontations) in order to come to a shared analysis of the underlying problems;
- interpreting possible directions towards solutions, actions, scenario's (diverging).

A number of issues that deserve particular attention during the activation phase are described below.

Personal relationships and tensions

It is important to know with whom you are to enter into a social learning process. Participants must be able to present themselves (their ideas, images, values, et cetera) in a safe environment. The differences that will inevitably become evident make up the basis for social learning processes. Good personal relationships (previously referred to as social capital and social cohesion) are a precondition for a safe environment of this kind. We simply accept more from those who we feel are nice and pleasant and less from those who we feel are annoying.

Documentation and feedback

The documenting of interactive processes is important for various reasons. First of all, it provides legitimisation of the process and recognition of the contributions of those involved. In addition, reporting back offers participants the opportunity to check whether the images, ideas and solutions have been well understood and reproduced correctly. Feedback is essential in order to prevent expectations and images from developing in more than one direction without the group being aware of this. Reporting back also leads to a 'sense of urgency'. After all, agreements are often made and deadlines established. At the same time, documenting is also important in terms of recording one's progress, also for those who do not actively participate in the process (e.g. other residents, government officials, authorities granting subsidy et cetera). The form of the reporting, the language used and the distribution of the reports must be well in line with the intended audience. One may opt for a special form of reporting (newsletter) for external relations.

Finally, we point out two hazards of documenting the process and its (intermediate) outcomes. On the

one hand, a report may gain an official status such that only that which is documented is considered 'true' and people may hide behind this ("That wasn't in the minutes!"). On the other hand, the person who does the reporting may subtly enhance certain views, while repressing others. The language used too may be a barrier to certain groups or people and may reduce their motivation or involvement.

Selecting and designing a solution

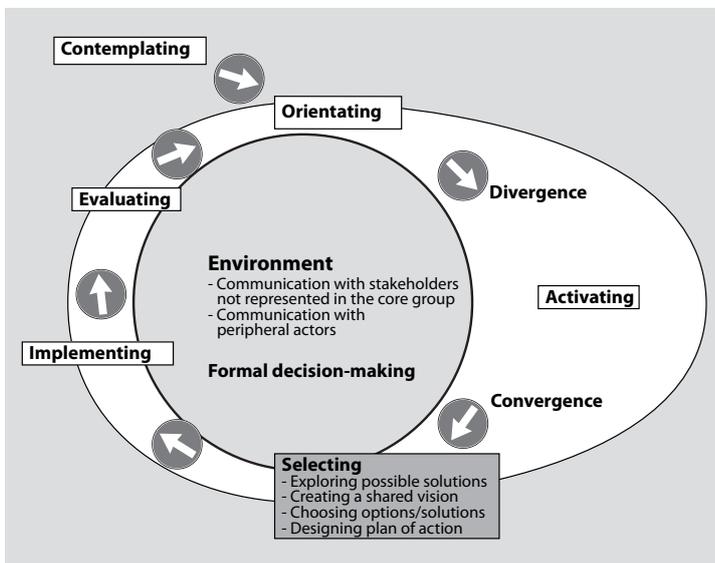
Whereas unveiling the spectrum of possibilities and utilizing diversity was particularly important in the previous phase, the selection and design phase is about collectively choosing a solution that can actually be realised in practice.

Selection

The activation phase offered ample room for exploring perspectives and ideas regarding the 'problem' for which the social learning process is intended. It was important in this respect to take care not to think in terms of solutions too quickly, but to first come to a collective understanding of the problem or challenge. The next step involved inspiring energy and creativity in order to find a number of possible solutions (actions, designs, activities).

The phase of 'diverging' (fanning out creativity) is followed by a period of 'converging': critically contemplating all of the devised possibilities in order to come to a selection of executable plans. The most important task in the selection phase is to end up with a selection of the most suitable direction(s) towards (a) solution(s). The participants can draw up a list of criteria themselves upon which to base their choice for a solution, but any solution will generally also have to comply with the administrative and financial leeway that is available.

The solution will not be everyone's first choice. A social learning process also has those who 'lose' and those who are dropped. The trick is to make them 'constructive critics' who can understand why a choice was made for a certain solution and who will not use their remaining energy to derail those



who carry on, but instead continue to follow the process as critical friends.

A shared vision

All those involved should for the most part be able to identify with the design or action plan that is ultimately realised. A design or plan is generally

based on visions of how things should look or can look. And so developing a shared, high quality, vision is an important step in the process. But what constitutes a high quality vision?

A good vision appeals to the imagination of many, inspires, challenges, combines energy and starts from a shared frame of reference. Realising a shared frame of reference is a particularly challenging part of participatory processes. An important aspect of interactive design is that people are given the opportunity to make their ideas explicit and to share these with others. These images may be incited by other images, such as photographs, videos or film, but also by stories told by others or from one's own experience. The facilitator of the process plays an important role in creating a safe and inspiring environment that offers room to everyone for his/her own stories and images and that can adequately respond to the images presented. And with that, the group has often already taken a first step towards realising a shared frame of reference. The next challenge concerns dealing with conflicting ideas and visions.

Dealing with conflicts

How should one handle conflicts that are either dormant or obviously apparent in social learning processes? Some say that our much praised consensus-based polder model avoids conflicts as much as possible because the fundamental decisions – often relating to visions of the future and underlying values – are either avoided or postponed. A deadlock can be overcome by making compromises regarding less sensitive subjects. The result is often a 'distributive negotiation process' (Van Woerkum and Van Meegeren, 1999) in which various parties make great demands in order to acquire the largest possible piece of the cake. This leads to a climate in which people do not share their true intentions, in which people feel insecure, risks are avoided and there is little concern for other stakeholders.

One approach that appears to offer more promise and that can lead to solutions of a high quality concerns a more *integrative approach* (Van Woerkum and Van Meegeren, 1999). In this approach, conflicts are not avoided but rather seen as an important source of

Pluriformity – dealing with differences

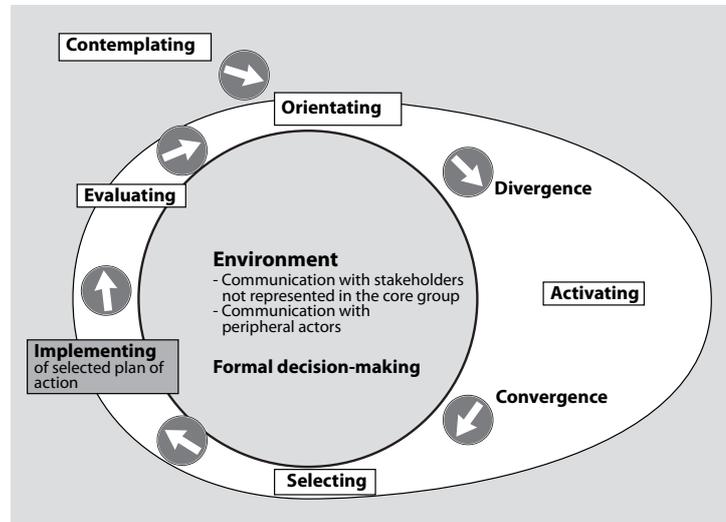
Social learning is characterised by the presence of a variety of perspectives, expectations and ideas. There are at least two sides to this pluriformity. On the one hand, these differences offer opportunities to learn from one another and to collectively come to creative solutions with which everyone can identify. On the other hand, these differences of opinion are sometimes deeply-rooted and can lead to bogus solutions with which no one can identify, but to which everyone agrees anyway for the simple reason that others did not have it their way either. . . An important challenge of interactive working is therefore to constructively deal with differences so that these are stimulating instead of obstructive. A first step in that direction is creating a safe atmosphere in which each individual is given the opportunity to present his or her perspective, expectations and ideas. This step forces people to carefully consider their own position and the underlying motives. By sharing these with others, the participants find themselves faced with other ways of thinking. This confrontation can lead to dissonance or discomfort or uneasiness towards one's own way of thinking and having to subsequently revise this. It may also lead to sympathy or respect for someone else's ideas, which may be beneficial to the process later on. If this step is skipped or is not carried out adequately, then the differences in terms of perspectives, expectations and images will become clear much too late in the process and disappointment and frustration can easily come to dominate the process.

collective learning. By making one another's ideas, visions and underlying values explicit in a safe climate and confronting one another with these, it is possible to lay the foundation for a shared frame of reference. The assumption being that when people jointly decide on the kind of pie to bake and bake the cake together, there will be less bickering about the size of the slice one actually gets to eat. The process becomes more important than the dividing up. In other words: the proof is in the making of the pudding, not in the eating! This does not mean that everyone has to agree with each other or have to like each other. Some differences will remain, but there is at least the beginning of a collective framework, social cohesion and respect for the differences that remain. A pre-condition for social learning is a safe climate in which people dare to take risks and to allow themselves to be vulnerable and in which creativity can lead to much needed unconventional solutions.

Implementing

The implementation phase involves the actual implementation of the selected solution to the problem. This may entail physical measures, such as the construction of a speed ramp, the layout of a play area, square or park, but this may also involve less visible measures, such as improved social relations between neighbours. It is important with respect to both the visible and less visible measures to make successes known, via the media for example, and to celebrate these (e.g. at the opening of a jointly created children's play area; an annual neighbourhood get-together in order to strengthen the new social cohesion, et cetera).

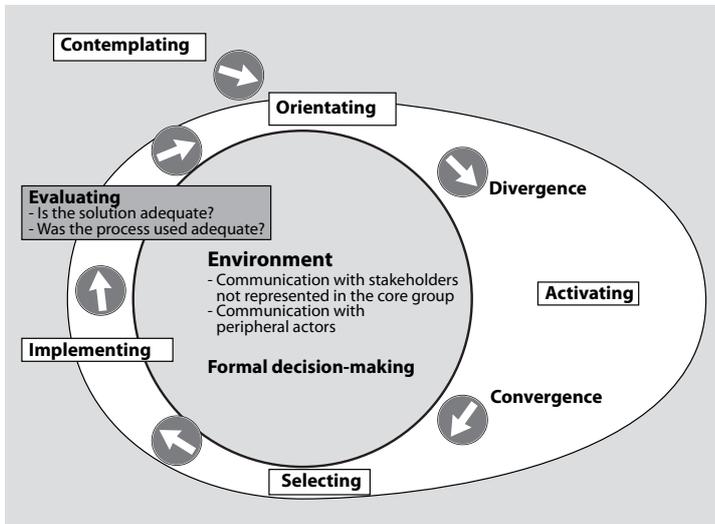
Social learning processes often take a long time and require much dialogue. People are often very enthusiastic, especially at first, and they want to get started quickly and proceed to take action. Still, it is usually wise not to think in terms of solutions and perspectives of action straight away, but rather to first carefully determine what the problems are exactly and in which direction we would like to go together. This necessary step can be frustrating, as the participants may feel that they are not making progress. This is often the result of a misunderstanding. Changes take place all of the time: people get to know one another



better, are more able to put themselves in other people's shoes, gain a better idea of the direction in which they want to go, develop *ownership* of the process, and involve new parties or interest groups in the process. In short, even if the first spade has to be entered into the soil, a lot of things are already happening. The problem is often that not enough visibility is given to these changes. As a result there is no feeling of satisfaction because there is no apparent progress. People often think in terms of hard results, such as a playground, a noise pollution barrier, ten hectares of nature reserve, but tend to forget the soft results, such as mutual understanding, respect, co-operation or a sense of community. Policy-makers too often base the success of processes on the hard, tangible results and not on the soft results. What we should actually do is make the hard results softer and the soft results harder. It is important to highlight the short-term results and small-scale successes to give people a sense of accomplishment and renewed energy.

Evaluating: looking back and ahead

We have already pointed out in the introduction to the social learning process that reflection, monitoring and evaluation are significant time and again to the success of social learning (as is illustrated by the roundabouts in Figure 2). Gaining insight into the progress and giving and receiving feedback are essential components of the process as a whole. We also pointed out in describing the various phases how important it is for changes to be visible, however small they may be, in order to keep participants motivated. And so much of what we describe here also applies to the previous phases



in the learning cycle. Here, we treat the monitoring and evaluating of social learning as part of the final phase as it is necessary from the perspective of the commissioning party to adequately assess the added value of social learning. In addition, it is also important to reflect upon the overall process in order to learn from that as well, in view of organising similar social learning cycles. This must be done with due care if we are to achieve permanent institutional leeway, political support and financial support for processes of change based on social learning.

Determining results ahead of time?

It is difficult and even undesirable to formulate the intended results of a social learning process in terms of changes in the behaviour of people, living communities and organisations beforehand. After all, one of the features of social learning is that the process determines the desired goals and results and the recognition that these may shift in the course of the project as new insights emerge. An additional problem is that social learning processes are characterised by a high degree of dynamics and uncertainty. Learning occurs at various levels: at the level of the individual, at the group level, and in the social network of which the individuals and groups are a part. Furthermore, the relationships between the actors involved are also constantly changing. All of the above make it quite difficult, to put it mildly, to determine the extent to which a project actually contributes to sustainable development. It may be possible later on to ascertain that there has been some change in, for instance, behaviour, the degree to which the change was the result of a project based on social learning and whether or not

this change can be considered positive or negative in sustainability terms. It may then be possible, perhaps with some effort, to say something about the cost effectiveness of a project.

Indeed it is difficult to determine to what extent social learning contributes directly to sustainable development. The focus of the monitoring and the evaluating of social learning should perhaps mainly be on the degree to which the capacity of individuals, organisations and networks is developed and utilised for the purpose of contributing to social learning processes within the context of sustainable development. The question is whether this will be easier.

Making soft results hard

How can we know whether or not the capacity of individuals, organisations and networks for contributing to sustainability-oriented social learning processes are actually being developed and utilised? The learning process of the involved actors, organisations and networks often generates all kinds of 'soft' results that, at first glance, appear to have little to do with sustainable development but that may be essential to creating a sustainable society (consider: social cohesion, empathy, involvement, co-operation, etc.) (Wals, 2007). And so we must make these 'soft' results somewhat harder, and we must make the degree to which these results ultimately contribute to a more sustainable society more visible. The policy of, for example, a municipality concerned with sustainability should include a number of clear-cut and accountable process goals, in addition to more tangible outcomes. One example of this concerns actively involving neighbourhood residents in designing and maintaining local green zones. The manner in which the residents are to help shape the green zones and what their role could possibly be in maintaining them is intentionally left open. The important thing is to consider what 'actively involving' implies. When can one be satisfied with the level of participation of people in an interactively structured process?

'Process goals' of this kind can be combined with goals concerning the harder results that can be realised in the short term. Factors such as reducing

the amount of litter in the neighbourhood or saving energy within a company can be made measurable. Even matters such as a sustainable neighbourhood and corporate social responsibility can be made measurable by means of checklists and indicators. It is, however, often the case that those who have compiled the indicators and checklists have already experienced 'the learning process', which is possibly an essential condition for internalisation and creating 'ownership' of such indicators. Measuring systems of this kind may be appealing to policy-makers and managers as a means to get a grip on change, but they may also frustrate the social learning process if they are imposed directly.

The manner in which the results are to be achieved can be pre-determined or determined more interactively, that is to say, determined by those immediately concerned in the neighbourhood, organisation or company (see Table 2). One can hardly call something a social learning process when both the results (goal) and the process (means) have been determined beforehand by policy-makers, experts or the management. The other combinations offer provide more space for social learning, either aimed or not aimed at pre-determined and measurable goals.

Three of the four cells in Table 2 refer to environmental results (less litter). The fourth cell (bottom right) does not specify a concrete environmental result but instead refers mainly to the commitment on the part of people. It is precisely this kind of result that may, in the long term, lead to social cohesion, co-operation and a sense of community, for example. Changes of this kind are perhaps a prerequisite if one is to find solutions for problems/challenges that are much more complex and that are more oriented towards sustainability rather than only aimed at reducing litter.

Soft results essential to sustainable development

There will be less room or more room for social learning depending upon how a project aimed at reducing litter, for example, is actually organised. The amount of space available for social learning determines the extent to which social spin-off results can be generated. It is assumed that it is precisely results of this kind that can form the necessary basis for taking a small leap towards sustainability. If such is indeed the case, the issue is then to determine whether the (long-term) advantage of creating space for social learning outweighs the (administrative) disadvantage of not being able to establish hard results beforehand. It is also important, should one

Table 2. A typology of change strategies.

	Process is pre-determined	Process is determined interactively
Policy results are pre-determined	Type 1: Highly instrumental Information campaign 'Litter in the neighbourhood' designed by the government, the goal of which is to reduce litter by 50% within one year.	Type 2: Mix Residents are challenged to come up with a plan to reduce litter in the neighbourhood by 50% within one year.
Policy results are determined in the course of the process	Type 3: Mix The municipality, without establishing ahead of time which level of reduction is to be realised, starts a campaign against litter in the neighbourhood, in the course of which (by means of waste-monitoring) it becomes clear which results are feasible, in which respect variations from one neighbourhood to the other are possible/acceptable/encouraged.	Type 4: Highly emancipatory The municipality, by means of neighbourhood surveys and consultations with the residents, determines which aspects of liveability and/or sustainability are to be given priority in the neighbourhood. These themes are jointly prioritized and then addressed interactively.

opt for creating room for social learning, to designate and visualise the social results that will be required in the course of time in order to realise sustainability.

Measuring is knowing?

'Not everything that can be measured counts, and not everything that counts can be measured.'

Einstein

Social learning within the context of sustainable development is also about monitoring and evaluating the capacity of people to contribute to social learning processes. In addition, it may also be important to outline and regularly provide feedback regarding the returns on sustainability as formulated by the participants in the course of the process, so that the progress in this respect is visible as well.

A number of differences between a mainly result-oriented evaluation process (results as expressed by hard sustainability indicators) and a mainly process-oriented monitoring process are set alongside one another in Table 3.

It is conceivable that a choice will be made for a mixture of approaches that are more instrumental or more emancipatory in nature. For example, an approach that is aimed at the 'hard' results of the change process can be combined with an approach

that is aimed at the more 'soft' results of the change process. As the demand for hard sustainability results may be strong, both from the angle of policy as well as from the perspective of, for example, the neighbourhood, it may be convenient to work with sustainability indicators.

Sustainability indicators for which a certain degree of consensus exists amongst the participants in the social learning process and that may in part themselves be the result of the process, can help provide a sense of progress and a sense of direction. As such, they can function as a *benchmark* of sorts against which progress can be made visible. In visualising progress, one can make use of attractive graphs and tables in which the results can be plotted against time. If there is indeed evident progress, then this can have a motivating effect. But there are also disadvantages to using sustainability indicators in social learning processes. For one thing, not being able to observe progress on the basis of indicators does not always mean that no progress has been made. However, the fact that no progress has been observed can be used as an excuse (by financiers/granters of subsidy, for example) to stop supporting the process. Verreck and Wijffels (2006) refer to the 'post-void' effect of a poor result from a measurement. It may also become evident later on that the indicators used were not correct and that the wrong factors were taken into account. This need not be a problem in itself, provided that it is made clear to those concerned how the indicators fell short and how they can be improved. If devising and using indicators makes up part of a social learning process then an integral part of the process will involve reflecting upon the functioning of these indicators and, when necessary, refining or rejecting them.

Sustainability indicators

What should we bear in mind when devising sustainability indicators? The Pastille project (Verreck and Wijffels, 2004) specifies characteristics of good indicators that are also relevant here. Good indicators are, for example:

- Politically relevant (are related to policy)
- Simple (people can understand them)
- Valid (a good representation of reality)
- Important (it is about what those involved find relevant and important)
- Measurable
- Based on available and workable data
- Informative (provide information on changes in the course of time, for example)
- Reliable (the outcome is virtually the same upon repeating the measurements)
- Action-oriented (can be connected to a certain action)

Table 3. Two monitoring and evaluation approaches juxtaposed (adapted freely from Proost and Wals, 2005).

	Instrumental approach (focus on determining results)	Emanicipatory approach (focus on improving the process)
Main goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> determining the (policy) goal range accountability commissioned party towards commissioning party accountability government towards society 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> determining the course of the process improving the quality of the project realisation process collectively learning from joint experiences
Role externals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> expert role external observation determining measuring system to be used and indicators measuring, analysis and interpreting data reporting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> role of facilitator and coach participatory observation determining measuring system and indicators together with actors making the process that is being completed visible and its progress enticing and equipping actors for self-evaluation and monitoring
Role of actors ¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> sources of information (data) for the external M&E specialist (one-sided) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> involving participants in discussions on (perceived) changes and experiences with the process (interactive)
For whom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> financiers / policy-makers, and ultimately the public 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> all those involved in the process of change (commissioning party is also one of the actors)
Underlying world view	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> empirical-analytical / understanding through reduction, search for explanations (if - then), aspiring to objectivity and independence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> actors may interpret things differently holistic: search for meanings, connections and relationships reality can be interpreted in various ways room for subjectivity but...striving for inter-subjectivity: collective interpretation of what has happened
Risks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> results are random indications and depend upon the reality and validity of the instruments used M&E is mainly of interest to one party only: the commissioning party, and is mainly used for strategic purposes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> commissioning party views the results as non-scientific¹; use of methods that yield significant stories from all of the interested parties intensive monitoring of the process of change and aspiring to inter-subjectivity is time-consuming².
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> surveyable, can be well planned, relatively inexpensive, appealing to policy (particularly within the short policy cycles) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> all of the participants can benefit from the process (can contribute to the professional development of those involved) renders a long-term perspective possible M&E stimulates the learning process and provides insights for the benefit of other similar projects and upscaling

¹ Role of actors within the system/network in the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) process.

² This depends upon the commissioning party's opinion of M&E and science. It is advisable to first gain sufficient support on the part of the commissioning party if one is to opt for the more emancipatory approach.

³ This time is compensated for because actions that result from M&E can be immediately taken up in the project realisation.



CONCLUDING REMARKS

This essay in its essence holds that moving towards sustainability as a social learning *process* stands in sharp contrast to the notion of sustainability as an expert pre-determined transferable *product* (i.e. as set by a policy, code of behaviour, charter or standard) (Jickling and Wals, 2008; Wals *et al.*, 2008). We believe that through facilitated social learning, knowledge, values and action competence can develop in harmony to increase an individual's, a group's or a network's possibilities to participate more fully and effectively in the resolution of emerging personal, organisational and/or societal issues. Perhaps the point of social learning is not so much what people should know, do or be able to do, which could be an embodiment of authoritative thinking and prescriptive management, but rather: How do people learn? What do they want to know and learn? How will they be able to recognize, evaluate and, when needed, potentially transcend or break with existing social norms, group thinking and personal biases? What knowledge, skills and competencies are needed to cope with new natural, social, political and economic conditions, and to give shape and meaning to their own lives? How can social learning build upon people's own knowledge, skills and, often alternative, ways of looking at the world? How can the dissonance created by introducing new knowledge, alternative values and ways of looking at the world become a stimulating force for learning, creativity and change? How can people become more sensitive to alternative ways of knowing, valuing and doing, and learn from them? How do we create spaces or environments that are conducive to this kind of learning? This essay addressed only some of these important questions.

These questions do make clear however that learning in the context of sustainability is an open-ended and transformative process that needs to be grounded in the everyday worlds and lives of people and the encounters they have with each one another. It is these 'encounters' that provide possibilities or opportunities for meaningful learning as they can lead both to (constructive) dissonance and increased social cohesion. The value of 'difference' and 'diversity' in energizing people, creating dissonance and unleashing creativity has been repeatedly mentioned in this booklet as has the power of 'social cohesion' and 'social capital' in creating change, and building resilience, in complex situations characterised by varying degrees of uncertainty.

The success of social learning depends a great deal on the collective goals and/or visions shared by those engaged in the process. Whether such collective goals and/or visions can actually be achieved depends, at least in part, on the amount of space for possible conflicts, oppositions and contradictions. In social learning the conflicts and their underlying sources, need to be explicated rather than concealed. By explicating and deconstructing the oftentimes diverging norms, values, interests and constructions of reality people bring to a sustainability challenge, it not only becomes possible to analyze and understand their roots and their persistence, but also to begin a collaborative change process in which the kind of shared meanings and joint actions emerge that will ultimately help create a more sustainable world.

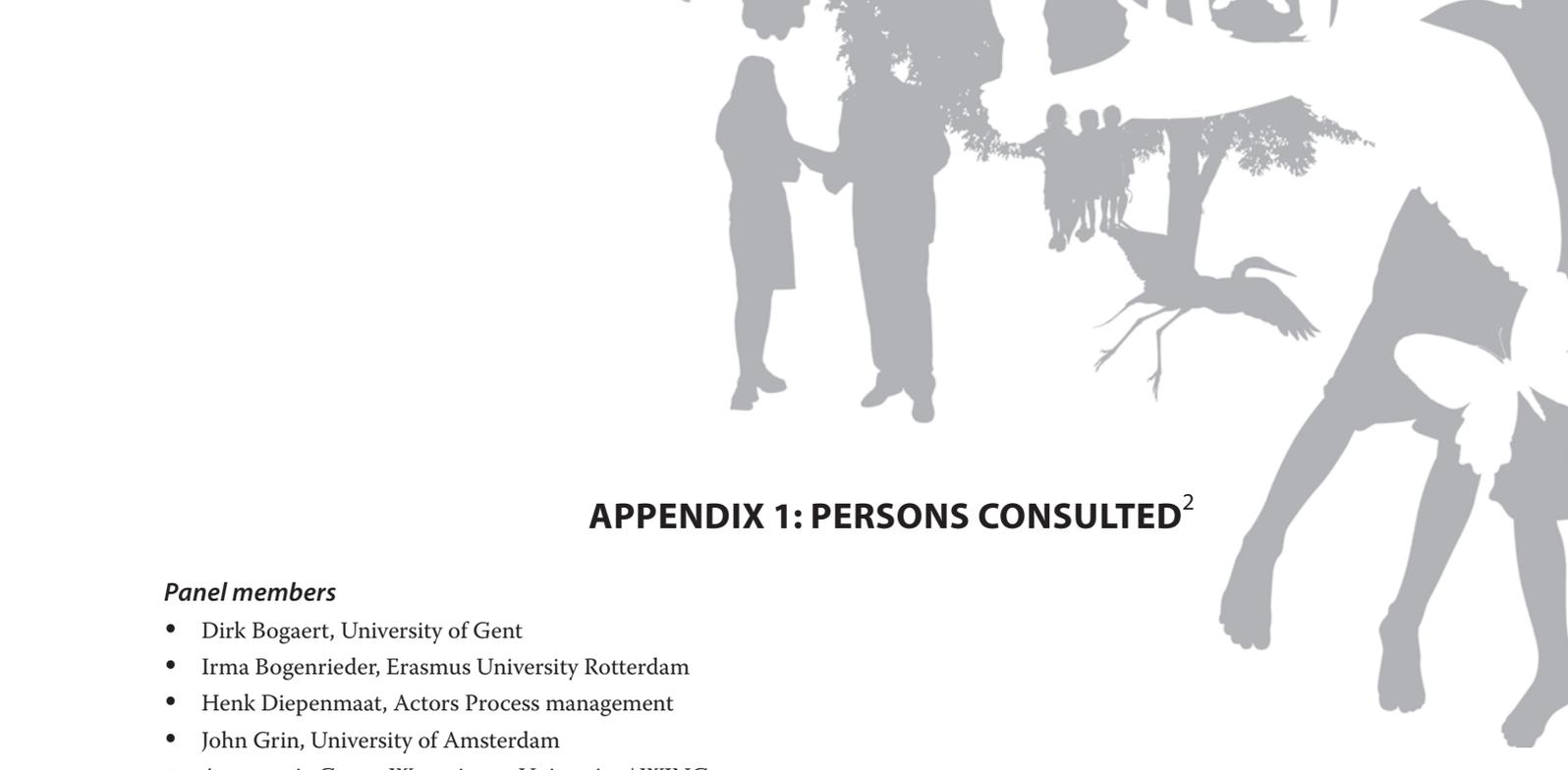


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APPENDIX 1: PERSONS CONSULTED²

Panel members

- Dirk Bogaert, University of Gent
- Irma Bogenrieder, Erasmus University Rotterdam
- Henk Diepenmaat, Actors Process management
- John Grin, University of Amsterdam
- Annemarie Groot, Wageningen University / WING
- Wim de Haas, Ministry of Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries
- Theo Kuijpers, emeritus NME
- Janice Jiggins, Wageningen University
- Douwe Jan Joustra, SenterNovem
- Suzanne Lijmbach, Wageningen University
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- Marleen Maarleveld, Ministry of Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries
- Joke Marinissen, Wageningen University
- Jet Proost, Communicatie Advies & Journalistiek
- Roel van Raaij, Ministry of Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries
- Niels Röling emeritus professor Wageningen University
- Erik van Slobbe, Wageningen University / Arcadis
- Cees van Straten, SenterNovem
- Eelke Wielinga, Link Consult

Participants study circle 'Social learning can be stimulated and learned'

- Albert Bos, KNHM Gelderland
- Bart van den Bosch, Milieuzorg Utrecht
- Gertjan Eg, Waterschap Aa en Maas
- Klaas Koopman, Waternet
- Rita de Ligt- van der Zee, IVN
- Herman Schotman, ProjectAtelier 119
- Bowine Wijffels, Cailin Consult
- Marieke Gombault, BECO
- Margreeth Broens, Prisma
- Patrick van der Hofstad, Milieuzorg Utrecht

² The affiliations of these people may have changed since the time they contributed to the creation of the thinking that underlies this publication.



APPENDIX 2: INTERNET SOURCES

<http://portals.wi.wur.nl/msp/>

A portal on multi-stakeholder processes and social learning created by Wageningen International. Here you can find practical information on how to facilitate participatory learning processes with various stakeholders. It provides theoretical foundations, methods and tools to create learning processes, facilitation tips, examples, literature and links.

<http://learningforsustainability.net/evaluation/>

The Learning for Sustainability portal provides a range of annotated links to material for evaluating multi-stakeholder initiatives. These cover different evaluation approaches, ways of dealing with different scales and intensities, and the use of logic models and theory of change.

<http://www.worldwatercouncil.org/index.php?id=1397>

A site on Capacity Building and Social learning created by the World Water Council.

http://learningforsustainability.net/social_learning/

This site aims to provide a practical resource for those who work with communities (in the wider sense of the term) to help them identify and adopt more sustainable practices.

<http://rayison.blogspot.com/2008/01/social-learning-systems-practice-and.html>

This is a part of Ray Ison's personal blog which contains many links to writings and resources on social learning, systems thinking, participatory approaches and so on. Ray Ison holds professorships in Systems at the UK Open University and Systems for Sustainability at Monash University, Melbourne.

<http://users.actrix.co.nz/bobwill/>

Bob William's personal homepage which contains many useful links. Williams is dedicated to providing training and consultancy support in the use of systems concepts in evaluation.

<http://www.triplehelix.com.au/>

Triple Helix Consulting works with progressive organisations in the public and private sectors to develop and implement more sustainable policies and practices. The 'triple helix' is Andrew Campbell's metaphor for sustainability – the intertwined and interdependent strands of landscapes, lifestyles and livelihoods.

<http://www.anecdote.com.au/index.php>

Anecdote helps business leaders engage their people to be even better collaborators, leaders and change agents using the power of business narrative.

<http://www.mindtools.com>

A semi-commercial site containing a range of practical tools for problem-solving, decision making, effective communication et cetera.

<http://reviewing.co.uk/reviews/>

Portal of books on active learning as well as reviews of many books on action learning, problem-solving, change management et cetera.

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