

Strengths and Weaknesses of Spatial Language: Mapping activities as debating instrument in a spatial planning process

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ABSTRACT

It seems like a battle for 'space' has broken out in the Netherlands. Since the fifth National Policy Document on Spatial Planning has just been delivered, the topic spatial planning is high on the agenda of many governmental departments, special interest groups and research institutions. In the many discussions on the national policy document, a common call is the need for more *interactive spatial policymaking*. A map can be a helpful instrument in such processes. But how mapping activities can be incorporated in the new ways of interactive policymaking is not yet clear. This paper is part of a research project, which tries to answer how maps, or mapping activities, can be used effectively and efficiently as supportive tool in interactive policymaking. This paper does not aim at a standard recipe how to implement a (participative) mapping process as debating instrument. From the perspective of the policy sciences this is not possible because of the complexity, capriciousness, and situational dependency of a policymaking process. Instead, a broad overview of the role of mapping activities in a policymaking process is given, of which a part is illustrated in a case study.

Roles of mapping activities in interactive policymaking

Seen from the perspective of policy analysis, mapping is a form of modelling, and maps are a type of visual language. A mapping activity is seen as the making and use of spatial visualisations, including the use of tools like GIS. Mapping activities have a role in several phases in policymaking processes. The following phases can be identified: problem formulation, design phase, comparing and ranking of alternatives, final selection, implementation and evaluation. Maps are helpful in the stage of *problem formulation*, in defining the scope of the problem and specifying the 'system'. Later in the process, maps can be used to visualise spatial criteria. Spatial visualisations are important for identifying and designing alternatives in the *design phase* of the policymaking process, by emphasising certain spatial themes and by showing search spaces. Mapping activities can also be undertaken to visualise the (spatial) impacts of plans. In the following phases, maps play a role in the deliberation by showing preferences and communicating planning concepts.

There are also supportive functions of mapping activities across the successive phases. For example, maps can serve as guiding support in the management of the abstraction level during the policymaking process, by using different maps of lower and higher scales. Also, by using maps, the aspect of goal searching in the beginning of the process can be *framed*

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towards a certain direction. Finally, because maps are concrete and graphic, they facilitate the process of fitting different jargons into one language, contributing to collective learning. Above roles of maps are illustrated in a case concerning a sectoral, regional planning process. In the case, a water board made a 'water opportunity map' in an interactive process with municipalities and province. In figure 1, a matrix is spanned by the phases in policymaking and the types of maps made in the case of the water opportunity map. The matrix illustrates the shifting role of mapping activities during the policymaking process.



Figure 1. The changing role of maps in the case of making a water opportunity map

Conclusions

A rudimentary framework is given, that relates several functions of maps to elements of an interactive policymaking process. The case illustrates how the 'funnel-shaped' process of developing a policy vision is framed by mapping activities. The case confirms once more the power of the language of (spatial) images. But by 'flattening' the policy complexity literally and figuratively into a plane of a map, other perspectives with their own points of attention fall outside the line of sight. Examples in the case are the ignoring of financial and landscape aspects. Probably a combination with other types of activities can overcome this weakness. Remarkable in the case is that legend items appear to be a red line in the process. It deserves united attention to formulate them specifically and clearly, and to explain them. The case shows the difficulty of managing the 'interaction' between the policy process and the mapping activities. Further research how this interaction can be approved is recommended.

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