

Rethinking strategy in environmental policy and planning

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Abstract

In this paper we develop a novel framework for analyzing the formation and effects of strategies in evolving governance contexts. To that purpose, we combine elements of critical management studies, strategy as practice thinking, social systems theory and evolutionary governance theory. The main starting point is the notion that governance and its constitutive elements are constantly evolving and that the formation of strategies and the effect strategies produce should be understood as elements of these ongoing dynamics. We introduce the concept of **reality effects** to grasp the various ways in which discursive and material changes can be linked to strategy and to show that identification of strategies can result from **prior intention and a posteriori ascription**. We demonstrate **the rootedness of strategy in observation**, with different modes and levels of observation bringing in different strategic potentialities: observation of self, of the governance context, and of the external environment. Observation of reality effects can enhance reality effect, and so does the observation of strategy. The paper synthesizes these ideas into a framework which conceptualizes strategies as **productive fictions** that 'require' constant adaptation. They never entirely work out as expected or hoped for, yet these productive fictions are necessary and effective parts of planning and steering efforts. Environmental policy and planning are considered part and parcel of broader governance configurations, yet often also embodying their own configurations, marked by rigidities in evolution, allowing for particular forms of strategy and reality effects. We argue there are situations where ambition has to be scaled back or held back and intermediate strategies and/or transitional governance has to be envisioned first.

Keywords: Strategy, reality effects, observation, steering, productive fiction, governance

Introduction: Strategy and/or the environment

Environmental policy and planning foster the ambition to have an influence on the world. Without ambition and intention, no policy and planning. In the case of environmental policy and planning, one has to add that, whatever the understanding of 'environment', one is bound to deal with a variety of knowledges, actors, institutions, issues, interests, and feedback loops both on the social and the natural side of social-ecological systems, as well as interactions between those two. All this is commonplace, indeed, yet in the drive towards specialization, technicality and usefulness, it is often forgotten how complex this enterprise is, and how many engineering assumptions we build into our models of policy, planning, environment and their interactions. Indeed, this too is commonplace now, as traditional critique of the high modernist

state. Yet, the high modernist state returns with a vengeance, as what made it attractive in the first place still holds attraction to politics and administration, and even for neo-liberal public-private coalitions arguing for a reduction of governance to public management for small government.

We take the position that governance is always there, that it is neither good nor bad per se, that it has to be assessed per case and configuration, and that what is possible with regards to governance transformations hinges on the particular co-evolutions making up a particular governance path. What environmental policy and planning can be, in other words, hinges on the overall governance configuration and its evolution. What it can do, hinges on the same things. The evolution of particular governance systems makes the emergence of particular ideas, plans, policies, procedures, sets of actors, of knowledges, more likely, but the same evolution does not guarantee at all that what emerges is the configuration with the best environmental effects. Neither does it guarantee that what is decided, and the direction envisioned are most appropriate or workable for the governance, social and physical environment addressed. The policies and plans that come up in a particular governance environment are not predestined by that environment to be useful in addressing problems of the physical environment. And they are not more likely to be implementable, compared to others, suggested by outsiders, by experiences elsewhere.

For these reasons, and for the reason that in our view not enough attention has been paid to them, we propose a reintroduction of the concept of strategy into environmental policy and planning. As 'implementation' is more than pushing a button after a policy or plan has been articulated, but requires strategy, and as policies or plans can be strategies themselves (to address environmental issues, improve environmental assets and qualities), and since policies and plans can be part of larger strategies, we believe this is a worthwhile enterprise. At the same time, we need to be very careful with the version of the concept of strategy we embrace, and we might need to craft critically a concept that can be used for analysis of governance of communities, not only of organizations, the dominant level of analysis in the management literature.

This is the main aim of the paper: a rethinking of strategy that makes the concept useful for understanding environmental governance and attempts at steering in that context. Our initial reflection, yet uninformed by theory, enabled us to distinguish between different versions of strategy in environmental governance:

- the policy or plan as strategy
- the policy or plan as part of a larger strategy
- strategy in the 'implementation' of a policy or plan

Logically, one can derive from this:

- Strategy in the formation of policies and plans (as inversion of the previous one)

And, in a broad understanding of institutions:

-Strategy more loosely tied to policies or plans, to formal institutions

In the following sections we will borrow from diverse theoretical traditions to develop this initial typology, to make explicit and refine our concept of strategy, and to discern ways to assess which kind of strategy might work in which situation of environmental governance. We argue that analysis of governance configurations and paths is essential in such assessment. In our theoretical elaboration, we introduce the concept of reality effects, and analyze strategy as rooted in observation of an environment. We conclude with an acknowledgement of the limitations of both strategy and governance, thus of environmental policy and planning, but offer the concepts of intermediate strategy and transitional governance as part of a meta-strategy for situations where articulation of substantive and long term strategy might not be possible (yet).

Strategy and governance

Strategy is a vision for a desirable longer term (distinct from tactics), coupled to an idea of how to get there (so distinct from dream, fantasy, or projection). If we start with this elementary notion, we can see that strategy is everywhere in governance. People strategize, organizations strategize and communities strategize, as philosophers going back to Plato and Aristotle already acknowledged (###). In early modern times, the political philosophy of Niccolo Machiavelli testifies to the entwining of individual, group, and communal strategies (Machiavelli, 1988). Individuals strive to get somewhere, in factions, which similarly strategize, as part of cities and states, which have an emergent agency allowing them to strategize as collectives.

In more recent times, the shifting roles of public and private actors in governance and the introduction of new policy instruments have fueled a still growing and renewed attention for governance strategies (Pierre, 2000; Imperial, 2005; Biermann et al., 2014; Grotenbreg & Van Buuren, 2017). Governance strategies are regularly discussed as alternatives to what is labelled more traditional forms of policy, such as regulation or financial incentives. Examples include collaborative strategies or networking strategies (Ansell & Gash, 2017; Scott & Thomas, 2017). These governance strategies are considered to be more effective or legitimate and they are presented as part of a broader normative agenda of governance reform in which the role of government is decreased in favor of markets and civil society (Bell & Hindmoor, 2009; Bevir & Rhodes, 2016). Despite the growing attention for a range of alternative governance strategies, few publications actually provide a more in-depth conceptualization of the formation and effects of governance strategies (###). Furthermore the literature on governance strategies often excludes the formulation and implementation of policies, plans or programs from the conceptual framework, therewith overlooking the actual diversity of governance strategies (###)

In order to shed a light on the forms and functions of strategy in governance, as a way for actors to move forwards, to define and create the futures they prefer, and to materialize the collective goods they most

value, we construct a conceptual framework to analyze and improve governance strategy. Analyzing governance strategy can refine the understanding of the possibilities and limits of strategy, planning and steering, and, one can add, of governance itself. We derive insights from strategy research at other scales or domains, i.e. in the realm of organizations, at individual level, and in the domains of politics and economics that can be found in management and organization studies. We lean on the strategy- as- practice literature (###), critical management theory (###), interpretive policy analysis (###), systems theory (###) and evolutionary governance theory (###). We selectively and critically borrow from these literatures. Our focus is on the strategies through which actors try to achieve collective (common) and public goods in a context where many other actors are active: governance. Placing strategy in governance means that there needs to be an actor or group of actors which tries to take collectively binding decisions. Often this is a government, but also private actors, like NGOs, communities or interest groups, or coalitions of public and private actors can strategize in governance. Governance changes continuously, partly as a result of these strategies, but also under influence of other actions and events and the temporal dimension thus plays an important role in analyzing governance strategies (Pierson).

In our conceptualization of governance strategy, both the formation of strategy and the effects matter. We first look at the strategy concept itself, we pay attention to what is understood as a strategy and outline two main **dimensions of governance strategy** as both **narrative and institution**. Following Mintzberg we reflect on the distinction between **deliberate and emerging** strategies. We then elaborate on our concept of **reality effects** and connect this to the notion of **observation**, meaning that what is understood and labeled as a strategy depends on observations, coupled to observers that have a particular understanding of themselves, their environment, and about the way to navigate or direct change in that environment.

We synthesize these insights in the following section in which we point at the necessity to understand strategy in the context of always evolving governance, which connects and reconnects thinking (or discursivity) and organizing (or institutions) in ever shifting configurations. Strategy as both narrative and institution functions then in a context where both are continuously remolded, and where adaptation is a natural and essential process. Then, we return to the idea of limits and possibilities of strategy in governance, and highlight its nature as **productive fiction**, in other words, an always impossible yet entirely necessary notion, enabling governance to look forwards, to structure itself in such a way that self- steering towards desirable futures becomes possible.

Strategy: actions and intentions

A governance strategy is understood as a vision for a desirable longer term, coupled to an idea of how to get there, through which actors, individually or collectively, work towards collective goals.

Most of the theoretical work on strategies is found in the context of management and organization studies. Within these fields strategy has been defined and understood in many different ways (Neugebauer et al., 2016). Mintzberg (1987) reflected on these different definitions and their relation and argued that although some definitions compete, they can also complement each other.

For our analysis of governance strategies three dimensions of governance strategy are relevant:

- A narrative of (a desired) future and how to get there
- A set of institutions (new and old) thought to enable moving in this direction
- The strategy ideally functions as an institution itself

First of all, a strategy needs to include, in fact, represent, a **narrative** of a desirable yet achievable future which is acceptable for enough actors to make it move. Narratives about the future include ideas about the identity of involved actors and expectation about their goals, actions and responses, because a strategy never exists without actors to support and enact it. The link between actors, their identities and their strategies is complex and not neutral (Mead, 1967). The identity is a discursive image of self, others and environment that can inform strategies, be part of a strategy, or be influenced by the strategy (Seidl). The image of self which is built into the strategy, will likely change in the life course of the strategy, just as the perspective on the world which underpins the strategy is likely to change through strategy. All this might make a certain narrative appealing and help in coordinating various actions, but at the same time it can also trigger counter actions from those who dislike the narrative.

Secondly governance strategy will depend and draw on existing institutions and it is likely to result in new **institutions** at some point. Institutions, as the rules and norms that structure interactions, act as tools for coordination. Existing institutions create and restrict options for strategy development and they can be tools for their realization. The development of new institutions can start with simple rules and norms shared within a small group, but also lead to the development of more complex institutions such as policies, plans, or laws and even to situations whereby these institutions create new forms of organization and new actors, in order to realize a particular strategy. One can say that, if successful, when the strategy is operative in the way intended, it starts to function as an institution in itself, coordinating the decision-making of actors and the behavior of citizens outside the sphere of governance. Third, if it works, if the strategy has a coordinative effect, it can become an institution itself, as it is ideally more than a collection of other institutions. It is intended to become a coordinative tool with a distinct identity and functioning ascribed to the strategy itself, not only the institutions contained. The degree to which it does function depends on the transparency and shared character of the strategy; if it is not shared and transparent, if it is strategy in governance held by a few and not communicated, there will be no ascriptions of effects to that strategy outside the small circle where it emerged, yet those effects can still be there, and the coordination can be restricted to a small circle. If that circle has influence, it still is a governance strategy functioning as institution.

For seminal strategy theorist Mintzberg main concern was with the relation between strategies as plan and strategies as patterns. Whereas the first perspective sees strategies as purposefully developed set of actions, the latter focusses on the emerging consistency in behavior that at some point could be labeled as strategy. The difference between both perspectives concentrates on the relation between intentions and actions, whereby intentions are rarely fully known, actions can differ from intentions, communicated intentions can deviate from actual intentions, and intentions can be identified after a certain pattern of actions emerges.

Social systems theory and organization theory influenced by it (parallel here with critical management studies) add to the complexity of the strategy concept. Strategy is always a combination of real intention a priori and ascription of intention a posteriori. The ascription of intention ('this was our plan') often coincides with an ascription of success, which can in turn be a result of actual change in the world, or of a reinterpretation as success (because of changing narratives, different actor coalitions, etc.). This complicates the distinction made by Mintzberg between strategy as plan and emerging strategy, as both dimensions are inextricably part of every set of actions that is considered to be a strategy. De facto, what is presented by proponents as the same thing (the strategy), is a continuous shifting between original intentions, adapted intentions, and ascription of intention. What is recognized in hindsight (ascription) then possibly leads to new strategic episodes and can be a strategy in itself.

This brings us to diagram 1[Missing still], where we present governance strategy as located on two dimensions: intentionality – contingency and a priori articulation - a posteriori ascription. Effects of strategies are always the product of both intentionality and contingency, yet in different relations: without intention, no strategy, but things happen, -and even what is line with the original intention, is not always the direct result of steps associated with the strategy. Similarly, the effects of strategy (and, the recognition of strategy itself) always combines prior articulation with looking backwards, recognizing effects, and because of always shifting reinterpretations and strategic situations, this is always an ascription. The ascription itself helps to continue the strategy, and not recognizing prior effects will lead to the breakdown of strategy. Governance strategies can be analyzed this way, with the caveat that the analysis itself is necessarily situated, that only a -posteriori this can be recognized, and that after analysis, the strategy will evolve.

Reality effects of strategy in governance

There are a number of issues that require particular attention in the exploration of strategy in the context of governance. Governance is by definition a place where diverging and competing interests and interpretations can lead to a multitude of co-existing (latent) strategies, but also to ideas not articulated yet into strategy (###). Strategy formation thus includes dealing with multiple actors, with non-strategic interpretations, and with already articulated strategies of others. Being surrounded by other actors means being surrounded not only by other intentions and strategies, but also by other observations and interpretations of self and environment, of past, present and future. Also the multi-level context of governance is relevant. In governance, strategy exists at different levels, which are largely entwined and influencing each other. The formation and implementation of governance strategies are influenced by developments at other level, while many governance strategies aim to affect the way things are organized at other levels. National governments, for example, through their policies aim to govern local affairs.

In the discussions on governance, public administration, policy and planning, the focus on effects often translates into an interest in the concept of 'implementation', as all the steps which come after the articulation of a strategy, and which are supposed to lead to the materialization of the underlying intentions. As many others, starting with Pressman and Wildavsky decades ago, have pointed out, such implementation focus makes it hard to see the actual functioning of governance, and hard to see the effects of a strategy. A governance strategy is never simply implemented. Complexity theory, the early theorists of implementation, and the Mertonian school in early sociology, together with most post-modern and critical versions of public policy and administration, would highlight the multiplicity of reasons why side effects always occur. This literature points to the fact that strategies are enacted in a world that is by definition more complex than the model presumed in the strategy. Part of the complexity is that other players anticipate the strategy and strategize vis a vis it, instead of with it. Furthermore even without such strategic reactions, shifting interpretation of everything and everyone playing a role in governance will lead to changing effects of the once agreed upon strategy.

All this is a reason for rethinking the relation between strategy and effects. What happens as a result of strategizing, is most likely to diverge from what was intended. Strategies can have little or no effects, or effects that more or less deviate from what was anticipated. In addition certain effects might be attributed to strategies only at a later moment in time.

We introduce the concept of *reality effects*, to refer to the different effects that can be coupled to governance strategies, effects in terms of changes to (discursive and physical) realities outside the sphere of governance. Identifying the reality effects of governance strategies, is not easy and straightforward, as the effects can never be fully isolated from effects of other factors, such as the actions and strategies of

others, the influence of various formal and informal institutions, changing narratives and values in the community, or unexpected events and evolving materialities (###).

In order to grasp the different reality effects of strategies one can make a basic distinction between **material and discursive effects**. **Material effects** can refer to changes in the physical environment, as effect, and as cause or to behavioral effects. Actors do or don't do certain things, and pattern of actions that itself might evolve into a strategy, are examples of behavioral effects. **Discursive effects** refer to changing ways of understanding and organizing. In a very general ways, the effect of strategies can be that people start to see the various elements of the world, e.g. objects and subjects, in a different way. Partly in relation relations between people or between different perspectives can shift, and all can have institutional and organizational effects. Discursive effects include: changing discourses and interpretations, object and subject formation, re-labeling, reinterpretation, new understandings of actors and institutions, identities, relational changes (power-relations, trust relations), institutional effects (stability and change) and organizational effects (stability and change).

The different types of reality effects can reinforce each other. Such reinforcement can take place within one category of effect (e.g. one crumbling infrastructure enabling the erosion of other materialities and their utility), and between categories (changing narratives in the community undermine compliance with water policies, changing material effects). Over time, path and interdependencies in reality effects can be established, so within governance, those effects look more predictable, look more like the direct result of their actions.

Observation

In order to further the understanding of the relations between strategies and effects, it is important, we argue, to investigate the linkages between *observation* and reality effects. Effects, whether material or discursive, only become visible through observation. This implies that material effects also have a discursive dimension (Duineveld et al., 2017). In other words the relevance and meaning of material effects are discursively constructed and cannot be understood without taking into account the discursive dimension. Within governance different and competing views on reality effects will co-exist and compete over prominence. The quality and consistency of observation will conversely influence reality effects, and any attempts to manage them through adaptive strategy.

Just like the identification of effects, the coupling of effects to actions and labelling them as effects of a strategy are a matter of observation. The complexity of the relation between strategies and effects is increased by the notion that the observation of effects shapes what is seen as a strategy and can therefore create a new set of reality effects. Observing certain effects and not others, or observing the link between actions and effects in a particular way and not another, can create a new effect, or soften or strengthen

the effects of other actions. As soon as effects of a strategy are observed and/or anticipated in the community at large, people will interpret these effects through the lens of their own values and discursive networks, and actors that want to shift governance, are ready to reframe the story of these effects, in order to gain access or power in governance.

Following ideas from social systems theory it can be useful to distinguish between first and second order observation. First order-observations refers to the identification of strategies and the coupling of certain reality effects to strategies. Second order observation focusses on how first order observation are made and includes the observer (fig 1). It thus brings attention to the ones that identify strategies and link particular effects to a strategy.

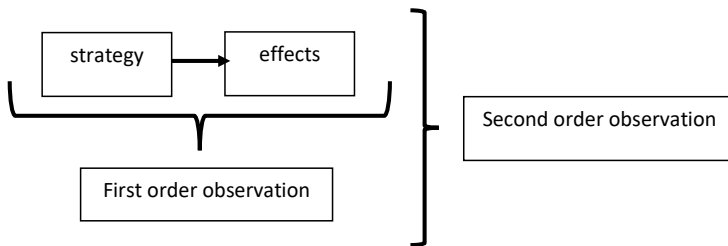


Fig. 1 First and second-order observations of strategy and effects

Second-order observation can be carried out by researcher who are interested in analyzing different views on strategies and effects, but it is also done by actors in governance who observe how others put forward particular perspectives on strategies and effects. E.g. they can deny the observations made by others (no this is not part of a bigger plan), or confirm these (yes, indeed our strategy is working). All these observations and the way in which they are communicated and acted upon, do influence governance.

Effects of strategies are always the product of both intentionality and contingency, yet in different relations: without intention, no strategy, but things happen, and even what is line with the original intention, is not always the direct result of steps associated with the strategy. Similarly, the effects of strategy (and, the recognition of strategy itself) always combines prior articulation with looking backwards, recognizing effects, and because of always shifting reinterpretations and strategic situations, this is always an ascription. The ascription itself helps to continue the strategy, and not recognizing prior effects will lead to the breakdown of strategy. A community strategy can be analyzed this way, with the caveat that the analysis itself is necessarily situated, that only a posteriori this can be recognized, and that after analysis, the strategy will evolve.

Observing the reality effects of strategy is useful for theoretical and practical reasons. Realistic strategy will understand that effects have to be monitored, that expectations and goals need to be adjusted, and planned actions adapted to changing circumstances. Even if the gist of a governance strategy is to follow

larger events or forces, in order to speak of strategy, we would say that it is necessary to reflect on the effects of coordinated action in that direction: are we really following? Are we capturing something by following?

In the context of governance, understanding the potential of strategy requires understanding, and thus ongoing observation, of governance evolutions. It requires a careful study, a reconstruction of the changing configurations of actors and institutions, power and knowledge, which help the community to guide itself towards appealing futures. Understanding the potential and limitations of governance strategy has to lean on careful observation of governance paths. Strategy rests on observation and the quality of observation correlates with more and more managed reality effects. This allow us to further distinguish forms of observation for and as strategy:

- Observation of self (the strategizing actor) and community (aiming to strategize)
- Of governance in its current configuration and its path
- Of strategizing and reality effects in previous steps in the governance path
- Of relations between governance and external environments (material, social)

Such structured observation can give a close proximation of the current power of policy and planning to create reality effects, the power dynamics in governance, and the effects of external environments on governance (leading to new governance tools and their reality effects).

Quality of observation underpins the quality of analysis and the quality of analysis can emerge from theoretical frames focusing on evolutions of governance in context. The analysis reveals some limits what can be known, predicted, steered, in other words, some limits of strategy which can have also positive structuring effects. It could lead to a conclusion that capacity building might be an intermediate strategy, or that expanding local autonomy ought to be the focus first, before giving any other content to strategy. It could be that sharpening of observation is a first strategic priority, to see how a new community strategy might function as meta- strategy in an environment swarming with other strategies. Analysis then informs strategy, without ever directly producing it. The strategy will always have to result from choices, just as no decision can be reduced to the information or arguments supporting it.

Strategy as productive fiction

The complexity of working towards and actually achieving certain goals in governance has contributed to the growing skepticism about the possibilities for planning and steering in the context of governance. Although we partly agree with some of the critiques, we are of the opinion that another perspective on

steering, one that takes into account the notions of observation and reality effects, can offer a more realistic perspective on the development and implementation of governance strategies, only through different mechanisms than those discussed in the more traditional literature.

Strategies do not sort effects by themselves, but because the narratives through which strategies are communicated impact a discursive environment and because people believe things can work. We therefore introduce the concept of **productive fiction** as an alternative way to understand how strategies (and policies and plans) do sort intended effects.

The concept of productive fictions refers to the way in which shared ideas influence and create effects.

Although a strategy can theoretically and practically never entirely deliver what was promised, the assumption that it (partly) can, already has powerful effects that can contribute to the actualization of a strategy.

The mechanisms of performance and performativity are useful to unpack how strategies, as productive fictions, sort effect.

Our concept of reality effects is partly derived from the concept of performativity (###). Policies and plans, are said by some authors to be performative (###), they can change reality in a variety of ways. Often, these authors would emphasize the (perception of) success of a policy as performative, as having many more different sources beyond the actions directly inspired by the policy. People can already believe in the strategy or actors associated with it, or things might have been moving in the same direction, or, more interesting, the process of policy making might have produced some of the preconditions or elements of governance which might make the policy possible (as in the cases of participation creating citizens). It is possible to stretch up the concept of performativity to include an even wider range of effects of policy, beyond what was intended, beyond what leads to perceived success. In that case, the effects can include the formation of opposition, of new objects and subjects, actors and institutions, of changing patterns of inclusion and exclusion of knowledges and perspectives. Such expanded performativity concept we would rather label as the creation of reality effects. Some authors would highlight the importance, in grasping reality effects, of goal dependencies, i.e. the impacts of visions or ideas of the future on the current reproduction of governance: if indeed a new plan or strategy engenders a shift in governance, this is then likely to alter the reality effects of that (and later other). If goal dependencies for a particular type of vision, plan, strategy are often similar, this can then give an insight in reality effects to be expected. We propose to stretch up the concept of performativity to include an even wider range of effects of policy, beyond what was intended, beyond what leads to perceived success. In that case, the effects can include the formation of opposition, of new objects and subjects, actors and institutions, of changing patterns of inclusion and exclusion of knowledges and perspectives. Such expanded performativity concept we label as the creation of reality effects.

When a set of discourses reinforces certain ideas, narratives, expectations, or strategies, we can speak of performativity. When layers of stories and discourses keep each other in place for a long time, they can start to function as infrastructures, for quick thinking and decision-making, for assessing and creating reality effects. Self-reinforcing processes in which things become real, because of a continuous performance.

Power/knowledge configurations can change and therewith different stories, forms of knowledge, and ideologies gain more currency and become seen as more persuasive or 'real'. In modern public policy economic knowledge has often gained dominance in defining reality for all others, e.g. leadership is important, and one can speak of performance of strategy (and of success) by leadership as a key factor shaping reality effects. Certainly, leaders operate in context, and the contexts of governance and community mediate in complex manners between intentions of leaders and what happens, but absence of leadership, in taking initiative, in bringing together players and ideas, in navigating formal and informal institutions, and in 'inspiring', in our view, performing persuasively, makes a real difference. Different strategies, with less effect, are likely to emerge. Pure force rarely works, and Machiavelli noted a while ago that laws have to complement, in daily life replace, arms, and that laws work when they do fit the values of the community.

Persuasion does not explain all, of course, and the complex bureaucracies of modern times produce reality effects based on administrative routine just as much as on the base of original intention by leadership (or community) and counter- strategy or obstruction at lower levels. Governance relies on many organizations, and even limiting ourselves to governmental actors, the diverse layers and departments represent sites of counter strategy, of competition, of bending through well meaning reinterpretation, of reinforcing through discursive similarity, etc

The mechanisms of performance and performativity, however, make it often hard to evaluate how things work and how they can be changed. They limit the scope for strategy and adaptation to always changing circumstances. The aforementioned creation of objects and subjects (which could become actors) in governance, can have the effect to keep the governance path even more on the same track, if these new subjectivities remain uniquely associated with immutable conceptual infrastructures. If, on the other hand, in governance new actors emerge which question such discursive configurations, and can start mobilizing inside and outside governance, then these infrastructures could be placed in a context of other possible perspectives, and the space for strategy is thus increased.

The reality effects of governance strategies will, in general, be more complex and unpredictable than those of many other types of strategy, yet on the other hand, since institutions are involved, the capacity to manage those reality effects will be greater at the same time. While governance strategy is thus susceptible both to the volatility and complexity of governance, the tools of governance (institutions, power,

knowledge) are available to deal with this. The concept of reality effects helps to assess what is possible in governance, which forms and roles of strategy might be possible, what degree and kind of steering might be realistic, and, concomitantly, which collective goals and public goods are realistic targets, when and how.

Continuous adaptation in evolving governance

The strategy-as-practice literature, as pioneered by Mintzberg, and developed by Seidl and others, would add an aspect of strategy that becomes even more important in governance: continuous adaptation. For any strategy to be successful, it has to emerge out of existing practices, and it has to be modified on a regular basis, after observing its effects on evolving practices. Strategy-as-practice is therefore also rooted strategy, adaptive strategy, both practical and reflexive. Outsiders, rigid planners or uprooted visionaries stand little chance, except by chance.

Careful observation along lines marked out in the previous paragraphs, not only helps localized strategizing, but also drives home the more general theoretical point that strategy has to be adaptive for an additional reason, beyond what was mentioned before: strategy is a decision, and it is a design, never reduced to initial intentions nor information. Besides all the unpredictabilities coming from complex interactions inside and outside governance, this is a further source of uncertainty, side effects and reinterpretations, which again have to be observed, responded to, etc. ad infinitum. It is another reason why reality effects can never be fully captured in and by strategy, yet at the same time another reason why strategizing and the observation of reality effects as part of strategizing as an ongoing activity is necessary.

The careful observation argued for above, can harness resources for the management of strategy and help making the fiction of strategy more productive. We single out four aspects of this as especially relevant: The relation between formal and informal institutions; the relation between short and long term; the relation between continuity and adaptation and the relation between flexibility and rigidity in identity narratives. It is in the interest of those strategizing to perform trust in institutions, in the power of formality. De facto, informal institutions are needed to interpret, adapt, and ground a strategy.

The relation between short and long term, between strategy and tactics has to be observed and crafted. It is natural that there is a felt need to present an image of staying the course, even when this is not clear, or not true, or not good. And, even when this is the case, short term tactics can be utterly necessary to stay a course, even when these are discursively, ethically, institutionally disconnected from the strategy itself. Such disconnect has to remain hidden.

The relation between continuity and adaptation in strategy requires observation. Governance is always adapted and adaptive, and the need to perform continuity is much more common than the need to perform conscious adaptation. What looks either traditional or new is commonly more appealing. The appearance of continuity is functionally necessary to continue coordination in most contexts.

Furthermore, what deserves attention in crafting community strategies are identities. Identities always produce their own history, their own appearance of stability and unity. These are traits necessary for groups to form and maintain themselves. Community strategy is likely to affect and be affected by these narrative identities, and address them in such a way that their productive fiction is not fully exposed (it has to take them for granted, presents them as stable and positive). Adaptation to identity, and to changing identity thus present themselves as features of successful community strategy. Environmental governance cannot escape from this dynamics, even if some of its versions seem narrowly focused and technical enough to do so. Either in its own intentions, or in the responses to its effects, identity narratives can be at play.

In each aspect, the side of unity, continuity, cohesion, stability will have to be emphasized routinely, in order to give the impression that the strategy is still alive, that there is a course plotted out, that it is working. The importance of formality will be emphasized naturally, to suggest that formal institutions, the formal order, the strategy itself as part of that, is stable and effective. Or, conversely, when changing circumstances spur a call for reform, for change, for a new strategy (possibly a reform of the context for strategizing), there will be a routine overestimating of the change, of the novelty, while still overestimating formality, stability of identity, and steering power. In other words, productive fictions, in cycles of seeming stability and reform, are recombined, to make any reform and stability possible.

The past looms large in all this, and identity narratives, as well as images and narratives about the future are tinged by understandings of the past which are always constructed in some discursive community. The proposed approach of reconstruction of governance pathways extends the understanding of influences of the past by distinguishing narratives from legacies, with legacies visible in the functioning of governance right now: patterns of material, discursive, institutional path dependencies, of inter- and goal dependencies.

When we don't know

This new perspective on strategy in governance applies to environmental governance entirely, and the more ambitious the form of environmental governance practiced or envisioned is, the more the complexity of strategizing in the context of community governance will assert itself. With that complexity arises the distinct possibility of gridlock, of not knowing, of unresolvable conflict, of lack of coordinative capacity, lack of resources, lack of expertise, all reasons which might hamper the articulation and/or implementation of strategy.

For those situations, we propose the concepts of intermediate strategy and transitional governance. Intermediate strategies are those strategies that are aware of the need for other strategies, of longer term approaches, but are addressing shorter time horizons, and/or proximate issues (as opposed to main issues) after careful analysis led to the conclusion that the issues cannot be addressed directly in the given

situation. Intermediate strategy is not necessarily inferior. It can be less costly, do less damage, and create time and space for longer term and more direct strategies to be crafted. Intermediate strategy might also be linked to a situation where analysis suggested that in the given governance configuration, *no strategy* is likely to come with any real chance of success. In such situations, the conclusion might be to adopt an intermediate strategy of capacity building, of adopting a temporary form of governance, we call *transitional governance*, which understands itself as temporary, as building a new platform from which, later, more ambitious, long term strategies can be created and enacted. The argument for transitional governance can be that the coordinative capacity and expertise are missing in the current governance configuration, to move in a direction already envisioned, and it can be that from the given viewpoint, it is impossible to articulate the substance of a strategy, a more desirable future and a way leading there. Transitional governance can entail the *stretching of autonomy*, or the building of agency. An intermediate strategy with that goal can sometimes be the main activity in a transitional governance configuration: the aim, then, is to transform itself in such a way that more future options become visible and become possible to act upon.

In all these, under all sorts of difficult conditions, informality can be of the essence, whether it be in the context of a weak or corrupt state, or in the context of a bureaucratic and political machinery of multi-level governance where navigation is hard, and where the autonomy of certain levels of governance (and certain scales of community) is scant and poorly defined. Resorting to informal institutions, actors, to informal strategy can be a way forward when formality is not there, does not work, is not affordable, is not helpful. Broad visions of the future can be articulated and enacted in such informal manners, visions for the development of the community, and more narrowly defined forms of strategy. Informal institutions rarely work by themselves however, and rarely work for a very long time (to satisfaction, for complex goals). Thus, the tendency to formalize informal institutions, or for informal arrangements to crumble after a while, as they do not give the same access to power, knowledge, other resources, actors. Thus, the often observed tendency of informal institutions to maintain environmental governance at a level of complexity which hampers inclusion in governance of technical expertise which might be necessary in addressing issues and pursuing values. Ideally, informal strategies produce partial effects in the formal system of institutions later on, and careful observation along the lines presented above can assist in maintaining cohesion in strategy, and adaptation when necessary.

Conclusion

This paper investigated the potential and limitations of governance strategy by relating it to the concept of reality effects of policy and planning. We distinguished **reality effects** as material and discursive changes. From there, we exposed the utility of **targeted observation** of governance paths in community context, to underpin analysis and strategizing. To deepen the understanding of reality effects of strategy, we introduced and developed the notion of **productive fiction** in the context of governance, where the

community and governance contexts in community strategy make strategizing both more complex and more impactful, and where the functioning of productive fictions requires more attention. Both the fictitious and productive character of productive fiction acquire more roles and functionality in governance and community strategy.

In our investigations, we borrowed from existing literatures to structure our initial concept of strategy, and then developed it further, with new aspects of the identity of strategy coming to the fore. Indeed, community strategy has to be both narrative and institution, yet we have to add (in order to understand the use of strategy to manage reality effects) that it strategy is also a decision (never emerging fully out of information and arguments), and a design (with the relation between the parts stemming from decisions). This deepening of the strategy concept had to be undertaken simultaneously with the analysis of strategy and reality effects.

Realizing a strategy is never fully possible. It has to be fiction because of the internal complexity of governance and the complex relations with various environments. Yet the fictitious aspect of governance strategy allows it to function, and insight in the different aspects of strategy as productive fiction helps to amplify and manage the reality effects of strategy. Strategy is always surrounded by other strategies, by unstable forces, it is reinterpreted, subjected to new informalities all the time, yet reality effects are there. Reality effects occur in governance because seeing, understanding and organizing shape each other, and grasping this entanglement in a particular governance path can unveil limits and possibilities of steering, as well as possible substance, or content, of a strategy.

If we speak of governance strategy, we speak of coordination of actors, ideas, resources, of other policies, towards public goods. Governance strategy is then in a general sense connected to a set of ideologies which believe that this is feasible and desirable. If we go beyond these insight, grasp the different dimensions of strategy, how it uses and is embedded in productive fictions, how reality effects come about and can be partly managed, and how ultimately all qualities of strategy rest on the qualities of observation of governance in community, then we are close to the limit of what is possible in terms of collectives steering themselves, while observing new reasons why looking forward and organizing ourselves makes sense at all. That in governance everything is the product of governance evolution, pre-forming what is possible in terms of thinking and organizing, is good to keep in mind when assessing the reality effects of newly considered strategy, and of previous strategies.

We presented finally the concepts of intermediate strategy and transitional governance for situations when formulation or implementation of strategy is difficult, when it might be impossible to see a desirable future and find a way to move in that direction. All the features of governance strategy discussed above apply to environmental governance, to environmental policy and planning, and, as said, the more ambitious, long term, comprehensive the chosen forms of policy and planning, the more the full complexity of strategizing in the context of governance, towards public goods in the broader community will be felt.

Environmental governance can implicate a broad set of knowledges, scales, common goods, actors, levels of policy integration. The importance of the physical environment and its issues makes long term perspectives and strategy all the more important, but this need for comprehensiveness, coordination and a long term at the same time introduce so many of the complexities presented above that continuous observation and adaptation become paramount. Our concepts of reality effects, productive fictions, the dimensions of strategy distinguished can assist in cultivating the kind of observation in and of governance that can in turn enable a balance between steering the course and adaptation, between tactics and strategy, contingent and intended strategy.

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