

## **Policy Experiments and Learning**

Evaluation of mid-term workshop presenting recommendations for experiment design.

Report Deliverable 2.1.6

Belinda McFadgen

---



---

This report was commissioned by: Knowledge for Climate

IVM  
Institute for Environmental Studies  
VU University Amsterdam  
De Boelelaan 1087  
1081 HV AMSTERDAM  
The Netherlands  
T +31-20-598 9555  
F +31-20-598 9553  
E [info.ivm@vu.nl](mailto:info.ivm@vu.nl)

Knowledge for Climate Programmabureau  
Daltonlaan 400  
3584 BK UTRECHT  
The Netherlands  
T +31 317 48 6540  
F +31 6 2120 2447  
E [info@kennisvoorklimaat.nl](mailto:info@kennisvoorklimaat.nl)

**Copyright © 2012, Institute for Environmental Studies**

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior written permission of the copyright holder

## Contents

|          |  |          |
|----------|--|----------|
| <b>1</b> | <b>Introduction</b>                                    | <b>4</b> |
| <b>2</b> | <b>Presentation</b>                                    | <b>5</b> |
| <b>3</b> | <b>Discussion</b>                                      | <b>6</b> |
| 3.1      | Examples of policy experiments                         | 6        |
| 3.2      | Best practice toolbox                                  | 6        |
| 3.3      | How my research can better serve them as policy makers | 7        |
| <b>4</b> | <b>Conclusion</b>                                      | <b>8</b> |

# 1 Introduction

On 26 November, 2012, I conducted an informal workshop at the Provinciehuis in Noord-Brabant. My contact in Brabant is hotspot coordinator Frank van Lamoen, who is senior officer Water, Climate Change and Sustainable Development for the province. Frank advertised my workshop to members of the Dry Rural Areas Hotspot and the province in general. Those who attended included representatives from nature conservation, knowledge development, and water policy. In all, 14 people were present. This report serves as an evaluation of the hour-long workshop and records vital feedback regarding the perspective of policy makers on my research project.

Flyer:

**Themaoverleg, maandag 26 november 11.30-12.30**

## Gooi eens een knuppel in het hoenderhok...

Hoe kunnen organisaties leren van  
beleidsexperimenten?

*Belinda McFadgen en Frank van Lamoen*



Maatschappelijke uitdagingen in water- en natuurbeheer zijn vaak complex en kennen veel onzekerheden. Als overheid kunnen we vooraf niet altijd goed het effect van beleidskeuzes inschatten. Het uitvoeren van beleidsexperimenten (tijdelijk ruimte bieden aan innovatieve benaderingen) kan hierbij helpen.

Wat zijn goede voorbeelden van deze benadering?

Wat betekent dit voor Brabant?

*Belinda McFadgen werkt als onderzoeker bij het Instituut voor Milieuvraagstukken van de Vrije Universiteit. Haar onderzoek naar beleidsexperimenten (What is the value of twisting the lions' tail?)*

## 2 Presentation

The main intention of my presentation was to introduce my research and stimulate conversation about policy experiments among participants of the workshop. I explained how my project relates to knowledge for climate, my research questions and related concepts, my results so far (theoretical not empirical), gave examples of policy experiments, and what my project means for the hotspot.

My project sits under the branch of governance for adaptation in the Knowledge for Climate consortium. It deals with the practical aspect of implementing policy experiments and how design choices can influence different sorts of learning outcomes. My main research question is: *how can policy experiments be designed so they enhance learning outcomes?* Which breaks down into sub questions: *what are policy experiments? What are their institutional design features? How does institutional design influence learning?*

In order to conduct this research, a conceptual framework was built that defined both policy experiments and learning. Learning is conceptualised in the project as cognitive, normative, and relational learning types, which allow us to address uncertain and complex policy problems. A policy experiment is defined as a project that tests a policy innovation in a temporary field setting that includes a variety of participants and seeks to influence public policy making. Its institutional design features include those related to participation, information, and power. Based on various configurations of these features, three ideal types have been defined: the technocratic, boundary, and advocacy types. As ideal types, these experiments do not exist in reality, rather they are extreme forms of what we hope to find empirically.

I provided four examples of current policy experiments, those within the Ecoshape (Building with Nature) programme: Sand engine Delfland; Soft sand engine IJsselmeer; Ecological mining pit; and the Shellfish reefs in the Oosterschelde, Zeeland. Each experiment involves testing an ecosystem response but differ in terms of perceived social impacts. These experiments are part of a programme initiated by a non-state actor (two dredging companies) and they are good examples of how experiments are constructed and how they intend to influence policy making.

Finally, in order to understand what my project may mean to policy makers, I opened the discussion to the room. I asked them about examples they have of policy experiments, what they would like included in a “best-practice toolbox” that advises policy makers on what design choices they can make and what sort of learning they can expect, and how else my research could be of use to them as policy makers.

In the following section, I will present the discussion under these three points, and then wrap up with a conclusion.

## 3 Discussion

### 3.1 Examples of policy experiments

The attendance of policy makers from various sectors meant several experiment examples emerged from the discussion. For example, I was told about how Waterschap Aa en Maas in North Brabant have been experimenting with fish migration corridors in three watercourses that have been blocked by dams or other means. They hope to learn whether these corridors will increase the ecological health of these waterways by allowing fish to migrate over the barriers. With these innovations the Waterboard hopes to meet its biodiversity goals and requirements under the European Water Framework Directive.

Another example given was regarding the multi-functional land use experiments being conducted where agriculture and water storage innovations are combined- for instance in the Room for the River projects. There are programmes where farmers are given more autonomy to set the water level on their own farms, thereby improving the environment and also relations between farmers and policy makers.

This leads me to the final point made by the group- whether my project will make provision for policy experiments that relate to changes in governance structures (for example: pricing tariffs for water use; giving farmers more autonomy). In these experiments the environment is indirectly affected, not explicitly tested for an ecosystem response. I was hoping to focus only on experiments that test an ecosystem response, thereby narrowing my population sample; however, it was made apparent to me that these sorts of “procedural experiments” are what the policy makers at the Provinciehuis are planning to use when implementing their responsibilities for Deltaplan Hoge Zandgronden as part of the Delta Plan. I promised them I would get back to them, I want to be relevant to their work but I am not sure what expanding my focus will mean for my framework. For example, governance experiments tend not to be monitored, so they may not be a “test” as defined by my project.

### 3.2 Best practice toolbox

Two main issues emerged from the discussion about what would be useful in a best practice toolbox for policy makers. First, how to deal with the ethical issues that stem from conducting policy experiments. Due to their public good function, policy experiments inevitably impact the social system to some degree- although some impact more than others. One person commented that fish corridor experiments have minimal ethical considerations compared to those that want to spread sand out on the coast in order to test whether it improves flood defences. People may feel vulnerable about being “tested” on. Ethical considerations feature regularly in literature on experiments, especially those that test economic or social policy. Providing or withholding treatment from citizens as a form of policy testing, even if it’s done randomly, leaves a bad taste in the mouth because not everyone is treated equally. So, it is a salient point and one I will follow up on in my analysis.

The second point made about improving the tool box is one I primarily hope to address in my project. This is regarding switching from a top-down policy approach to a bottom-up policy approach. The context was nature policy management, and it was stated that traditional approaches are not working and they would be interested to know how a more participatory policy approach would look. I explained that my

project aims to empirically analyse whether a participatory, bottom up approach in fact does produce greater learning outcomes, so there is general relevance there.

### 3.3 How my research can better serve them as policy makers

It was mentioned that the job of a policy maker in general has recently become more complex. In the past, policy makers decided policy and implemented it; nowadays decision makers from above want to tap into knowledge on the ground. They want to learn what the citizen knows, so there is a lot more consultation and co-creation of relevant knowledge. Goals are also open for debate now, in the past what the policy maker wanted to do was done; now goals are negotiated and policy makers go out and ask- what do people want them to do? I think my project essentially addresses these points- how can policy makers and non-state actors work together? What design can improve the chances of learning being created? How can goals be “co-created”?

The other issue that came up that people would be interested in is how does my research compare with policy experiments abroad? For instance, someone brought up water policy development in the UK and the use of trust organisations that organise citizens. How does this compare to the Netherlands? Can lessons be learnt from the UK and applied here? Again this is very relevant to my project, as there is an international case study component built in. I hope to analyse experiments from Scotland and Sweden, or perhaps the US, so my base of experiments is broadened.

## 4 Conclusion

This PhD project is an attempt to close a significant gap in the literature, because although it is assumed that conducting a policy experiment will allow us to learn something, there are issues to be explored; for instance, what characteristics a policy experiment has, how its design features influence learning outcomes, and whether particular design choices and enhanced learning actually improve decision making.

By presenting my work to policy makers at this stage, I have enlarged the potential of this project to remain relevant and functional for those who actually conduct policy experiments in the field. I think a few very interesting points have emerged from this workshop; for instance, I have been referred to examples of policy experiments in Brabant, I have been given tips on how to be useful to policy makers, and I have learnt what they find most important. Perhaps even my presentation has made them consider experimenting with policy for the first time. I hope to stay in touch with the attendees and present them with final findings in the next couple of years.

My sincere thanks to Frank van Lamoen for his efforts in helping me organise this workshop.