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Multi-voiced organizing by relational knowledge practices in multi-party sustainability projects.

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This paper wants to document how the multi-party collaboration approach can contribute in a significant way to the management of a wide range of sustainability problems: natural resource management, water management, social-economic development and a wide range of other very urgent global environmental issues.

Typical for those problem domains is that there is a very high level of complexity and ambiguity and a broad range of actors is involved. The growing awareness of the strong interdependency among the major stakeholders (government, business organisations, civil society and diverse groups of experts) is stimulating the search for collaborative approaches. Multi-party collaboration can create a platform for the involved actors to engage in a multi-voiced or polyphonic organizing process.

Polyphony is a medieval form of music where several independent but equally important voices sound together. It can be a rich metaphor to grasp complex part-whole relationships in a very dynamic, interactive and self-organizing process. The unique contribution of each voice is acknowledged through the fluent integration in the continuous melodious pattern. Polyphonic music performances are also an illustration of a high quality relational practice: reciprocal, open, interactive, and confrontational and mutually enriching and reinforcing.

In multi-party collaboration processes, different interests, perspectives and power positions are enacted among the key stakeholders: business, government and social groups. Among the different expert groups different knowledge voices are enacted: economists, environmentalists, technologists, social scientists.

The polyphonic organizing in multi-party projects stipulates the key tasks the process has to address: collective meaning is not given but constructed jointly, different communities of practices engage in common project practices to create new understandings, parallel to joint meaning there is the creation of new memberships through these relational practices, new meaning is not be imposed but only invited on 'inner conviction'.

The thesis of this contribution is that differences in knowledge among experts or among social actors can only be bridged when also a relational reconstruction is taking place: new knowledge and meaning goes together with new relationships and memberships. This contribution will conceptualize the challenges of multi-party projects in terms of generative relational knowledge practices, building on the metaphor of polyphonic music. These insight will be connected to and illustrated by reference to projects in the domain of natural resource management to achieve more sustainability.

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Art Dewulf is Assistant Professor at the Public Administration and Policy Group at Wageningen University (Netherlands). His research deals with the organizational and governance aspects of negotiation, conflict and collaboration between multiple public and private actors in the context of natural resources management. Specific research topics focus on the processes of sensemaking, issue framing, dealing with differences, social learning and innovation, from an approach that emphasizes the role of meaning, interaction and language