NGI101x - 2.5B - What is actor analysis?

We have just seen why it is important for policy makers to know the social and political environment they are operating in. We will now look at what it is: an actor-network analysis. Therefore we are gone look at an example from our own consultancy practice and it shows you the results of the analysis of a very complex network; it depicts the network of actors that a group of policy makers is operating in.

Behind me on the screen you see this beautiful multi-colored picture. It is a map. It is a map representing the network of actors, mostly organizations involved in policy making on water quality issues. Each of these more than 80 colored hexagons represents an actor in this policy network. I will tell you the story.

A few years ago we had this project in the Netherlands commissioned by the province of Utrecht. Provinces in the Netherlands are politically responsible for the water quality and the EU requires all its member states to improve their surface water and groundwater quality. Utrecht had a so-called 'platform' diffuse pollution to execute this task, but it seemed quite unsuccessful in generating support for measures to improve the water quality in the province; so what should they do differently to become more effective?

You should then know that 'diffuse pollution' stands for pollution; particles, chemical substances that do not originate from point sources like a chemical plant or a water treatment facility, rather it is about dispersed sources such as NOx from the air, smut from the exhausts of cars, metals like Cupper and Zink from buildings, Phosphates from manure or anti-fouling chemicals from boats.

This multicolored image is one of the results of our analysis; it shows the network the platform is operating in. After a number of interviews and a series of workshops we were able to construct this map and it shows the platform in the center of the map and its relations to over 80 other organizations, including authorities, private bodies, industries, farmers, environmental/nature/landscape NGO's, Land-owners, professional representatives of the shipping sector, the chamber of commerce, etc.

Moreover it turned out they were fighting in four different arenas and at two different levels: in their province and with the national and European authorities.

The detailed map behind me reflects this very complex environment this organization is trying to influence. We used this map mainly for showing them how complex their world is. Each quadrant of the map shows a specific power/interest grid in one of the four policy arena's the platform is operating. The parties closest to the center are their allies; the parties at the rim are the opponents and the bigger their size the more powerful they are.

We made a somewhat simpler map for discussing their strategy.

In this simpler map you see the platform in the middle and the four policy arenas it is working in. Referring to the Roman concept of arenas, these policy arenas are the fighting rings where the actors involved engage in a fight over what policy needs to be implemented.

in green - agriculture;

in red - the build environment,

in brown - road and rail infrastructure and

in blue - the water transport and water quality sector.

The yellow oval on top - are the national and European authorities who are imposing or more complicated: not imposing all kind of legislation.

In these five ovals representing the different arenas you see the issues they are fighting over; for instance rural development and the use of herbicides in the rural network; garbage collection and dog shit in the urban areas. It shows the world they are operating in.

What lessons did we draw from this analysis and what advice did we give the people form the platform?

Our advice was based on what these maps showed. One is don't mingle with agriculture/rural areas; the second map with the arenas shows that the farmers are overburdened by national en EU regulations; they are struggling for survival and water quality is about the last of their concerns. Moreover, the actor-map shows that in this arena there are few allies and many strong opponents

More or less the same story goes for urban areas and construction materials. Our analysis shows that these issues are dealt with elsewhere and there are no strong allies either.

Roads and water transport sectors; here the maps show they have easy access to some strong supporters who actually have the means to do something about issues like anti-fouling and road run-off. These partners show in the map: they are the province itself and the regional water boards.

And finally, we had two strategic advises: Focus on low hanging fruit: go for short term highly visible guaranteed successes that you can boast about (like an anti-fouling policy for boats) and where you have some means yourself, so you have control. And keep others informed of these successes and your endless ambition. And it that way you try to generate support.

We now finish this first chunk. Up to now what have you learned: Well, the Brent Spar example has learned us that it if you want to solve a complex problem or design a new policy it is important to know the playing field and to know who are your friends and who are the foes. You have to know the concerns and issues of other actors and you may need to take those into account when designing a strategy for problem solving.

And you may want to know who has the power to block your plans and whom you need to incorporate or involve in your work to generate social support for your policy or project.

The diffuse pollution example showed us that we often don't really know the networks we are operating in: how they actually look like. And we showed that for effective policy analysis and policy design it is important to systematically explore the socio-political environment you are operating in.