

Grounding reflexive governance in practice and context: some democratic considerations

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Paper to be presented at Governance for Sustainable Development Workshop
5-7th February 2006, Berlin

Abstract

In this paper, we explore some of the democratic implications of reflexive governance – a concept gaining much attention in recent debates on sustainable development. In its broadest sense, reflexive governance refers to a mode of steering that is self-critical, and has its own re-shaping continuously in mind. More specifically, it involves diverse actors coming together in reflexive arrangements to scrutinize and reconsider existing systems, rules and paradigms. We argue that to understand what reflexive governance signifies for democracy, greater insights into its practice are needed. A useful starting point for conceptualising what reflexive practice might involve can be found in recent accounts of systems innovation and transition management. However, as basis for considering democratic questions, these approaches are limited because they do not provide an adequate account of the politics that reflexive arrangements generate, or the nature of contemporary policy practices in which they operate. We argue for a richer understanding of reflexive practice by proposing a framework that embeds sites of reflexivity in their socio-political context. We apply this conceptual framework to a Dutch case study and describe the kind of democratic struggles that surface as actors negotiate the *interfaces* between reflexive projects and the contested world of everyday policy making. Our analysis sheds light into the work – and indeed politics – involved in achieving legitimacy and accountability in reflexive governance.

1. Introduction

In most western democracies we are now witnessing a transition from state-centred modes of policy development to multi-actor governance (Alexander, 1995; Rhodes, 1997; Van Tatenhove et al., 2000). The state is no longer in the privileged position of autonomously driving policies but increasingly shares the task of governing with a multiplicity of public and non-public entities. The emerging picture is an eclectic one. We now have network governance, corporate governance, market governance, participatory governance, multi-level governance and the list goes on. One thing shared by all these forms of governance is that they pose fundamental challenges to conventional understandings of democracy. The legitimacy of decision making is no longer vested in one sovereign body but in a range of actors. Democratic representation is no longer about elected members delegated to make decisions on behalf of their constituents. And democratic accountability is no longer a concept that is restricted to government institutions alone. The democratic implications of emerging forms of governance are attracting the attention of democratic theorists and political scientists alike (Sørensen & Torfing, 2006; Pierre, 2001; Wolf, 2002). This has particularly been the case for network governance where scholars have begun to ask questions about the legitimacy of decisions and actions emerging from governance arrangements, and the public accountability of decision makers – whether state or private actors – to the wider community (e.g. Sørensen & Torfing, 2005; Dryzek, 2006).

In this paper, we extend this discussion to consider the democratic implications of reflexive governance. From the outset we recognise that reflexive governance is contested and evolving concept. In its broadest sense, it refers to a mode of steering that is self-critical, and has its own re-shaping continuously in mind.¹ Our interest in this paper focuses on its use in the context of ecological sustainability, where it has come to mean a ‘mode of steering’ in view of sustainable development. What differentiates this reflexive approach from the (weak) ‘ecological modernization’ agenda on the 1990s (see Christoff, 1996) is that technological reform and development more broadly is understood as part of a social and historical process. So rather than focussing on change within existing structures and systems, reflexive governance towards sustainability is about ‘meta-change’ (Beck et al., 2003) or re-structuration (Grin, 2006). In more concrete terms, reflexive governance has been described as a process of *reflexive designing*, where actors scrutinize and reconsider existing systems, and the broader rules and paradigms within which they operate (Grin et al., 2004). Reflexivity here implies that actors *loosen their grip* on the desire ‘to control’ problems in the way that classical modernity prescribes. Nothing is taken for granted – practices, paradigms, and institutions are all open to consideration and reconfiguration. Designing here is the creative, and constructive process of defining problems and developing solutions in a way that takes power differentials and value conflicts into account (e.g. Bobrow & Dryzek, 1987; Schön & Rein, 1994; Schneider & Ingram, 1997).

While increasing attention has been paid to theoretical notions of reflexive governance, ideas on its practice are still in their infancy. Some have developed strategic guidelines on what reflexive governance for sustainability should entail and refer to specific reflexive arrangements, such as constructive technology assessment (Voß & Kemp, 2006: 23). Others have started to address the challenge of meta-change by developing programs for systems innovation and transition management (Elzen et al., 2004a; Kemp & Loorbach, 2006; Rotmans et al., 2001). Notwithstanding these developments, there remains much to

¹ This definition draws on Berejikian and Dryzek’s (2000: 212-3) definition of reflexive modernity.

understand about reflexive governance in practice, particularly its democratic consequences. For example, how is it organised, who does it engage, and how is its democratic legitimacy and accountability secured?

Our intention here is not to evaluate reflexive governance against standard democratic principles, such as political equality, popular control or freedom. Rather our aim is to explore how legitimacy and accountability may be achieved in projects aimed at reflexive design (hereafter, reflexive arrangements). To this end we understand democracy in broad terms as ‘the collective construction and application of political authority’ (Dryzek, 1990: 217). As for *legitimacy*, in the abstract we view this as the ‘moral basis of political authority’ (Birch, 1993: 32).² More concretely, it is concerned with why people should consent, agree and obey decisions of leaders, institutions and regimes with power. We understand it as a ‘regulatory ideal’ that is shaped by perceptions and public discourse (Parkinson, 2003). Apart from moral grounds for authority, legitimacy also carries instrumental value to the extent that it facilitates more efficient political processes by encouraging compliance and cooperation (see Parkinson, 2003). *Accountability* is more a matter of procedure. It refers to the process of holding individuals or institutions to account for their actions through external scrutiny (Mulgan, 2000: 555), especially vis-à-vis those bound or affected by these actions (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996: 128).³

There are several reasons why democratic issues deserve greater consideration in discussions on reflexive governance.⁴ The first and most obvious reason stems from the moral position that people should have the opportunity to contribute to decisions that affect them, particularly in relation to the kind of far reaching issues involved in reflexive governance. Second, and more pragmatically, we contend that the effectiveness of reflexive arrangements co-depend on how well they can secure legitimacy, and demonstrate their accountability to the broader public. For example, the capacity of a given project to promote change towards sustainability will be severely hindered if relevant policy actors and sectors of the community feel excluded or under-represented. In such cases, an attempt to generate reflexive conditions for policy making could easily collapse into adversarial and strategic politics – conditions not well suited for fostering sustainability (Jänicke, 1997; Scruggs, 1999, Dryzek et al. 2003).

Our starting point is that given the complex and diverse institutional landscape we now operate in, the best way to appreciate the democratic implications of reflexive governance is to study its practice. We find, however, that existing conceptualisations of reflexive practice do not adequately reflect the messy political world in which reflexive arrangements are embedded. We argue that greater insights into the democratic implications of reflexive governance will come into view with a richer and more contextual understanding of its practice. To this end we develop a conceptual framework that acknowledges the

² The notion of legitimacy is slippery and not easy to pin down. According to Beetham (1991) there are three elements to legitimacy, which can be summarised as: 1) that the rules of the game are considered just; 2) that authority can be justified against internal and external social norms about who should make decisions, how they should be responsible to those they represent, and what substantive outcomes society should achieve 3) that the procedures for consent are considered fair.

³ According to Mulgan (2000: 555), there are at least three elements of accountability: 1) it is *external* to the accountable person or organisation, 2) it involves *social interaction and exchange* between the accountable and those calling for an account, 3) and it implies that those calling for an account have *authority rights* over the accountable to ask questions and impose sanctions.

⁴ For a good overview of these and other related arguments, see Lafferty and Meadowcroft (1996).

interconnectedness between reflexive arrangements and their embedded context. In the final section of the paper, we apply this conceptual framework to a Dutch case study and discuss the democratic issues that it reveals.

2. Reflexive Governance as a concept

Reflexive governance is not an easy term to pin down. Its ambiguity stems largely from the multiple faces of reflexivity.⁵ ‘To be reflexive’ in its most elementary meaning is the capacity to turn or bend back on oneself. Reflexivity, then at least in a methodological sense, refers to ‘the mutual interdependence of observer or knower to what is seen or known’ (Johnson, 1977: 172).⁶ When reflexivity is taken beyond the individual and applied to larger sociological phenomena, its meaning becomes more slippery. For Beck (1994), reflexivity is used to describe a phenomenon of late modernity, when society begins to accept that we cannot control our development path and that many of the premises, structures and institutions taken for granted in first modernity are questioned and reconsidered. In his later work, Beck together with his colleagues (2003) extends the use reflexivity to incorporate more cognitive and normative elements by calling on society to become more reflexive; that is, more attentive and pre-emptive of modernity’s side-effects. For Latour (2003), reflexivity is interpreted more narrowly as the recognition in society that we cannot control the intractable problems that modern societies produce. Berejikan and Dryzek (2000) apply the concept of reflexivity to the arena of international politics and develop the notion of reflexive action in which state and non-state actors ‘attend to the kind of world they are helping to create, recreate or indeed undermine.’ Others interpret reflexivity in a strictly administrative sense, for example, by labelling the co-constitution of new service reforms in the public sector ‘reflexive governance’ (Considine, 2000).

Given the wide net cast by different notions of ‘reflexivity’, the term reflexive governance seems destined for misunderstanding. But for those working with sustainability in mind reflexive governance has come to take on a particular meaning, one that is best appreciated by Voß and Kemp’s (2005) distinction between first-order and second-order reflexivity. Under this schema, *first-order reflexivity* refers to the continuous cycle of side effects from simple modernity. Reflexivity of this kind is ‘reflex like’. It captures the unconscious and unintended consequences of industrial modernization, or what Beck labels the ‘self-confrontation’ aspect of reflexive modernization (see Beck 1994). In contrast, *second-order reflexivity* is about the self-critical and self-conscious reflection on processes of modernity, particularly instrumental rationality. It evokes a sense of agency, intention and change. Here actors reflect on and confront not only the self-induced problems of modernity, but also the approaches, structures and systems that reproduce them. This is the kind of reflexivity that scholars interested in governance for sustainability have in mind. For example, Stirling (2006) takes to term reflexive governance “to imply the exercise ex ante of deliberate agency, rather than to describe ex post unintentional reflexes in the face of unpredicted consequences”. Grin (2006)

⁵ In one comprehensive inventory, Lynch, (2000) identifies six broad categories of reflexivity: mechanical, substantive, methodological, meta-theoretical, interpretative, and ethnomethodological. In relation to sustainability, reflexivity is mostly applied in its substantive sense (as a social phenomenon of late modernity) and in a methodological sense (as a cognitive process of reflection/self-reflection).

⁶ Similarly, Pels (2000: 2) states that “reflexivity presupposes while saying something about the ‘real world’, one is simultaneously disclosing something about oneself”.

goes further, arguing that reflexive governance also concerns the transformation of the governance system itself, that is, institutions of government, the market, science and society, as well as of their mutual alignment. The important presupposition being that policy and polity are *both* being shaped in relation to each other (cf. Hajer, 2003). This puts important additional demands on agency in the policy process in that actors need to consider changes well beyond existing structures (Grin, 2006).

Some scholars have taken agency a step further, by viewing second order reflexivity as a mode of steering and coordination. This is clearly what Voß and Kemp (2005: 8) have in mind, for example, when they define reflexive governance as: ‘the organisation (modulation) of recursive feedback relations between distributed steering activities’.⁷ They interpret reflexive governance as a strategic process involving five key elements (Voß & Kemp, 2005: 18, Table 1):

1. transdisciplinary knowledge production
2. experiments and adaptivity strategies and institutions
3. anticipation of long-term systems effects of measures
4. interactive participatory goal formulation
5. interactive strategy development

Though these goals give greater shape to the meaning of reflexive governance, how it might be put into practice remains unclear. On one level we get a sense that it involves applying “methods of problem handling which are more open, experimental and learning orientated” (Voß & Kemp, 2005: 8). Reference is made to a host of existing procedures such as constructive technology assessment, deliberative policy making, social appraisal of technology, and Local Agenda 21. Though these arrangements represent potential sites of reflexivity, they seem to fall short of the kind of organised or modulated approach to *steering* so central to definitions of reflexive governance (for sustainability).

3. Reflexive governance in practice: steering transitions

One approach that is explicitly orientated towards steering for sustainability is the emerging field of systems innovation and transition management (SITM). Here scholars and practitioners – predominantly in the Netherlands⁸ – have been developing ways to understand how to transform large-scale socio-technological systems, for example those associated with agriculture, transportation, health, communication, and energy.⁹ To be clear ‘steering’ here is not about driving society to a predetermined destination as the metaphor might suggest.

⁷ Later in their paper, Voß and Kemp (2005: 9) provide a more elaborate definition of second-order governance, describing it as ‘a procedural approach towards reflecting the interdependencies, understanding aggregate effects of specialised concepts and strategies, and engaging in the modulation of ongoing societal developments by establishing links, organising problem-orientated communication and interaction among distributed steering activities.’

⁸ Jan Rotmans, John Grin, Johan Schot, Ruud Smits. *A multidisciplinary research programme on transitions and system innovations*. Research programme, presented at the Open Science Meeting of the International Human Dimensions Programme, Montreal, 18-20 October 2003. Meanwhile, the programme has received significant funding from the Dutch government. See www.ksinetwork.nl

⁹ The label ‘systems innovation and transition management’ tends to suggest an emphasis on technological innovation. But unlike the end-of-pipe solutions and dematerialization approaches to environmental management characteristic of the 1980s and 1990s, transition management explicitly acknowledges the social dimension of technological systems.

Rather it is understood as a means to facilitate change towards a multiplicity of sustainable futures. Despite their differences,¹⁰ most SITM scholars are committed to two goals: one substantive and the other more procedural.¹¹

- *Substantively*, transition management seeks to achieve a more sustainable development path by facilitating large-scale transformation of socio-technological systems.
- *Procedurally*, transition management requires engaging relevant actors in developing and reviewing visions to guide future innovation.

To date, most scholarly attention has focused on the substantive goal of transition management. For example, scholars have categorized different phases of transition projects (Rotmans et al., 2001), or developed multi-level frameworks (Rip & Kemp, 1998; Schot, 1998) to describe and explain the stages of socio-technological transitions (Geels et al., 2004). When it comes to procedural matters, the SITM literature is less coherent. It is not that matters of engagement have been ignored altogether but they tend to be implied or enclosed under the banner of interaction, participation, partnership or visioning. Literature that speaks *explicitly* to procedural issues tends to come in one of two extremes. It is either non-specific, referring to broad notions of ‘visioning’ or ‘opening up’, or it provides very detailed accounts of particular project model or tool to aid interactive processes, such as foresighting (e.g. Brown et al. 2003; Elzen et al., 2004b). While these present important insights and know-how for practice, we want to probe deeper and ask: How is steering for sustainability conceptualised *in practice* and what are its democratic implications?

To explore such questions, we briefly look at two different approaches to steering, one initiated more or less by the state and the other initiated from the ‘bottom up’ by innovation partnerships.

The first steering approach we consider emphasizes a strong role for the state, particularly in terms of facilitating and managing systems innovation. Here the state assumes ‘a leading role...[n]ot by acting as the great commander, enforcing change, but by inspiring a collective learning process and encouraging others to think along and participate’ (Rotmans et al., 2001: 25). The state should modulate ongoing developments rather than adopt planning-and-control modes of government (Kemp & Rotmans, 2004). Government actors are called upon to create ‘transition arenas’ with a variety of innovate thinkers from the market, science, civil society and government. Together, they define a broad vision of transitions for a particular domain, for example, the agriculture or water sector. Participative experiments involving a variety of stakeholders are then organized and facilitated on basis of that broad vision. Transition management then emerges and “build[s] upon these bottom-up experiments” (Kemp & Rotmans, 2004). Under this account the government’s role is described as “plural”. Depending on the stage of the reform, the state is called on to act as a “facilitator-stimulator-controller-director”. On the one hand state actors are called upon to steer systems innovation towards sustainable objectives (content role), whilst on the other hand they need to facilitate and evaluate procedures that mobilize and engage actors (process role) (Rotmans et al., 2001).

¹⁰ The SITM field is new and interdisciplinary, and there remains ongoing debate on what exactly constitutes a transition, and how we might identify or stimulate it (see Geels et al., 2004). In its purest sense a ‘transition’ refers to a change from one state to another. A more specific description of a transition has been proposed by Rotmans et al (2001: 16), who define it as: “...a gradual, continuous process of change where the structural character of a society (or complex sub-system of society) transforms.”

¹¹ Here we see a remarkable overlap with the goals of reflexive governance for sustainability (see Kemp & Loorbach, 2006).

The idea is to have a mix of ‘control’ and ‘support’; self-regulation is seen as a poor alternative (Kemp & Rotmans, 2004).

This state-facilitated approach to systems innovation raises several democratic questions that deserve further consideration. First, how well do government actors adopt these multiple roles? Do existing institutional arrangements provide the necessary flexibility for actors to shift between content and process thinking? Empirical research suggests that many actors are uncomfortable moving between different roles (Grin et al., 2004), with bureaucrats often showing a preference for content-based roles over process roles (Hendriks, 2004). Second, this account is also heavily focused on the role of the executive branch of government (the administration), but how do these sorts of state-initiated projects work alongside the preferences and demands of elected officials, the legislature and the market?

Other accounts of ‘steering’ towards sustainability, particularly those interested in the development of innovative technologies, emphasize partnerships and collaboration amongst actors. Authors here explicitly acknowledge that steering: ‘...is not just something for governments: industry and NGOs are well placed to initiate and run niche projects’ (Kemp et al., 1998: 189). Authors from this perspective argue that platforms need to be created where different actors can work together *horizontally* to define visions and strategies (e.g. Elzen et al., 2004b). For example, Kemp et al. (1998) put forward the idea of *strategic niche management* to facilitate regime transformation. Niches are conceived as spaces where innovation is actively protected against certain aspects of the existing regime, such as unfavourable market conditions.¹² Niches are also zones where a variety of experiments take place. Ideally these experiments involve (Kemp et al., 1998: 185-6): “...stimulating learning about problems, needs and possibilities of a technology, building actor networks, alignment of different interests to a goal, altering the expectation of different actors and fostering institutional adaptation...” Actors in these experiments are supposed to modulate ongoing transformation at the regime level and beyond (Elzen et al., 2004b).

This approach to steering through partnerships recognizes the role of interests and strategic action in technological development. The emphasis on actors and their networks also seems to reflect the networked approach to reflexive design observed in practice (see Grin et al., 2004, Hajer & Wagenaar 2004). However, it is precisely because of this that partnership approaches to steering are likely to suffer from many democratic problems that plague network governance, in particular the claim that networks are not always open or accountable to the broader public (see Sørensen & Torfing, 2006). There are of course important differences between reflexive and network notions of governance to acknowledge here. In particular, in reflexive practices actors are doing much more than simply working together *around* and *across* existing modernist institutions (e.g. the state), as network governance scholars describe (Kickert et al., 1997; Rhodes, 1997). In addition, they are engaging in a process of transforming the very systems in which they operate; a change they may or may not support. This added dimension of reflexive governance is likely to pose a unique set of challenges to democracy, some of which we explore below.

¹² For our purposes here, a regime is best understood as the dominant socio-technological structure.

4. Reflexive praxis in a complex world

Our discussion thus far has focussed on particular interpretations of how reflexive governance or steering might be put into practice. While these approaches present useful starting points for how to promote reflexive governance, as a conceptual basis for considering democratic issues they fall short in several respects. First, they present a simplified picture of the multifaceted and dynamic world in which reflexive projects typically find themselves, as observed by several empirical studies (see Grin et al., 2004; Loeber, 2004; Schot, 1998). Further, existing approaches to steering tend to neglect the increasingly complex and diverse institutional landscape in which governance in contemporary post-industrial societies operates (Alexander, 1995; van Tatenhove et al., 2000).

Second, and related to above is that existing notions of reflexive practice carry questionable assumptions about the way contemporary policy making works. Although more implicit than explicit, policy making is construed as an apolitical, government led exercise that involves the *willing* engagement of relevant ‘stakeholders’ such as interest groups, scientists, businesses and experts. For example, Rotmans et al (2001: 30) assert that: “All social actors look to the government to take the lead”. This seems an overly optimistic interpretation of how actors perceive of, and experience the state in contemporary politics. In many instances, state-based attempts to stimulate innovation meet resistance from non-state actors who fear co-option or loss of power (Hendriks, 2002; Sagoff, 1999; Thomas, 2003; van den Daele et al., 1997). Alternatively, existing or past controversies can affect the willingness of actors to participate in state-initiated projects (Grin et al., 2004; Hendriks, 2004).

Third, existing notions of steering governance seem to offer an incomplete picture of ‘the political’ dimensions of reflexive projects, and the ‘politics’ that they generate. While they do acknowledge the existence of politics, they implicitly see it as a bother to steering, rather than as something that reflexive governance needs to accommodate and build upon (cf. Lindblom, 1990). For example, where is the contestation that arises when reflexive arrangements conflict with competing interests and policy discourses? How does reflexive practice deal with the struggles between different forms of knowledge and their perceived legitimacy? How do reflexive arrangements accommodate strategic actors motivated more by power and interests than common visions?

Fourth, existing conceptualisations of reflexive practice do not attend to the complicated and intricate relationship between large-scale transitions and civil society. In most theoretical accounts of reflexive governance, civil society is celebrated at the site of sub-politics, where actors work outside and against the state (Beck 1992). This radical aspect of civil society is considered a crucial element of reflexive action, particularly in the international arena where issues extend well beyond the nation-state (Berejikian & Dryzek, 2000). However, in most steering proposals civil society is considered a site for cooperation rather than radical action. In this sense civil society is somewhat instrumentalised – actors are expected to cooperate in transitions and assist in its implementation. Yet, in emphasising a cooperative role for civil society, transition management is possibly biting its own tail: for it is often the radical voices in civil society that provide the necessary background conditions for wide-scale transitions to occur (see Dryzek et al., 2003).

These four shortcomings can be understood as a lack of consideration of the context within reflexive arrangements are embedded. For the most part, reflexive practice is understood as

something that occurs within a bounded project. On the one hand this project-based understanding of reflexive practice recognises that reflexivity needs to be designed, facilitated, fostered and ‘niched’ under existing socio-economic conditions. Yet on the other hand, in focusing too heavily on ‘the project’, we risk losing sight of how these moments of reflexivity *influence* and are *influenced by* their social and political context. Here we find the metaphor of ‘bounded experiments’ misleading because it suggests that projects and their actors are somehow disconnected from the very context that they are trying to transform or retain. We ask whether this is possible, and indeed desirable?

It is our contention that any project aimed at reflexive governance, however bounded and protected, is permeable to the institutions, ideas, stories, histories and politics that surround it. Likewise, the ideas and visions generated within a reflexive project will influence its broader socio-political context as actors seek to promote change beyond the immediacy of the project. Our argument here is that to fully appreciate the democratic implications of reflexive governance, we need to understand how reflexive arrangements interface with their surrounding socio-political context. For it is on the interface between the intentional world of reflexivity and the everyday world of policy making where the struggles over legitimacy and knowledge are most likely to play out.

5. A richer conceptualisation of reflexive governance

In order to bring these interfaces into view, we propose an analytical framework for conceptualising reflexive governance in context (building on Hendriks 2004; 2006). Our heuristic device relates sites of reflexivity to ‘the land of middle democracy’ (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996: 12-13). This is the space where debates on public issues occur; where citizens, stakeholders, government officials and parliamentarians come together to consider issues for collective decision making.

A useful way to situate reflexive projects with their democratic landscape is to understand them as part of a broader deliberative system (after Mansbridge, 1999). We conceptualise this system as a series of multiple interconnected and overlapping spheres of public discourse, or discursive spheres.¹³ These are arenas (both in the literal and figurative sense) where discussion and debate on an issue occurs in the political domain. They form when social and political pressures generate sites of communication where ideas and opinions are exchanged, debated and contested. They include state and non-state venues such as parliaments, expert committees, stakeholder roundtables, community meetings, public seminars, the media and other sites of public conversation (Hendriks, 2006).

The term discourse here needs further clarification. To be clear we are *not* using the term in its Foucauldian sense to describe a shared set of constructs.¹⁴ Rather we use discourse in a loosely Habermasian way to refer to a social communicative process where actors expose and discuss different viewpoints, ideas, stories and arguments. We do not however mean to evoke the normative ideal of communicative action (as described in Habermas’ discourse ethics). In

¹³ In contrast, Jane Mansbridge (1999) conceptualizes the deliberative system as a *spectrum*. We have extended this idea into a system of interconnected discursive spheres, for reasons elaborated on elsewhere (see Hendriks 2006).

¹⁴ Discourse of this kind is defined by Hajer (1995: 44) as ‘a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts and categorizations that are produced, reproduced and transformed to give meaning to physical and social relations’

contrast, discourse is used here descriptively to capture a whole gamut of communication that extends well beyond rational argumentation and consensus to include story telling, rhetoric, agonism, contestation and dissent.¹⁵

A discursive sphere is therefore a venue where communication (in its broadest sense) occurs on a given public problem. Most spheres have a predominant form of communication. Some are aimed at *formal* or structured forms of communication, such as scientific inquiry, arbitration or consensus. Other spheres promote a more *informal* exchange of ideas, for example via symbolic, rhetorical or antagonistic means. Then there are those discursive spheres that attempt to bring together a *mix* actors accustomed to a wide range of discursive practices. Some spheres are also far more public and inclusive than others; some are initiated by the state, and others emerge from civil society. What they all share, however, is that they provide spaces for conversations on matters of public concern.¹⁶

Drawing on these ideas, we conceptualise a reflexive arrangement as one discursive sphere surrounded but a series of overlapping arenas of public discourse, as depicted in Figure 1.

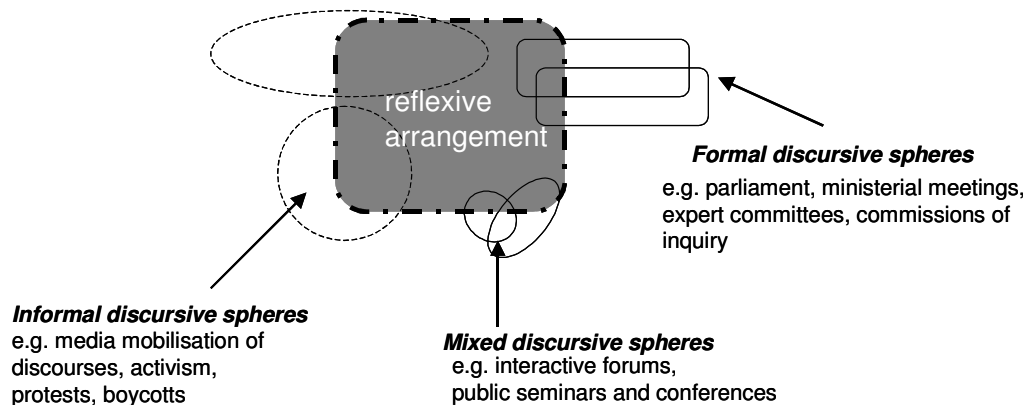


Figure 1: A reflexive arrangement in its discursive context

To be sure the neat overlapping nature of discursive spheres as depicted in Figure 1 is a theoretical interpretation of what is in practice a highly unstructured dynamic process. Nevertheless, our framework provides a useful platform for studying the democratic implications of reflexive governance in practice for several reasons.

First, conceptualising reflexive practice in this way draws our attention to interconnectivities. On the one hand, it acknowledges that reflexive practice often occurs in an intentionally designed arena, such as a systems innovation project. Yet on the other hand, this conceptualisation situates and connects reflexive moments to other arenas of public debate.

¹⁵ This understanding of discourse is perhaps closer to Habermas' earlier sociological diagnosis of the public sphere in late capitalism, what Benhabib (1992: 84-95) labels as his 'discourse model of public space' in contradistinction to his later work on the 'moral theory of discourse ethics'. Our usage of discourse also overlaps with certain interpretations of Hannah Arendt's concept of public discourse, which highlight *expressive* and *communicative* modes of action (Benhabib, 1992: 74-81; 2003: 123-130; d'Entréves, 1994: 84-5).

¹⁶ Here the concept of the 'discursive sphere' is broader than the notion of 'public sphere' which is commonly used in political theory to refer to those arenas where issues are brought into the public domain, that is, 'made public' (Benhabib, 1992; Fraser, 1992). Discursive spheres encapsulate much more than this by including both public and non-public venues of discussion.

In doing so it connects moments of second-order reflexivity to existing spaces of debate in contemporary society, where first-order reflexivity unintentionally surfaces. This brings into focus an important element of reflexivity: the capacity to turn back on itself (see Stirling, 2006). In other words, our framework highlights the dialectic between different worlds of reflexivity.

This emphasis on connections encourages us to look at reflexive governance at the interfaces. These are spaces where different discursive spheres overlap; where multiple worlds intersect (Hughes, 1971). Interfaces can be explored through the actions and experiences of various actors who move in and out of the innovation projects, such as government officials, interest representatives, scientists, activists and citizens. These encounters – or ‘reflexivity interfaces’ – provide insights into how actors straddle the demands of their existing institutional world, and the world they are trying to create. A study of ‘reflexivity interfaces’ can also inform broader debates on the democratic possibilities and limitations of network governance, particularly with respect to the legitimacy, franchise, and public accountability of networks (see Dryzek, 2006; Sørensen & Torfing, 2005). For example, we might explore how actors involved in a particular reflexive arrangement are affected by, or have an impact on broader public discourse, parliamentary debate, the media, and global events?

Second, conceptualising reflexive arrangements in their discursive context acknowledges that actors are involved in, and influenced by, many different venues of debate. While most actors might locate themselves primarily in one discursive sphere, there are times when they might engage in multiple conversations. When we view reflexive governance in this way, we are provoked to consider questions such as: who participates in different arenas, and how inclusive and diverse are they?

Third, reflexive practice as conceptualised here acknowledges that in praxis reflexivity can involve diverse forms of communication. In particular it provides room for more strategic and radical forms of action, such as activism, boycott, and protest. In doing so it acknowledges that given the far-reaching implications of sustainability, it is likely that some actors will resort to strategic, even radical forms of action to stimulate or undermine reflexivity.

In the final section of this paper, we use the discursive system as a framework to examine the democratic issues that surfaced in a project aimed at reflexive governance.

6. The Gideon project and its interfaces with other discursive spheres

Our case study concerns the Gideon-project (1995-1996), an interactive, formative evaluation of sustainable crop policies in the Netherlands.¹⁷ Gideon was to contribute to a mid-term Parliamentary review of the so-called Multi-Year Plan Crop Protection (hereafter, the Plan). The primary objective of the Plan, which was launched in 1991 with a time horizon of a decade, was to reduce quantities of pesticides used per acre in the Netherlands. More broadly, it sought to reduce emissions to the environment, and the Dutch agricultural system’s “dependency” on chemical pesticides (LNV 1990; Loeber, 2004). The addiction metaphor

¹⁷ Although responsibility for the following discussion is of course fully ours, we are indebted to the extensive discussion of this project by Anne Loeber, who analysed documents internal and external to the project, and conducted interviews with members of the project team, the Rathenau Institute, and stakeholders involved in the project (see Loeber 2004).

had been chosen deliberately, with the Plan explicitly emphasising the fundamental nature of changes to agricultural practice it implied. As such, the Plan represented one of the first steps in a process of ‘opening up’ traditional agricultural policies in the Netherlands. Initially, its reforms were designed to work within the existing institutional framework, but as things progressed it soon became clear that the proposed changes were so fundamental that they needed to be addressed both at the institutional level and beyond (Bekke et al., 1994; Wisserhof, 2000). Institutionally, the Plan had been produced outside the traditional framework for Dutch agriculture policy making. It encompassed changes in legislation, especially on pesticide admission; simultaneously, there was a struggle over other matters, especially on whether to involve only traditional players or to extend participation to new players such as environmental movements, water managers and the Ministry of Environmental Affairs. Together these aspects make Gideon and the broader mid-term parliamentary review a case of attempting reflexive governance.

In 1994, the Rathenau Institute, an independent adviser to parliament on science and technology issues, decided to contribute to this mid-term parliamentary review. It commissioned a team to draft a proposal to conduct an evaluation of the Plan on its behalf.¹⁸ The team comprised two university groups (a STS and a public policy studies group) from outside the agricultural domain as well as a young, independent institute at the fringes of that domain, CLM (the Centre for Agriculture and Environment). In its proposal, the team argued that in order to break through the ‘deadlock’ on pesticide dependency not only were fundamental changes in agricultural practices needed, but equally profound changes were required in other practices, such as consumption, knowledge and technology development, agricultural policy making, and the ‘social structures’ that governed these. Thus, the Gideon project’s framing of the problematic further emphasised the second-order reflexivity implied in the Plan’s objectives.

In designing the project, the Gideon team argued that it would be essential to engage actors involved in various agricultural practices, as well as actors that had a stake in the issue, such as environmental groups and water managers. More specifically, they argued for an ‘interactive analysis’, understood as a process where discussion and analysis feed into each other with the aim of reaching maximum agreement between actors on both the diagnosis of the deadlock, and strategies to resolve it.¹⁹ Another important methodological element of the Gideon project was to concentrate on engaging people from the ‘shop floor’ in the project.²⁰ Thus farmers were targeted rather than formal representatives of farmers’ organizations, operational water managers were invited to participate rather than their director-general and so on. This selection procedure was aimed at promoting creativity by encouraging local knowledge. It was also intended to protect the project from many of the strategic games prevalent around the Plan process, and in the agricultural policy arena more generally. In the Gideon project, strategic players were given a place in a ‘second ring’ – an Advisory Committee – where they were invited to provide input to the Rathenau Institute on the project’s proceedings.

¹⁸ One of the authors of this paper was a project leader of this team.

¹⁹ This approach was inspired by Guba and Lincoln’s (1989) method of constructivist evaluation (see Grin & Van de Graaf 1994; 1996).

²⁰ Additional selection criteria included that participants should: represent a variety of positions on the issue; stem from various parts of the economic chain; stem from different agricultural sectors; and be prepared to accept deliberative norms.

After reviewing the proposal the Rathenau Institute commissioned the team to conduct the project, which formally commenced in early 1995. The project design evolved throughout the process and in the end comprised seven stages, as outlined in Box 1.

Box 1. Outline of the GIDEON project

1. Preliminary studies

In this stage, the problems surrounding chemical crop protection in the Netherlands were explored in five detailed studies. The studies were based on a literature study, document analysis and some 60 interviews and resulted in a problem assessment and some short-term solution suggestions. These provided information to both the project team and the participants in later stages.

2. First round of interviews

Next, approximately 60 interviews were conducted with relevant stakeholders from the agricultural sector as well as parties involved in the food production, distribution and consumption chain. An important selection criterion was to include a large variety of perspectives. The interviews aimed to gain insights into the interviewees' definitions of sustainable crop protection, and to elicit their perceptions of any barriers as well as options for eliminating them.

3. Analysis by the project team.

The first round of interviews provided the basis for an accurate picture of the various parties' problem definitions of some twenty issues, the preferences and values underlying them, and the barriers encountered or anticipated in resolving them. The project team used this understanding of stakeholder views and barriers to develop a variety of options.

4. Second round of interviews

The options were then tested in a second round of interviews with most of the people from the first round. Interviewees were asked to respond to a document containing various options.

5. Future-oriented workshop

Next, a 'future-oriented workshop' was held, in which visions and development paths towards them, were interactively formulated. Participants in the workshop were selected according to the same criteria as for the interviews, but most of them were new.

6. Work conference

The results of the two rounds of interviews and the workshop were then integrated into three future visions. These were scrutinized during a work conference. The participants consisted for the most part of participants in the interview phase, supplemented by others selected according to the same criteria. In addition, a few strategic thinkers were invited, such as experts on consumer preferences and European policies. The objective was to arrive at joint conclusions.

7. Open day and final report

The final report contained an analysis of the preliminary studies, the interviews and the long-term future visions and their associated development paths. A draft version was presented in outline at an open day, aimed at involving project participants and key organizations involved crop protection issues. The final report was also discussed in the project's Advisory Committee. The various reactions were incorporated into the final version, and mentioned by the Rathenau Institute in its report to Parliament.

The Gideon project in its discursive context

The Gideon project was surrounded by many venues of debate, negotiation and deliberation – some more public with others. In order to appreciate how it interfaced with this discursive context, we first describe four key discursive spheres, as well as the Rathenau's role at the time as an 'intermediary' space, intentionally established to operate at such interfaces. Figure 2 depicts this contextual landscape.

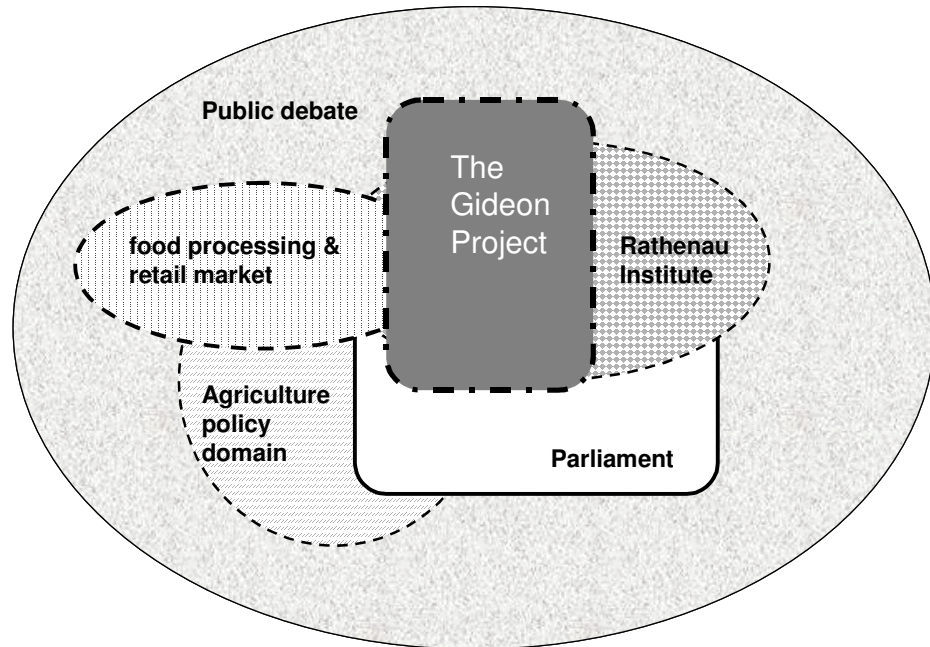


Figure 2: The Gideon Project in its discursive context

Public debate

Pesticides entered the public sphere as an issue of concern during the late 1940s, as some agriculture experts began to raise questions about their potential health effects. But it took Rachel Carson’s (1962) *Silent Spring* to stimulate a broader wave of public concern about the risks of chemicals in the food chain and the environment. Pesticides were one of the key issues (together with some waste scandals, nuclear energy, and eutrophication of surface waters) around which a broad societal movement on ecological concerns developed. By the 1970s the environmental movement, along with ecologists and consumer groups managed to bring other agricultural related issues onto the Dutch political agenda, in particular production surpluses, manure emissions, and animal welfare concerns. Originally, the movement pressed mainly for effect-oriented measures in these areas – a strategy that left the classical modernization regime largely untouched. Yet, gradually a (small) organic farming sector emerged, and, more importantly, pressure started to build up against modernist policies through consumer actions, environmental protests and lobbying (Bieleman, 2000). Public debate broadened even further with various global environmental activities; the 1987 publication of the Brundtland report being a major stimulus. This report also encouraged a change in strategy by the environmental movement in the public sphere: from protest and awareness building to stimulating and participating in cooperative arrangements. This shift had largely occurred by the time the Gideon project arrived, though a debate continued within the environmental movement on the right balance these two dimensions of their mission (Van der Heijden, 2000).

The agriculture policy domain

The Gideon project and the policy process through which it was designed and implemented was contextualized by profound changes – both substantively and institutionally – in the agriculture policy domain. The Netherlands’ international reputation as a leader in agricultural

production was largely due to the success of the 'iron triangle', which comprised: 1) the agriculture ministry, 2) the *Landbouwschap* (a public-private agricultural organization) and farmers' organisations and 3) agricultural specialists from Parliament (Bekke et al., 1994; Wisserhof, 2000).²¹ The triangle was based on a strong consensus – partly maintained through personal commitments and unions of different kinds – on the modernization programme and the policies conceived to support it. 'Outsiders', like members of parliamentary delegations who were not agriculture specialists, were not allowed to have a say on these matters.

Increasing criticism in the public sphere (see above) placed pressure on the modernization programme, particularly the influence of players in the iron triangle, such as the *Landbouwschap*. A historical moment occurred in 1983 when a 'super levy' was introduced on milk production surpluses to counter 'perpetual' productivity increases. The relevant legislation was prepared in utmost secrecy by the Ministers of Agriculture and Environment, and a very small number of high level trustees. It was quickly adopted in one Cabinet Session, and then announced to the public (Bekke et al., 1994: 40-41). These events sparked vehement protest from the agriculture and food production sectors, not only because of the policy's substantive aspects, but also because it represented a weakening of the iron triangle. Shortly after that, manure legislation was formed and passed in a similar manner, and other examples followed (Bekke & De Vries, 2001).

The Plan was another case in point. When it was launched in the early 1990s, the power of the Iron Triangle had deteriorated, with other governmental and non-governmental actors from the environmental and water sectors now in the picture. At the time of the mid-term parliamentary review, preparations were in place within government to terminate the existence of the triangle's central actor, the powerful *Landbouwschap*, a public-private player with regulative authority. In the process, a second institutional triangle also started to dissolve, the so-called OVO-triad, which had been created to generate agriculture 'know-how' and disseminate it into farming practice.²²

Parliament

Within the parliamentary discursive sphere, a monopoly of agriculture specialists had effectively depoliticised modernist agriculture practices for decades. However, from 1980 onwards this monopoly dissolved as a group of financial and environmental specialists entered the picture. Agriculture was then 're-politicised' as MPs from all sides of the political spectrum became involved in debates on controversial issues, such as the subsidy system, production restrictions or measures to reduce emissions or improve animal welfare. On such issues especially, the influence of traditional agriculture specialists in Parliament was no longer self-evident: continuation of the post-war modernization policy now needed to be *achieved* in a *struggle* (with more or less success) against colleagues driven by financial or environmental concerns (Bekke et al., 1994). As Parliament increasingly became a discursive battle ground between modernists and reformers, its resulting policies showed two faces. For example, when the Plan was being discussed around 1991, Parliament adopted it virtually unchanged, despite vehement lobbying from traditional players. Simultaneously, it also passed a resolution

²¹ To a significant extent the EU's Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) might be seen as transnational embedding for the Iron Triangle's programme, for which there are clear historical reasons (see Ackrill, 2000; Westerman, 1999).

²² These developments not only reflected national developments, but also the reforms of the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), set in motion under Commissioner McSharry as a response to budget problems, developments in the World Trade Organization, and environmental problems and small farmers' concerns (Ackrill, 2000; Hennis, 2001).

demanding that government reach 'binding agreements' with agricultural interest organizations on the Plan's implementation. With this second resolution, the Parliament was responding to an implementation initiative that had been proposed a few days earlier by the *Landbouwschap* in a strategic attempt to restore its influence over agriculture policy. Parliament thus both expressed its commitment to the Plan's objectives, and acknowledged traditional players' desire to maintain a serious role. It was against this background that Parliament stipulated a mid-term review of the Plan's progress, especially in reducing the sectors dependency on pesticides (Schreurs & Grin, 1996).

The food processing and retailing market

While the food processing industry and retailers in the Netherlands had initially ignored public debate over pesticide use, and downplayed the significance of an emerging organic sector, things began to change when public concern increased. Several groups, including the market leader, *Albert Heijn*, started to add labelled products to their assortment, and/or raised the environmental and animal welfare requirements on the food they sold. These changes must largely be understood as an attempt – in the context of transnational competition – to maintain or attain a responsible public image. It was also a response to changes in consumer preferences, which were perceived to be increasingly emphasising quality, diversity and products' contribution to lifestyles and identities. Although market players were careful to maintain their autonomy, they sought contact with environmental, animal welfare and consumer organizations to ensure that their efforts satisfied critical groups. These efforts must also be viewed in the context of power. The retailing sector was more or less able to impose its position (including demands on the primary sector) given its powerful position in the agrifood chains vis-à-vis farmers and consumers (Priester, 2000).

The Rathenau Institute as a mixed discursive sphere

The Rathenau Institute was founded in 1987 as an independent institute (under auspices of the Academy of Science) to provide advice to parliament, so as "to broaden decision making [in terms of actors and aspects]" on issues in which science and technology played a major role. So, by its nature, it is located at the interface between various discursive spheres, and can therefore be thought of as a mixed discursive sphere to the extent that it brought together different sets of conversations. As an intermediary organization the Institute has significant degrees of freedom, but it also finds itself in the continuous process of legitimising itself. This legitimating task was particular challenging when the Gideon project began because the organisation was undergoing a transformation of its mission. Induced by an evaluation after its first five-year period (Van Eijndhoven, 2000: 154-155), the Institute shifted its mission from an analytical group that translated societal concerns into policy advice, to an organisation that was to contribute to societal debate. Its activities "were now understood as interventions in an ongoing process of public opinion forming" (Van Eijndhoven, 2000: 155). This shift in emphasis had two crucial implications. First, the quality of its projects would now be judged not only on the "quality of its reports *per se*, but also on its overall contribution to the arguments used in public debate and decision making" (Van Eijndhoven, 2000: 155). Second, it became necessary to discuss methods to contribute to societal debates (Rathenau Institute, 1994). One novel approach was interactive technology assessment – a methodology on which the Institute latter published (see Grin et al. 1997). Against this background, the Institute's viewed the Gideon project both as a methodological testing ground, but also as a means to demonstrate its capacity to contribute to public debate.

Exploring Gideon at interfaces

In order to exemplify how our proposed framework may be used to understand democratic aspects of reflexive governance, we will present some examples of how the Gideon project interfaced with various discursive spheres.

Interface with the market

As the Gideon project connected with the market it met some resistance from a major retailing company. Initially, the company engaged enthusiastically in the future-oriented workshop. However, in the subsequent stage (the work conference) it strongly rejected the ‘ecological’ vision and strategy (Loeber, 2004: 235-236). When before the Gideon project, the company had decided that it needed to somehow meet the increasing demand for ‘sustainable products’. To this end it organized – five years earlier than the Plan had demanded – a network of farmers to supply the supermarket with produce. The tight contracting system employed in this new arrangement left the company with many enemies in the primary sector, and ironically damaged the very image they were seeking to improve. As a result of this experience they were wary of getting farmers offside. Thus at the work conference they were quick to reject the ecological vision on the grounds that it would concern many farmers. Although it acknowledged that an ecological production system would be ‘absolutely feasible’ it strongly opposed governmental intervention as part of the strategy to reach it.

The firm under discussion here clearly participated in the Gideon project to pursue its own strategic goal: to improve its public image in civil society and in the market. It sought to delegitimize any proposals that would undermine this goal, including one of the emerging joint visions. In the end, the firm’s resistance together with opposition from the *Landbouwschap* and some farmers, meant that the ecological vision was abandoned.

Interface with the agriculture policy domain

In the initial stages of the Gideon project, its interface with the agriculture policy domain brought contested notions of representation to the surface. In particular, the public-private entity, the *Landbouwschap* was concerned that those included in the Gideon project were not ‘representative’ of agriculture sector – a claim they themselves made. As noted, a key methodological choice in the project was to involve people from ‘the shop floor’, rather than official stakeholder representatives. Instead, these more strategic players were invited to sit on the project’s advisory committee. Many interest representatives willingly took up this role because it presented an opportunity through which they could influence the project. One of the primary issues on which these actors focused was the selection of participants (Loeber, 2004). On several occasions, various advisory committee members put forward strong suggestions for particular individuals to participate, for example, strategic players, a selection of ‘shop-floor’ representatives who actually held responsibilities in their constituencies, their favourite types of experts and so on. Some members even suggested that the Rathenau Institute was paying too little attention to accountability vis-à-vis ‘the’ sector by bringing under the Institute’s attention “the danger of the impression that one talks about the agricultural sector without consulting the sector itself”.²³

Of course, part of the reason that such pressure could be exerted at these moments was the Rathenau’s Institute mission and position vis-à-vis the agriculture sector. To deal with such

²³ Minutes of a meeting of the advisory board of December 12, 1995. Internal document, Rathenau Institute.

interventions, it careful manoeuvring was required by the project team, the Institute's project leader and the work conference facilitator (Loeber, 2004: 226-237). For example, they reminded the participants and the Board members of their commitment to deliberative norms such as accountability and reciprocity, and pointed out that the project's impact would be maximized if it worked with the problem definition set by its addressee, the Parliament. They also frequently drew attention to external developments that supported reform, such as changing consuming preferences, the recognition of these trends by powerful market parties; and changing EU policies. At the work conference, such trends were brought prominently to the fore through plenary talks at the beginning of the two-day session. These exchanges helped to create results that were both reasonably innovative and met some acceptance, especially by remnants of the iron triangle.

These gains, however, did not prevent traditional players from trying to de-legitimise the final report. During the Open Day, some participants claimed that the report contained little news. In the advisory board, some members deemed the report, with its rather "qualitative" approach, rather vague. The representative of the *Landbouwschap*, for instance, felt that it was sort of a "Christmas message put forward by the queen: all good intentions and best wishes, without practical ideas and means to show for it" (Loeber, 2004: 237). Other members, favouring radical reform, believed that the report would have gained more credibility if had included more quantitative analysis. They used this opportunity to promote particular experts and approaches, trying to strengthen their favoured position in an ongoing debate within the agriculture knowledge infrastructure. Again, the legitimacy of the project was under-dispute. In the end, the resulting problem was resolved with when the Rathenau Institute's leader and a member from the project team (from CLM) prepared several case studies to illustrate the project's proposals. Rather than focusing merely on the expertise emphasized in the advisory committee, these case studies strongly relied on local knowledge and innovative ideas, either directly taken from experimenting farmers, or from research stations that rely heavily on their input (*cf.* Groenewegen *et al.*, 1996: 87-106).

Especially during the final stages of, and following, the Gideon project, its interface with the agriculture policy domain also worked the other way around: the Gideon project was impacting upon the discursive sphere of policy making. First, the project and its results were employed strategically by those policy makers within the Ministry who were in favour of far-sighted policies, with the ambition of fundamentally changing agriculture practices. To them, the Gideon report presented useful ammunition for their internal battles with their more conservative colleagues. As one policy maker explained: it was now clear that "they were not the only ones who think this approach is necessary and feasible" (Loeber, 2004: 245). In the end, a paragraph was inserted into a Ministerial letter to Parliament (mid-1996) stating that the Gideon report was the only one of a variety of mid-term reviews worth mentioning, because it had specifically outlined how dependency on chemical pesticides might be reduced.

The Gideon project also provided legitimacy for other far reaching policy proposals (Loeber, 2004: 248). For example, after the project, the IKC, an information centre used the Gideon proposal in their options for a follow-up policy to the Plan (IKC, 1998). The person responsible for that activity justified this action on the grounds that the Gideon project "had made visible support for fundamental changes" in crop protection. In addition, a person active in water management referred to the project to legitimise innovations at the boundary between spatial planning and agriculture policy (Faassen, 1999). Also a Ministerial letter (1997) on this follow-up policy included Gideon's methodological approach as a basis for

such steps.²⁴ The Gideon project thus contributed to a gradual process of changing acceptance of more radical policies.

Interface with Parliament

As noted, the Gideon project was intended to contribute to the mid-term parliamentary review of the Plan. Although this fact was used frequently to deal with the strategic action of powerful actors, in the end the Parliament paid little explicit attention to the final report. Three episodes may serve to exemplify the Parliament's passive response. First, the report was used to legitimise the adoption of support measures for crop protection in smaller cultivations – an issue some parliamentarians had been pushing for a while. This episode indicates how the Gideon results were used selectively and opportunistically. Second, during the open day, an agriculture specialist from Parliament with strong ties with the traditional iron triangle raised again the accountability issue by casting doubt on whether the project reflected 'the' view from 'the' primary sector, commenting that the project team should have visited some farmers: then the project results would have been different, while also more justice would have been done to a wide range of attempts to reduce emissions and the amount of chemicals needed. Third, and nevertheless, Parliament just accepted the Minister's proposals for the mid-term review, which, as we have seen, were influenced by the Gideon project. These two episodes demonstrate the dual-positioning of the parliament: on the one hand it was committed to traditional agricultural *actors*, and on the other hand to the Plan's long-term and radical *objectives*.

Insights from Gideon for reflexive governance

A case study such as Gideon is rich with examples of the kinds of democratic struggles that reflexive governance in practice can generate. Here we highlight *three* important insights that were gained by applying our proposed conceptual framework.

First, the case study demonstrates that there is indeed a strong interconnectivity and intensive interaction between reflexive arrangements and their surrounding discursive spheres. Most 'discursive activity' (Hendriks, 2004: 285) in the Gideon project occurred as the project interfaced with the agriculture policy domain and the market. In particular, our analysis reveals that at these interfaces a dialectic occurred: the Gideon Project both *influenced*, and was *influenced by*, its surrounding context.

- On the one hand, the project had an impact – albeit indirect – on the agriculture policy domain. This was especially the case in the latter stages of the project and beyond, when reformists used the outcomes and legitimacy of the Gideon project to boost support for other reforms they were struggling to achieve or supposed to implement. Others such as actors in the water management sector used the Gideon project to legitimise changes in spatial planning.
- On the other hand, the project was shaped and influenced by surrounding discursive activities particularly those of traditional, powerful players (e.g. iron triangle actors; retailers). Most of these activities concerned attempts to influence the project for example, by putting pressure on participant selection; or by 'vetoing' particular outcomes, or by trying to de-legitimise the project and its outcomes by disputing its methodology and knowledge base. These attempts were aimed at preventing 'unfavourable' outcomes and a potential change to their monopoly on representing

²⁴ *Tweede Kamer*, 1996-1997, 21677, nr. 33, p. 2.

the interests of the primary sector – a crucial issue in a period in which their legitimacy was seriously at stake. A similar influence occurred at the interface with the market, where powerful players had taken initiatives for reform. Their interest in Gideon was conditional on whether the project added legitimacy to these, and only these, reforms.

A second important insight from our analysis is the ‘politics’ that reflexive arrangements incite. In the Gideon project, we found that political tensions surfaced as actors and institutions positioned themselves *strategically* as they tried to juggle the competing demands of reflexive projects and other discursive spheres. For example:

- traditional, ‘iron triangle’, players struggled to maintain their power by questioning both the legitimacy of the project’s proceedings and the degree to which it was accountable to the primary sector;
- market players responded to rising public concern over food production methods and safety by producing new ‘sustainable products’ but they were reluctant to support more substantial reform for fear of damaging their reputation within the agricultural sector ;
- the parliament positioned itself in a dual manner: on the one hand it was committed to profound substantive change in the agriculture sector, but on the other hand it continued to support traditional ‘iron triangle’ players
- the Rathenau Institute tried to attain and maintain its legitimacy especially in the eyes of Parliament and relevant the ministries by holding itself accountable to both traditional agriculture actors and those promoting change.

Politics was not only present in the Gideon project, but it was also accommodated. The Rathenau Institute and the Gideon team worked hard to address various methodological and substantive concerns raised by different actors. They tried to anticipate potential objections, and wherever possible they adapted the project’s design and content to resolve external concerns. This suggests that reflexive projects need to be organized by institutions with the capacity to balance and accommodate the politics that second-order reflexivity is likely to generate (cf. Roep et al., 2003).

The final insight we wish to highlight from this case study is that reflexive arrangements often result in subtle and indirect impacts. Rarely do they cumulate in grand policy decisions made by formal institutions, such as relevant ministries or even the parliament. As the Gideon project shows, formal discursive venues such as Parliament tend to play an inactive role in the everyday activities of policy making, especially when radical reforms are involved. In this case Parliament may have been inactive, but it was certainly not insignificant. It provided the locus around which much discursive activity was centred. After all Parliament was the addressee of the Gideon report, and this helped to legitimate the project, especially when the organisers were dealing with strategic action (see above).

7. Conclusions

This paper attempts to stimulate a rich conversation about the democratic implications of reflexive governance. We have seen that this is an ambiguous term, which in the context of sustainability, refers to a mode of steering that is strategic, yet self-critical. Our primary concern here has been with how reflexive governance of this kind might be practiced, and its democratic consequences. We have argued that existing notions of reflexive practice do not capture the dynamic and complex nature of reflexive governance observed in practice. In particular, existing approaches provide little room for understanding how sites of reflexivity *influence* and are *influenced* by their social and political context.

In this paper, we have sought to bring context into view, by proposing a richer conceptualisation of reflexive governance in practice. Rather than understanding reflexive arrangements as isolated ‘bounded experiments’, we have argued that they are best conceptualised in their broader discursive context. Inspired by deliberative democracy, our conceptualisation of reflexive practice situates reflexive projects in relation to relevant arenas of public debate – which we label ‘discursive spheres’. This framework embraces rather than reduces complexity in that it:

- acknowledges that transitions to sustainability will involve a multiplicity of arenas, actors and forms of political communication;
- brings into view the significant and multifaceted role of civil society in reflexive governance
- recognises that intentional sites of reflexivity will *interface* and in some cases *challenge* other arenas of public debate; and thereby
- opens up conceptual space to consider the impact of the politics and strategic action that surface as actors negotiate the demands of reflexive arrangements and their existing worlds.

All these aspects make our proposed framework a useful basis from which to explore the democratic challenges of reflexive governance. Our Dutch case study demonstrates that an analysis of discursive interfaces is a valuable way of understanding the democratic and political struggles that reflexive arrangements generate. While the Gideon project eventually was able to lend sufficient legitimacy to visions and strategies for fundamental reform both in the agricultural sector and beyond, our analysis shows that a lot of ‘hard work’ had to be done in order to reach that point. In particular, ‘work’ took place as the project interfaced with two other discursive spheres (agricultural policy making and the market), which were both engaged in a process of transformation. All this took place under the influence of a third discursive sphere, public debate as citizens and NGOs promoted themselves as parties to which traditional players were accountable. Public debate, together with activities in and around the Parliament, provided an important resource for the Gideon project in dealing with frequent strategic interventions. Our analysis of Gideon’s discursive interfaces sheds light on the work – and indeed the politics – involved in achieving legitimacy and accountability in reflexive governance.

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