

Positive uncertainties in megaproject evaluation

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The governance and evaluation of ‘megaprojects’; that is, large-scale, complex, high-stakes infrastructure projects usually commissioned by governments and delivered through partnerships between public and private organisations, is receiving increased attention in areas such as project management, urban planning, and policy evaluation. Yet, ecological economics has paid little explicit attention to particularities of megaproject evaluation, with the ecological distribution conflicts literature perhaps the closest example of ecological economists in this area (e.g. Healy et al. 2013). Furthermore, the broader megaproject evaluation literature has hitherto largely adopted a linear-rationalist perspective to explain the frequent failure of megaprojects to meet the ‘iron triangle’ criteria of project performance: delivering on time, within budget, and according to specifications. This approach typically draws on theories of rational choice, and recommends greater control and accountability to remedy megaproject ‘pathologies’ (e.g. Flyvbjerg et al. 2003).

Drawing on empirical examples presented in a recent book on socioeconomic evaluation of megaprojects (Lehtonen et al. 2016), this session explores potential synergies and common ground and differences between ecological economics on one hand, and the “non-rationalistic” strand of research on megaproject governance and evaluation on the other (e.g. van Marrewijk et al. 2008; OMEGA 2012). It does so by examining concrete megaproject cases in the light of two dimensions constituting the core of such an alternative megaproject evaluation approach: 1) going beyond the dominant linear-rationalist notion of policy processes, and stressing the objective of “opening up” appraisal processes in order to enhance learning and reflexivity (e.g. Stirling 2008); and 2) extending evaluative criteria beyond the ‘iron triangle’, to cover the various socioeconomic impacts and preconditions for project success. The first strategy embraces the multiplicity of interpretations of policy processes and rationalities motivating human behaviour – an approach that would highlight and take seriously the various uncertainties. In a sense, this approach draws on uncertainty as a resource in governance and evaluation, placing uncertainties at the heart of governance instead of seeking to suppress them. The second strategy refers to the socioeconomic aspects as performance criteria in project evaluation, including both socioeconomic impacts and the socioeconomic preconditions for successful project implementation. Arguably, the ‘iron triangle’ considerations constitute only a part of the multiple criteria against which the performance of megaprojects should be evaluated. Not only does this approach fail to adequately address the various impacts on affected communities, but it also gives insufficient attention to the dynamics of project implementation. In these processes, project goals are constantly redefined through interaction and dialogue amongst the involved actors and stakeholders –

which may or may not include publics beyond the project planners, managers and directly concerned parties.

Through an empirical analysis of megaprojects in the areas of transport and radioactive waste management, the papers in this session explore this novel strand of megaproject evaluation in the light of fundamental principles of ecological economics. Numerous areas of common ground will be explored, including ecological distribution conflicts, citizen and stakeholder participation, principles of institutionalist policy appraisal, treatment of complexity and uncertainty, and the challenges of evaluation and governance of long-term sustainability.

References

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