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## Public Support, Keep it Awake

### Avoir en permanence le soutien du public

### Oeffentliche Unterstützung - sollte man pflegen

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#### SUMMARY

Based on practical experience with planning of projects and formulating of policies, an approach in planning and management of civil engineering projects is developed. The approach consists of a phase of public recognition of the problem, a phase of formulating alternative solutions, a phase of choosing a solution and realising it and a phase of management. The main object of the approach was to provide the opportunity in every phase for interaction with public opinion and to gain and hold public support. The main point of view in this paper is the relation with public opinion and public support.

Avoir en permanence le soutien du public

#### Résumé

Basé sur une expérience pratique, une approche de la conception et de la gestion de projets de génie civil est présentée. Elle consiste en une phase d'acceptation du problème par le public, d'une phase de formulation de solutions alternatives, d'une phase de sélection d'une solution, de sa réalisation et de son exploitation. Cette approche a pour objectif de permettre une interaction avec le public dans chaque phase de la réalisation, afin de gagner et garder son soutien. Le point principal de cet article est en relation avec l'opinion publique et le soutien public.

Oeffentliche Unterstützung - sollte man pflegen

#### Zusammenfassung

Basierend auf praktischer Erfahrung wurde ein Verfahren in Planung und Management von Bauingenieurprojekten entwickelt. Das Verfahren besteht in einer Phase öffentlichen Bekanntmachens des Problems, einer Phase der Formulierung alternativer Lösungen, einer Phase der Lösungswahl und ihrer Verwirklichung und einer Phase des Managements. Das hauptsächliche Ziel dieses Verfahrens war, in jeder Phase die Gelegenheit zum Austausch mit der öffentlichen Meinung zu ergreifen und die öffentliche Unterstützung zu gewinnen und zu halten. Der Hauptgesichtspunkt in diesem Artikel ist die Beziehung zwischen öffentlicher Meinung und öffentlicher Unterstützung.



## 1. INTRODUCTION.

Civil engineering projects usually serve public interest: Watermanagement, coastal defence, reclamation of land from the sea, etc. However, many civil engineers sometimes have difficulties to get the most necessary project started. In several cases public resistance is growing against the project during realization which often takes years or decades. Sometimes it results in essential modifications of the original design of the project. In other cases it even means the end of the project. Sometimes the public interest as translated in the project, fades away or one or more objectives of the project disappear. In a number of cases ecological effects cause the public resistance. The papers of only one symposium [1] showed the next examples:

- \* Deltaproject (S-W Netherlands) [1a]. Main interest (1958) was flood control by closing estuaries from the sea. Another objective was to replace salt water with fresh water for agriculture. Public opinion said in 1973: Salt water nature and shellfish culture are more important than fresh water. That resulted in a salt lake Grevelingen [1b] instead of a fresh water lake and in a stormsurgebarrier in the Eastern Scheldt leaving room for tidal water movement instead of a dam [1c]. Recently public opinion called for a stormsurgebarrier in Rotterdam Waterway instead of raised dikes in towns and villages.
- \* Zuiderzeaproject (Central Netherlands) [1d]. Main interests (1932) were flood protection and the reclamation of land out of water for food production in 5 polders. Public opinion (1980) said: A fresh water lake for nature, fishing and watersports is more important than land for food production. That resulted in the cancelling of the 5th polder. This means the end of 7 centuries of landreclamation: 20% of the Netherlands consists of reclaimed land. [2]. Today the lake is a wetland.
- \* Waddenzeaproject (N Netherlands) [1e]. Main interest was land reclamation from the Wadden Sea. This project started stealthy in the 1930s. Public opinion (1970) said: The estuarine environment is more important than land reclamation. That resulted in cancelling the project. Today the Wadden Sea is an international wetland area.
- \* Nakanoumi project (Japan) [1f]. Main interest (1963) was the reclamation of land for rice production. Public opinion (1975) said: Nature and fisheries are more important than rice production. That resulted in cancelling the construction of a dam although sluices and locks were finished.

Another example is the Siberian project to reverse the direction of the flow of a river. This project was cancelled by Gorbatsjov after public resistance all over the world. Recently public resistance is growing against the stormsurgebarrier which is under construction near Leningrad. This resistance is caused by serious waterpollution which however is not related to the barrier. So this might be an example of irrational resistance.

After the realization of a project the budget for the maintenance of public work is often too low. Even in the Netherlands - with their history as a subsiding country and a rising sealevel over centuries - the budgets for maintenance of flood protection works were often insufficient. By analyzing this phenomenon a cycle could be recognised [3]:

- \* an inundation with its traumatic consequences in losses of life and goods brought a national consensus: "this never again, dikes have to be raised".
- \* after 2 or 3 generations the public awareness of the danger to be flooded decreased and consequently the degree of protection decreased too.
- \* the 3rd or 4th generation could look forward to a next inundation.

In the field of basin management similar experiences are available. The Eastern Scheldt stormsurgebarrier was realised instead of a dam to preserve the estuarine system (costs doubled to 4 billions of guilders). Then (1978) the objective of basin management in the Eastern Scheldt basin was chosen: To

preserve the natural system - even to improve it where possible - and to continue shellfish culture. Today it is difficult to protect nature from a too high increase of fishing a certain species of shellfish (*Cardium Edule*). These species are especially important because they form the greatest biomass in the basin and are food for many birds.

From the recent experience with the formulation of the new erosion control policy of the Dutch coast, the conclusion can be drawn that public opinion and public support often are the keys to gain and to keep attention for essential issues. Of course: In democratic societies politicians decide on priorities. And politicians do their job in interaction with the public opinion.

That leads to the central problem definition of this paper. "What are the possibilities for the government and its civil servants to interact with public opinion and to hold public support over many years or decennia during the planning and the realization of a project and afterwards during the maintenance?"

First of all the answer will be given based on practical experience. This experience is gained working on projects and observing the interaction between project, politics and public opinion. The experience is supplemented with some information from literature. The practical base forms the approach in the next sections and is in the first place rooted in the Dutch society. On the other hand foreign literature indicated that the approach might be useful in other well developed societies where people think independently.

The approach will be worked out for the planning, the realization and the maintenance of civil engineering projects. The same approach is suitable for the formulation, the acceptance and the realization of more abstract policies.

## 2. PUBLIC OPINION, PUBLIC SUPPORT AND POLITICS.

### 2.1 Public opinion and politics.

Public opinion rules in a democracy [4]. This could be a direct democracy where all citizens are directly involved in decision making. However in practice a small number of chosen politicians represent voters in parliament and government. They interact with public opinion.

Politicians have their own rationality. Often one or more of the next three criteria can be recognised [5]:

- a. Public interest.
- b. Rules and routines of the authority.
- c. Striving to stay in power, so to be elected again.

Politicians mix these criteria to their own combination which changes from time to time. Of course the striving to stay in power is important. Otherwise a politician can not continue to work for public interest. It makes politicians sometimes seem to have their agenda dictated by press and public opinion. Some politicians rise to the level of a statesman. The latter are mostly concerned with public interest on the long term and are able to get public support for

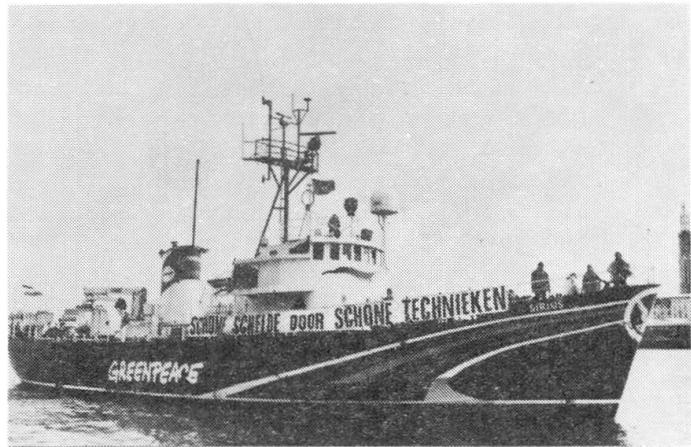


Fig. 1. Mobilizing the public opinion:  
A key factor.



their ideas. This way their agenda is not dictated, but they appoint the political agenda. Also a statesman can only bring his ideas effective to the public if he knows his public. So he has to be in contact with the public and he has to listen what is going on [6]. Anyhow, for every politician public opinion is important. So it is for civil engineers in civil service.

A civil engineer in civil service - both as he is working as a policy formulator and as he is working more closely to technics - has from time to time to support his political superiors to inform the public about good or bad news. The approach of politicians and engineers is often decisive for the public opinion about their project. Some remarks are:

- \* Politicians dislike to bring bad news. Examples are: Negative ecological effects of a project or exceeding the original budget. If possible such bad news has to be explained of external influences such as an exceeding inflation in the marketsegment.
- \* Politicians prefer to avoid complicated messages that are difficult or hard to explain. Keep it simple.
- \* Policies without visible success are unpopular. Such policies are sufficient management or maintenance which are never spectacular.
- \* Projects with short term success have an advantage on projects with a long term success. The success of the latter might be harvested by a successor. That might be the reason why decisions on public investments have a disadvantage on projects in a consumptive atmosphere.

Looking at the latter two items. A decision with long term effect can enhance the image as a statesman from the responsible politician. Such a decision presented just before elections might be attractive from a political point of view. Timing is important for a public discussion. When a discussion starts one or half a year before elections, political parties might use it as a topic in

their program. After the elections it can be written in an agreement between ruling parties. It is a method to quick popular decisions.

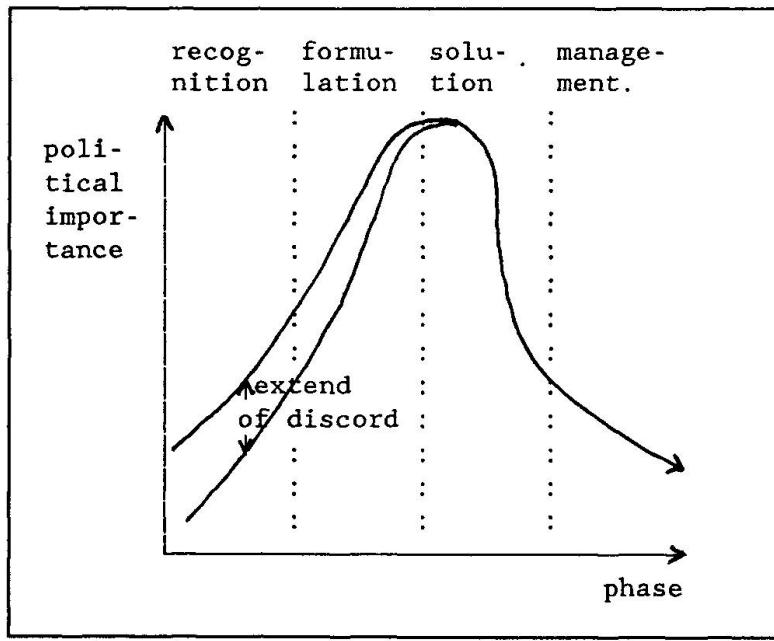


Fig. 2. Policy lifecycle.

The political importance of questions depends on the phase of a project. The successful former Dutch minister of environment, Winsemius, recognised the policy lifecycle [7] as shown in figure 2. To get recognised a problem is sometimes very difficult. Often bad news or an incident is necessary. The Sandoz disaster (1987) - seriously polluting the river Rhine - is an example of such an incident. It pushed the international Rhine action plan forward. A logic continuation was the action plan for the

North Sea. It was more difficult to reach an agreement on the latter. The sea seems to stay far from our backyard. Fortunately Greenpeace mobilizes public opinion. If that was not the case, only dying seals like in 1988 could do this. The figure also illustrates that the phase of management (maintenance) is the least interesting in politics.

## 2.2. Influencing the public opinion.

The media can help to consolidate an existing public opinion. To change an attitude in public opinion is more difficult, especially an existing issue. Considering the long realization period and required lifetime of civil engineering projects, attitudes have to be influenced for longer periods. This leads to fig. 3 [9]. People strive to the equilibrium between the 4 pillars of attitude. Values (ideas and feelings) weigh the heaviest. For continuing influence on an attitude, it is necessary to appeal on the values of people. The Brundtland report may be an example summoning for "sustainable development of society": This generation inherited the earth with specific chances to survive and ought to leave

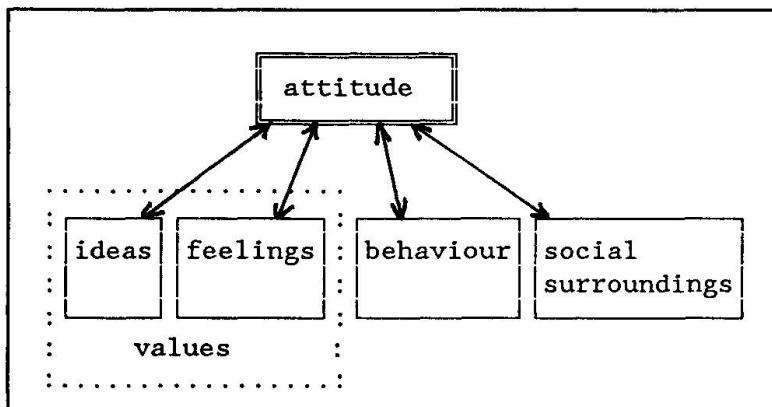


Fig.3. Pillars of attitude.

the earth in a condition giving their children at least the same chances to survive. This appeals to a basic value of people, their parenthood. Such appeals are issues for statesmen.

Today the Dutch politics is involved with long term environmental policies. This is not only caused by the Brundtland report, but might also be caused by other facts. Around 1970 young academic people at universities were educated in environmental problems. At that time the ruling item was "Limits to growth" [10]. Today these academic people have key positions in public service and in industries. This seems to be related to the pillar social surroundings. Colleagues, fellow students, family, societies are a decisive factor whether a signal will be recognised or not [11]. Public opinion depends strongly on opinion makers such as leaders of societies, of trade-unions and even of pressuregroups. These groups are a vital link between their supporters and the government [12]. It is necessary to talk with these "linkgroups" in order to listen what is going on in the public. Only then it is possible to bring an effective message to the public.

The moment a democratic decision has been made, can be seen as a turning point in communication from government with the public. Before the decision is taken only information consisting of facts is acceptable. After the decision, information influencing the people to fulfill the adopted objective is acceptable. Independent thinking people do not like to be pushed to specific conclusions. This behaviour is an international recognized basic principle in the science of communication [13], [14].

Contrary to this principle, the classic approach is: "This is my problem and here is a solution, please give me the necessary budget." The public opinion often doubts about the proposition and ignores the problem sometimes. Only opponents are heard. The policy analysis that was executed to formulate the new policy on erosion control of the Dutch coast was tackled with a non-classic approach [15].

## 3. CHANCES IN INTERACTION WITH THE PUBLIC OPINION.

### 3.1. Case Erosion Control of the Dutch Coast.

The erosion of the Dutch North Sea coast (10 millions m<sup>3</sup> of sand/year) was a



rather non-recognised problem. The erosion undermined dikes and dunes and caused unsafe situations for the polder areas. About 20 ha dunes/year disappeared by the erosion. That gave the government no reason to allocate a structural budget to fight the erosion. Till 1991 the ruling policy was to solve the most embarrassing bottle necks. The public showed a growing indignation. In 1987 the parliament requested the government to establish a long term policy. The public and the parliament asked for a structural policy. However the government did not want.

The first crucial step to establish the long term policy was a discussion report published in 1989. It gave only facts and alternative policies without preferences. Accompanied by a video-film, some thousands of reports were sent to all authorities and persons who might be interested. Since publication of the report the public opinion jumped to the conclusion: "The erosion must be stopped". This was shown by the results of public participation - collected by the Advisory Board of Public Works and Watermanagement. The Minister of Public Works and Watermanagement remained without preference for a specific alternative, so did her officials.

The second crucial step was to contact and to consultate linkgroups. The Royal Institution of Engineers (KIVI) organised a congress for technicians, businesspeople, policymakers and politicians. Environmental groups (interested in preserving natural dunes) organised a congress on natural coastal protection. Officials from the Ministry of Public Works and Watermanagement presented only informative speeches. Both congresses lead to the same consensus: Stop the erosion. Others played the role of opinion makers. Consensus was reached too in consultations with provinces, the union of waterboards and other ministries. These bodies were involved in discussions on the drafts for a decisive report choosing the "stop erosion alternative". One major question remained: The Ministry of Finance had to supply the budget.

The third crucial step came by "good" luck. A 5 days lasting storm did heavily damage large duneareas. Emergency measures were necessary. Public was very indignant. That incident bred a decisive atmosphere. The budget was allocated for the long run.

By the way, the atmosphere for a decision was already reached. All the concerned persons and bodies except the Ministry of Finance, were committed to "stop erosion" before that storm. The linkgroups had done their job well.

The non-preferent attitude of the Ministry of Public Works and Watermanagement until the final decision was very important. Opposition was impossible. The public and every interested group had to plead for "stop erosion"

#### 4.2. Generalization of the approach.

The approach of the erosion control policy of the Dutch coast can be generalized according to the stages in the public opinion [16] and phases of the policy lifecycle (fig. 2). These are linked in table 1. Table 2 shows the more detailed approach interacting with the public opinion. Failing recognition of the problem is supposed. In some cases the phases of recognition and formulation may be integrated if the problem is full recognised.

Stages in public opinion	:	Phases in policy lifecycle
	:	
a. Discontent.		
b. Crystallization in a common need.	:	1. Recognition.
c. Judgment and decision.		2. Formulation.
	:	3. Solution.
	:	4. Management.

Tabel 1. Public opinion and policy lifecycle.

If the government does not permit to publish a report of the phase of recognition,

linkgroups might publish the facts they extract from the discussions. It is important to take time at the end of the phase of recognition. The politicians and the public need time to become familiar with the problem. If there is no reaction, wait for the next chance and continue consequently the existing policy. The facts must do their work.

It is essential to express no preference for a specific alternative in the phase of formulation up to the final decision. A preference opposes the basic principle of communication as mentioned in section 2.2. It is essential too to keep in contact with linkgroups and opinionleaders and to involve pressuregroups and

Phase.	: Activity.	: Who and what.
1. Recognition.	: a. Analyze : b. Listen : : c. Report : : d. Wait	: facts, history, existing policy. : politicians, press-publications, : letters of citizens, linkgroups. : facts, prediction what happens : if policy is continued. : reactions.
2. Formulation.	: a. Analyze : : : b. Test : c. Compare : : d. Report : : e. Inform	: alternatives based on reactions, : costs, sensitiveness on : uncertain predictions. : flexibility of alternatives. : alternatives. : compared alternatives, <u>NO CHOICE</u> . : politics, press, linkgroups, : scientists.
3. Solution.	: a. Listen : : b. Resume : : c. Decide : : d. Report : : e. Execute : : f. Inform	: participation of public, : consultation of linkgroups. : reactions into conclusions, : involvement of linkgroups. : : decision, execution. : project, policy. : : see 2e, also schools, universities.
4. Management.	: a. Evaluate : : b. Report : : c. Inform	: results, state of maintenance, : costs and budgets, predictions. : involvement of linkgroups. : : see 2e.

Tabel 2. Interacting approach.

governmental bodies in the resuming activities up to the decision. Preferably every consulted body gets success in the consultation phase and there are no losers [17]. Realise that it must be no problem if anyone else adopts your good idea.

The final decision is the responsibility of the government. Also the announcement of the decision to the press must be done by the responsible politician. With the announcement the realization of the project starts.

At the same moment the information about the project goes on. The information intends now to hold public support in order to complete the project and to maintain it afterwards. Special attention should be given to groups who are important in future: Scholars and students. Lectures today help them to remember the project of vital interest in coming decades. The shorter the time of realization of a project is, the shorter the time to loose public support. Projects with realization periods taking decades, require flexibility to modify on additional objectives and to go on for the main issue.



Anyhow, during the realization of the project it is indispensable the public feels confidence: This task force guarantees professionalism and soberness. Although "Nothing succeeds like success" [18], give true information, also if disappointments occur. Particularly in the long run, telling the truth is a sake for dead or life for confidence of the public. And last but not least: Keep reports simple. Everyone must understand them.

Information goes on in the phase of maintenance to keep the public support awake. In this phase periodic evaluation is necessary. It is difficult for politicians to neglect an evaluation report which concludes to intensivate the maintenance and requires a raise of the budget. When such a report is neglected, public support is indispensable. Linkgroups might seek publicity. Legal duties to evaluate and to publish the results are useful instruments. Such a legal duty about dike management in the Netherlands is under preparation. This phase remains the most difficult to hold public interest, because sufficient maintenance is never spectacular.

#### 4. FINAL REMARKS.

Public support has to be earned every day again [19]. Of course major public interest, professionalism and soberness are necessary issues. Also, the way back to the market: For the public service the public is the market. The recommended attitude is to listen respectfully and to handle patient with the ideas from the public instead of considering them as difficult [20]. Telling the truth is indispensable for confidence. Only simple elements of good behaviour are required. In this way public support can be gained and kept awake.

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