Argument as a process: dialogue, trust and credibility in biodiversity decision-making

The Brief in brief

This brief explains how the argument process, involving multiple exchanges of views between actors along a timeline, creates a basis for human interactions that can be as influential on the effectiveness of the argument as its content. Particular aspects are illustrated by reference to some selected examples from the BESAFE case studies.

Topic

Arguments about biodiversity and its protection are rarely, if ever, confined to a single exchange between one arguer and the receiver audience. Usually, there is a series of exchanges between actors, over a shorter or longer period of time. Thus an argument is not a single event, but a process that evolves and changes along the temporal axis. Importantly, the changes are not confined to the content (message) of the particular argument; there are also important changes on the more human side – how the actors judge each other, their reactions to each other. These alter as experience is gained and reputations are formed. Such aspects of the argument process can be just as important in influencing the overall effectiveness and ultimate success or failure of an argument as the argument content.

If we view an argument in these terms, as a dynamic process that combines content with human nature along a timeline, then at least three inter-related facets are worthy of further consideration.

1) Dialogue. The communications between the actors involved in an argument form a dialogue – a set of exchanges of views with an aim to reach an agreement. If such dialogue is conducted in a deliberative manner, with each actor carefully considering the "pros and cons" before reacting, this generally aids the efficiency of the argumentation process in reaching its conclusion. This is at least partly because a well organised deliberative dialogue enables mutual understanding of the actors' goals, interests and percpetions. Even persistent contradictory argumentation can be best solved by deliberating across stakeholder types and governance levels [1].

2) Trust. A good working dialogue between the actors can help to foster a relation of trust through building upon experiences from previous interactions. Although this is a complex dimension of human relationships, for present purposes trust may be taken simply as "worthiness to be relied upon". It therefore comprises a spectrum between the two extremes of total trust and total distrust between actors and may be biased on one side or mutual. Trust is a form of judgement that influences the argument process by affecting courses of actions in terms of co-operation or resistance [2].

3) Credibility. This is closely intertwined with the trust that may develop between actors and refers to the perceived quality and adequacy of the knowledge exchanged in the dialogue of the argumentation process [3], particularly how confident the actors are in the information they receive. Credibility can be reinforced or diminished by its reputation along the timeline of the argumentation process and can apply to not only the information, but may also include the credibility (trustworthiness) of the arguer. Both may be enhanced if the information provided is backed up by clear evidence. Such evidence-based information leads to an increased willigness to accept the argument.

Some illustrations from the BESAFE case studies

The great majority of the BESAFE case studies include a timeline involving multiple stakeholder exchanges in their analyses and provide clear examples of the process-related aspects of arguments discussed above.

Most of the BESAFE case studies illustrate the importance of deliberative dialogue in biodiversity arguments, but two particularly strong examples may be used to emphasise this point. (i) The designation of Natura 2000 sites in The Netherlands began as a closed process of national government decisions that attempted to force local stakeholder cooperation by using the argument of obligation under European law. Subsequent serious resistance from the local stakeholders was sufficient to stimulate the establishment of a deliberative dialogue. This successfully defused the tension between the national government and regional actors, permitting further and fruitful negotiations on Natura 2000 site designations. (See the case study brief on " Argumentation for Natura 2000 in The Netherlands"). (ii) The construction and operation of a tidal turbine in a marine protected area in Northern Ireland required that an adaptive management approach be adopted at the earliest stages. This meant that deliberative dialogue between all of the actors was an essential prerequisite before the work on the turbine could commence and was agreed by all actors at the outset. (See the case study brief on "Tidal turbine technology within a marine protected area in Northern Ireland, UK").

The issue of credibility and trustworthiness is a particular focus in the case study of a local Biodiversity Action Plan area in the UK. Here, examination of a variety of argument intreractions, each involving an arguer and an intended stakeholder audience, clearly indicated that in situations where there is a greater likelihood of conflict, the credibility of an argument becomes increasingly important, becoming particularly strong if supported by evidence. Equally, examples showed that if there was already an existing relationship between the actors, this could help to persuade the receiver audience to trust the arguer as a source of reliable information. (See the case study brief on "Arguing for biodiversity in a Local Biodiversity Action Plan area, UK").

But trust and credibility can also be a hinderance to biodiversity protection arguments, as exemplified by the Polish Białowieża Forest case, in which the local people tended to trust the established management of the local foresters and resisted governmental, scientific arguments for nature protection through designation of national park status. (See the case study brief on "Conflicts in the protection and management of the Polish Białowieża Forest").

Lessons learned

- **An argument is to be considered as a process, involving multiple exchanges between actors along a timeline. This influences human relationships as well as argument content, both of which are important for argument effectiveness.**

- **Establishing a good working dialogue between actors is important to facilitate the common aim to reach agreement.**

- **The level of trust attained between the different actors in the argument process affects further courses of actions through the resulting reactions of co-operation or resistance.**

- **Credibility of information is enhanced if it is evidence-based and this also enhances the credibility (trustworthiness) of the arguer. Credibility and trust are closely intertwined.**

References

1] NEWIG, J. & FRITSCH, O. 2009. Environmental governance: participatory, multi-level - and effective? Environmental Policy and Governance. 19:3, 197-214.

[2] LEVI, M. & STOKER L. 2000. Political Trust and Trustworthiness. Annual Reveu Political Sciences. 3. 475-507.

[3] SARKKI, S., NIEMELA, J., TINCH, R., VAN DEN HOVE, S., WATT, A. & YOUNG, J. 2013. Balancing credibility, relevance and legitimacy: A critical assessment of trade-offs in science-policy interfaces. Science and pulbic policy 2013, 1-13.

Looking for more information on effective arguments for biodiversity?

For more BESAFE results, including separate briefs focusing on other case studies and various aspects of argumentation, see http://www.besafe-project.net and BESAFE toolkit http://tool.besafe-project.net.

This brief is a result of research carried out under the BESAFE project. This brief was written by **Ingrid Coninx** (Ingrid.Coninx@wur.nl) and **John Haslett**, based on the BESAFE Deliverables:

Deliverable 2.3: Final Report Synthesizing the Analysis on Effectivenss in Case Studies. Primmer E., Jokinen P., Blicharska. (eds) 2014. http://www.besafe-project.net/deliverables.php?P=4&SP=32.

Deliverable 3.1. Final report synthesising the analysis of argumentation in multi-level governance interactions in case studies. Van Herzele A. et al 2014. http://www.besafe-project.net/deliverables.php?P=4&SP=32.