**Broadening the Knowledge Base in Policymaking: Notes on a Symposium on Technology Assessment in the Walloon Parliament**

How can technology assessment (TA) broaden and deepen the knowledge base of decision making in science, technology, and innovation? This question was at the forefront of a symposium entitled “Debating new technologies” (Les nouvelles technologies en débat), held on March 8 at the Walloon Parliament in Namur, Belgium. It expresses an aspiration shared by Walloon TA professionals, science and technology researchers, policy administrators, as well as certain members of Parliament (MPs), to render TA serviceable to policymaking in Wallonia. It also reflects the aim of PACITA, an EU-funded project that supports TA initiatives involving policymakers and civil society organizations in “non-TA” countries and regions like Wallonia. [http://www.pacitaproject.eu]

Broadly speaking, TA is the systematic study and evaluation of technologies. When tailored to meet the demands of policymakers and MPs in particular, it is termed Parliamentary TA (PTA). As symposium organizer Pierre Delvenne (SPIRAL, University of Liège) remarked at the symposium’s outset, various countries (e.g. USA, Denmark, The Netherlands, Switzerland) and regions (e.g. Flanders, Catalonia) have established PTA traditions, but TA was never durably institutionalized in Wallonia. Why is that?, he asked. And how can TA processes and tools inform Walloon policymaking, taking into account the needs of scientists, societal actors, citizens, and politicians?

*Useful but fragile*

During the first half of the day, various TA experts offered their responses to the above questions. Michael Nentwich (ITA, Austria) and Theodoros Karapiperis (STOA, EU Parliament) illustrated how expert studies and citizen consultations, among other TA activities, can support technological innovation in domains such as energy, health technologies, and nanotechnologies. A more intriguing note, however, was sounded by Todd LaPorte, formerly with the US Office of Technology Assessment, OTA. Intent on sharing his OTA experiences with the audience, LaPorte underlined that PTA is a fragile policy tool, as TA processes provide interdisciplinary, long-term oriented knowledge that must be “de-politicized” in order to tailor to all political factions. The difficulty, said LaPorte, is that PTA inputs into policymaking are almost by definition threatening to the political and economic status quo, because they urge policymakers to take measures that surpass the short term of politics. A good example is global warming, which in the US has not resulted in notable policy action. Furthermore, PTA institutes tend to lack “outside constituencies”; that is, they can be so firmly wedded to Parliament that they are unable to target other societal actors, such as the media, civil society organizations, and the citizenry. As a consequence, many PTA institutes are fully dependent on Parliament and Parliament only.

Recent political-institutional developments lend support to LaPorte’s fragility thesis. In 2011, the Danish Government announced that it would reform the Danish Board of Technology, which serves as a model for PTA in Europe. [See: EASST Review vol. 31(1): 13-14] In the same year, the Flemish Government called for the disbandment of the Instituut Samenleving en Technologie (IST), which advised the Flemish Parliament on matters relating to science and technology. Little surprise then that symposium participants asked IST director Robby Berloznik to expound on the recent restructuring of his institute. In line with LaPorte, Berloznik responded that PTA organizations must continuously adapt to changing political cultures, which can be hard to fathom. He argued that when PTA was initiated in Flanders in 2000, Parliament was considered the bastion of people’s power. This “strong” conception of the role of Parliament has radically weakened in recent years. Due to political shifts, Parliament and its affiliated organizations have come under increasing ideological pressure and face budgetary restrictions.

Fragility thus set the tone for the morning discussions. Offering his reflections on the issue, Deputy Christian Noiret even went so far as to point out that only three Walloon MPs were in attendance in the present session. He hastened to add, however, that TA is far from redundant. Policymakers, he argued, can utilize TA as a tool to reach more informed decisions, but this requires experimentation with TA processes and ideas, as well as openness from all involved parties. Experimentation and openness imply integrating representative (parliamentary) and deliberative-participatory (TA) rationales in decision making, he said, as well as carefully listening to, and assessing, the needs of MPs when it comes to technological innovation.

*Expanding TA*

After a walking lunch in one of the underground galleries of the Parliament, it was time for the first of two thematic sessions. Two early-career researchers presented their research on food technologies, to which Danielle Bütschi (TA-SWISS) and Deputy Anne-Catherine Goffinet responded. Building on observations raised by Kim Hendrickx (SPIRAL, University of Liège) as to how scientists, regulators, and policymakers categorize foods in different, potentially conflicting ways, Bütschi acknowledged that TA processes are always interpretive. This is why writing policy recommendations is so difficult, she said, as PTA reports must avoid using politically sensitive words in order to assure the impartiality of PTA. To illustrate her point, she referred to the height of public controversy around genetically-modified organisms. At the time, the word “moratorium” was taboo in Switzerland, as it was elsewhere.

Bütschi’s remarks reflect earlier concerns about retaining the political independence of PTA. If the independence of a PTA institute, or more accurately, the perception of independence, is breached, PTA risks losing political credibility and clout. Picking up on these concerns, Goffinet emphasized that the added value of PTA lies precisely in “bridging” the worlds of academia, industry, civil society, and politics. While the neutrality of PTA can be questioned on scientific, legal, political, and philosophical grounds, “neutrality” is also a tool that enables PTA actors to draw together, and facilitate, multiple innovation rationales, vocabularies, values, and interests.

The second afternoon panel, entitled “Technologies of democracy,” comprised contributions from Gérard Valenduc (Universities of Namur and Louvain-la-Neuve), Nicole Dewandre (Advisor to the Director-General of the DG CONNECT, EU Commission), and Claire Lobet (vice-rector of the University of Namur), among others. Valenduc, who in the eighties and nineties pioneered various TA initiatives in Wallonia, praised the symposium organizers for revitalizing, and possibly reinventing, TA in the Walloon region. Reiterating an earlier remark by Delvenne, Valenduc contended that policy-oriented TA now has more momentum than ever before, as both TA practitioners and politicians make a concerted effort to explore and use TA for policymaking.

Intriguingly, Valenduc next touched upon a tension between TA and science and technology studies (STS). Invoking the names of Michel Callon and Bruno Latour, he suggested that TA is akin to practical problem solving, whereas STS (or certain strands of STS) has little or no real-world applicability. It was not clear from his intervention if Valenduc believes TA and STS can also fruitfully inform one another. Thankfully, both Dewandre and Lobet provided resources to work with, or around, the opposition between ostensibly “detached,” academic research and “practical” policymaking. Lobet by highlighting that she has developed participatory methods with philosophers that can be of service to TA, and by evoking ethical questions specific to technology that directly impinge on the lives of citizens; Dewandre by insisting that “evidence-based policymaking,” on which many TA formats draw, does not necessarily muster the kind of evidence policy actors like herself are looking for. What is needed, argued Dewandre, is an analytical practice that does not take technology as a given object that must be “assessed,” but understands technology as a societal project.

*TA working lunches*

As the symposium drew to a close, Deputy Member and President of the Parliamentary Working Group on the Assessment of Technological Choices (Evaluation des choix technologiques) Joëlle Kapompolé, thanked the symposium organizers and speakers for their contributions. She pledged to draw political support for PTA in Wallonia and reminded attendees of a series of “TA working lunches” that will be held with TA researchers and MPs in the Walloon Parliament from May 28 onwards. She also sounded two notes of caution. First, contrary to what some symposium attendees had suggested, the PTA activities in the Walloon Parliament serve to explore the potential uses of TA for policymakers based on the latters’ expectations and concerns. In other words, the present initiatives are not an attempt to erect a full-fledged TA institute within the Parliament – at least not just yet. Second, there is a need for TA professionals and researchers to communicate in a transparent and clear language in order not to exclude broader segments of society. While speakers in the symposium achieved a high level of debate on a range of important issues, it is necessary to “vulgarize” TA outputs in the best sense of the term.

In their closing remarks, Marie-Carmen Bex (representing Minister Jean-Marc Nollet) and Jérôme Vandermaes (representing Minister Jean-Claude Marcourt) likewise underlined the added value of TA for policymaking processes. Echoing Kapompolé’s point that the question at present is to sensitize MPs to TA ideas and approaches, Bex spoke of launching a “TA awareness campaign” within the Parliament. Vandermaes added that such a campaign should target all political factions, without exception.

These reactions suggest that PTA in Wallonia is “on the move,” to cite Delvenne; although the direction in which PTA is presently heading is not yet clear. The follow-up initiatives, such as the TA working lunches, should help involved parties to outline the possibilities and cease the opportunities for PTA. The same initiatives will also have to address the various challenges raised in the symposium, such as the fragility of PTA institutions, if PTA is to leave a lasting imprint on Walloon policymaking circles and Walloon society at large.

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For more information on the March 8 symposium and upcoming Walloon PTA events, visit http://tapw.wordpress.com (in French).