

**FROM STAKEHOLDER TO SHAREHOLDER
– ORGANISING STAKEHOLDER COMMITMENT FOR THE SCHELDE ESTUARY OF THE FUTURE –**

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ABSTRACT

The Scheldt Estuary provides the stage for a broad range of stakeholders and (conflicting) interests. These diverging interests led to complex decision-making on estuarine policy and management. The EU Interreg project ‘Estuaries on the MOVE’ (EMOVE) aims to bring stakeholders together and organize bottom-up commitment for a sustainable Scheldt Estuary of the future, by turning them into shareholders, implying ‘ownership’ of a particular development or project. Crucial in the approach were: 1) generating a shared understanding on the physical and ecological functioning of estuary and the different perspectives stakeholders have on the estuary and 2) collectively formulating projects and organizing coalitions. The result of the approach was both successful and promising. Five different projects were formulated – ranging from a change in polder regime (‘growing land’) to a cross-border nature reserve, environmental-friendly sediment disposal techniques, silt agriculture and governance opportunities. The applied methodology of bottom-up project formulation, combined with Group Decision Modelling provided a fruitful ground for measures towards a sustainable Scheldt Estuary that have sufficient support to come to implementation and also important generic lessons for organizing stakeholder commitment in sensitive decision-making environments like estuaries.

Keywords: stakeholders, shareholders, Schelde, estuary

1. INTRODUCTION

The Schelde estuary covers both Dutch and Flemish territory. The countries have agreed on joint policy and management of the estuary (laid down in a treaty in 2005). Shipping in the estuary is essential for four major ports, but the estuary also is an extremely valuable, unique and protected nature reserve. Other issues are flood safety, agriculture, salt intrusion and the opportunities for the tourism industry. Due to this multitude of functions, the Schelde estuary is a stage for a broad range of stakeholders and (conflicting) interests. Especially in the past decades these diverging interests led to an extremely tense and complex decision-making process and accompanying implementation. The EU Interreg project ‘Estuaries on the MOVE’ (EMOVE) has taken up the challenge of bringing stakeholders together and organizing bottom-up commitment in working towards a sustainable Schelde estuary of the future.

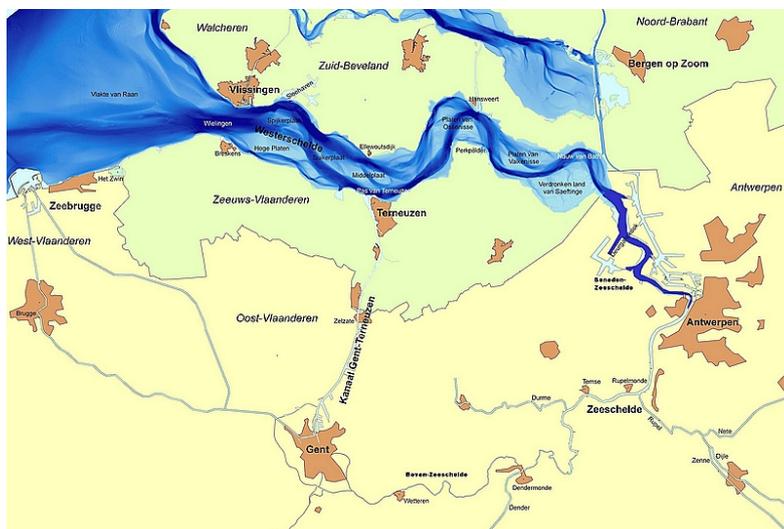


Figure 1: The Schelde estuary, in the Flemish Region of Belgium and The Netherlands, covering approximately 33,000 hectares

An important challenge for the Schelde estuary is ‘tidal intrusion’. The tidal regime has strong impacts on the prioritized user functions for both Flanders and the Netherlands: safety against flooding, accessibility and ecological values. However as (Taal et al., 2015) conclude that all these functions have to accept that from science alone we cannot expect an unambiguous answer when tidal intrusion is sufficiently kept under control or which other aspects of the ‘physical characteristics of the estuary’ should be preserved. Choices that have been made in the past (on embankments, on the situation of ports) are now an undeniable part of our history and part of our objectives for estuarine management. The Schelde estuary therefore is and will be a modified estuary with safety and accessibility as leading user functions.

This means that a major challenge for establishing sustainable management of the Schelde estuary will always be a (political and societal) debate on the possibilities to improve the services the estuary provides. In the past years this debate has been dominated by discussions on nature restoration plans, especially depoldering along the Westerschelde, even though this was part of the 2005 treaty. This issue is off the political agenda since the last court appeal to stop the depoldering of the ‘Hedwigepolder’ was dismissed in 2014. This final decision and the fact that an official advisory board for the Ministers of Water Management of Flanders and the Netherlands has been (re-)established (Schelderaad, April 2014, including most stakeholders along the Schelde estuary) created opportunities to bring stakeholders together in a more constructive atmosphere than the previous years.

With this context as a starting point, the EU Interreg project ‘Estuaries on the MOVE’ (EMOVE)¹ started. The main ambition of EMOVE was to turn stakeholders into shareholders, meaning that parties obtain ‘ownership’ of a particular development or project.

2. ESTUARIES ON THE MOVE (EMOVE)

To reach the ambition described above EMOVE was designed around the following steps:

1. Convening assessment: The purpose of the convening assessment was to gather preliminary information about major issues and expectations that would be relevant for the EMOVE project. The information was used in the design of the project and the stakeholder input process and identify key stakeholders that should be involved.
2. Shared understanding: by means of sharing information and a short process of joint-fact-finding we tried to create a shared foundation of available knowledge.
3. Designing projects and vital coalitions: during this step the stakeholders designed projects and coalitions contributing to a sustainable Schelde estuary.
4. Landing: creating a fertile soil for the projects and coalitions to land on and continue their work after the end of the EMOVE project.

These steps were carried out within the timespan of 12 months, by means of desk research, interviews, bilateral meetings and 4 workshops. In the following sections we describe the 4 steps more elaborately.

2.1 Convening assessment

A convening assessment was held by means of rounds of interviews with stakeholders representing three important user groups: harbours, nature conservation and agriculture. Each time organizations from both Flanders and the Netherlands were interviewed. These interviews did not focus on a ‘problem’, but asked the respondents open questions with the aim to let them open up for their important interests instead of focusing on problems. By doing so the EMOVE project team wanted to prevent that the project would ‘push’ the discussion in a direction that was undesired or irrelevant for the stakeholders. Furthermore we asked them in the interviews whether they thought it would be possible for them to identify projects with other stakeholders, and what those could be. Finally we also asked them under what conditions, such as process rules and amount of involvement of stakeholders, they would be willing to work on the identification of potential projects and how they could contribute to this. Finally, because the goal of EMOVE was to create projects in which stakeholders could and wanted to become shareholder, we also tried to identify (potentially) vital project ideas and coalitions. As an illustration table 1 presents an overview of the interests, conditions and opportunities that were identified by the respondents. What we can conclude from these responses is that across all sectors there is a more or less explicit cry out from the stakeholders for convening of the stakeholders and mutual understanding.

Table 1 Interview results concerning interests, conditions, and opportunities

	Harbours	Agriculture	Nature
Interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Opportunity to be able to discuss the sustainable development of the Schelde with other stakeholders. – Collaborative knowledge development between the stakeholders. – Gaining insight in the current state of the Schelde system to be able to search for space for development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – to confirm the importance of the economic value of the agricultural sector. – Being able to frame agricultural areas also as having an ecological/nature value – To look abroad for inspiration and also EMOVE should be inspiring. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learning from the past before going on. What were the success factors and why did it go wrong with the implementation? – Emove should create support of possible pilots/projects. – Creating mutual understanding between different sectors: not as opponents but as partners.

¹ For more information on the project and the other estuaries that were involved see: <http://www.emove-project.eu>

	in a sustainable way.		
Conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Transparency of the process - Use existing knowledge and creating level playing field by sharing knowledge/research. - Pilots/projects should be based on consensus of all the stakeholders. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Respect towards all stakeholders involved and an curious attitude. No discussion only about conflicting interests. - More attention towards the explanation and communication of the ecological value of the Schelde estuary. - Trying to design projects and pilots that are close to the 'real' people and not only – regional scale – policy makers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “It takes two to tango” - Willingness to listen to other stakeholders and also some sense for the others interests and ideas. - Being constructive: for example not writing down <i>who</i> says something but only <i>what</i> has been said. - Decision-makers should respect the outcome of the EMOVE project.
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creating a shared 'language' defining what concepts mean for the Schelde estuary. - Communication between stakeholders has been minimal, EMOVE offers an opportunity to improve this. - Emove should create the shapes of a number of follow up projects or pilots, thus creating a stepping stone for continuity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Insight in the effects of salinization and the opportunities this offers for agriculture. - Smart management surplus precipitation. - Growing salt resistant crops. - Insight in the tourist potential of the Schelde estuary. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Evaluate whether the sediment management is actually reaching the ecological goals it was designed for? - Developing a strategy similar to 'room for the river' which combines nature, agriculture and agriculture - Creating an instrument that can be used to test all the projects and plans whether they are: Ecological resilient, economically strong and whether they have societal support

2.2 Shared understanding

To create shared understanding EMOVE used the concept of joint fact-finding. This is described by van Buuren et al (2007). as: *the process in which separate coalitions of scientists and policy-makers and other stakeholders with differing viewpoints and interests work together in order to develop data and information, analyses facts and forecasts, develop common assumptions and informed opinions, and, finally, use the information they have developed to reach decisions together.* However, due to time restraints and the fact that a large joint fact-finding process had already taken place in the Schelde estuary, it was decided to create a 'pressure cooker approach'. The joint fact-finding had various forms. It started with 'facts from science', a memo written by experts on the functioning of the natural system in the Schelde estuary. It also contained a summary of the current governance situation on treaties (Taal, 2014). This memo was also discussed with the stakeholders during their first meeting. Secondly – using the interviews as input – a causal model of the functions and dynamics of the Schelde estuary was designed using Group Model Building (Andersen et al., 2007). This resulted in a diagram that was discussed with the stakeholders. Such a model helps to identify possible feedback loops that could be a topic for projects to be developed by the stakeholders. Finally, also to show how choices from the past still had their impact on the present, a visual narrative of the development of the Schelde estuary from the middle ages until the present was presented and the stakeholders were asked to add to this narrative.

2.3 Designing projects and vital coalitions

During the EMOVE project 4 workshops were organized to take the stakeholders along the path of becoming shareholders. During these 4 workshops the stakeholders designed projects and coalitions contributing to a sustainable Schelde estuary. The workshops are described below.

Workshop 1: Getting on the same page

Due to the fact that the stakeholders came from a period of fierce discussion after the court ruling on the Hedwigepolder, and because the interviews clearly showed a need for an open and trusting approach, the EMOVE project decided that we have to take things slow to deal with this fragile situation. We started the workshop on a personal level and asked all the participants to bring a picture of what the Schelde estuary symbolized for them and asked them to 'speed-date' with the other stakeholders that were present. By starting a meeting on a personal note a conflict about more abstract concepts could be prevented. The stakeholders discussed the memo on the state of art (see paragraph 2.1). After that we wanted to make the step to project ideas. To help this we first tried the stakeholders to let them find their mutual gains by identifying

in duo's how the Schelde estuary helped them, and where it 'obstructed' them. Starting from these 'gains' more than 50 initiatives were suggested.

Workshop 2: Selection of projects

There was almost a gap of 2 months between the first and second workshop and some new stakeholders joined the process. Therefore we started the second workshop with 'a step back' and did not directly go to the selection of projects from the first workshop. We feared that we would surprise the stakeholders otherwise too much. Instead, we took extra time for sharing facts, visions and ideas between the stakeholders in three subgroups.

During the second part of the workshop we showed the stakeholders the list of initiatives-from table 3 the first workshop. After that we gave them the opportunity to change or add to this list and they could then also 'vote' for the initiative/project idea that appealed to them the most. Finally we also wanted the stakeholders to trigger in becoming shareholders. We did this by letting the stakeholders take up the ideas/initiatives that they came up with themselves. This was a crucial moment, as they would make the step from stakeholder to active shareholder. For this reason we gave instructions for the next step and asked the stakeholders who wanted to go on with one of the projects to take these instructions and invite others to form a coalition. We also stated that if they picked up the instructions they could join us for an additional working session. Eventually 5 groups picked up the instructions resulting in in five initiatives/active project ideas.

Table 2 Selected initiatives/project ideas that were further developed by stakeholders

Initiatives /Project ideas	Stakeholders involved
1) 'Growing land': bringing back dynamics into agricultural polder areas and thus heightening the land, and creating nature areas. At the same creating agricultural polders from nature areas.	Agriculture Nature organisations Harbours Recreation Government (waterways)
2) Creating hydro morphologic measures that contribute to the strengthening of eco system services concerning nature, accessibility and safety in the Schelde estuary.	Government (waterways) Harbours Civil organisations Research
3) Creating a cross boundary nature park including recreational functions.	Municipalities Regional government Nature organisations Agricultural organisations Local recreation entrepreneurs
4) The support engine for the Schelderaad: more a process business case in which the newly formed Schelderaad would be supported by a – activity and agenda setting based – help team.	Government (waterways) Nature organisations Schelderaad members
5) Silt agriculture: growing salt resistant/allowing crops on areas that were influenced by salt intrusion.	Agriculture Nature Municipalities

Workshop 3: Working on the pilots

As we did not want the newly formed coalitions to be left alone for 2 months, we offered help in the start-up phase with an facultative extra work-session for their initiatives. During this session they worked as a coalition on their initiative. We used the implementation canvas (van der Brugge en Ellen, 2013) for this working session. The canvas was used because it quickly brings together important challenges concerning the implementation of measures or the realisation of project ideas.

Implementation Canvas

Proposed Measure: ...
Organisation:

1. Problem 1A What is my problem?	3. Opportunities *** 3A How can it contribute to the organizational mission? 3B How can you improve the multi-functionality? 3C It possible to link up with planned investments in the region?	5. Proposition to improve measure	6. Benefits 6A What are the revenues? 6B Which societal benefits are generated?	7. Costs 7A What are the costs of the investments? 7B What are the costs of maintenance? 7C What are the cost of personnel?
2. Solution 2A How is the proposed measure contributing to solving my problem? 2B Which (side-) effects (+/-) does the solution have?	4. Threats 4A What are the most important threats?		11. Activities 11A What should your organisation do to implement the measure? 11B What should other organisations do?	12. Instruments 12A What kind of (policy-) instruments could you apply? 12B How do they contribute to the Implementation of the measure?
8. Stakeholders 8A Which stakeholders benefit? 8B Which stakeholders are possibly against?	9. Partners 9A Which persons do you need within your own organisation for implementation (name + dept.)? 9B Which persons do you need outside your organisation for implementation (name + dept.)?		13. Agenda 13A What are for you important preconditions for implementation? 13B Which agreements do you want to make with whom? 13C. What are critical decision moments?	14. Monitoring 14A What do you want to monitor? 14B What will happen with the measurements?
10. Relationships 10A Are there any sensitive issues between stakeholders that compromises implementation??				

Figure 2 Implementation canvas (Van der Brugge and Ellen, 2013)

Workshop 4: Presenting the results and taking the next step.

In the first part of the final workshop we asked the coalitions to present their projects and use the other stakeholders to improve the projects, with the implementation canvas as the guideline: improving and filling in the blanks. In the second part of the workshop we brought back the joint fact-finding results from the interviews and the workshops by presenting a 'narrative' of the Schelde, where we also included the pictures that the stakeholders took with them for the first workshop.

2.4 Landing and aftermath

Because the EMOVE project wanted to prevent that the projects did not stop after the last workshop EMOVE made sure that the projects were presented to the chairman of the Schelderaad. Also we ensured that the projects would be on the agenda of the next meeting of the Schelderaad, with a request for an official reaction towards the Flemish-Dutch Schelde Committee. By doing so, the EMOVE project safeguarded that the projects would also be brought to the next step of decision-making.

3. CONCLUSIONS and outlook

Looking back on the process of EMOVE we learned the following:

1. Start with the energy/enthusiasm of the stakeholders instead of a large problem or with a strategy that the stakeholders could react upon. We put them a bit off their feet – and also got a lot of questions from the stakeholders like 'where are the solutions we should react on' but it also triggered the stakeholders to come up with innovative ideas.
2. Give the stakeholders the opportunity to bring in the issues that they thought were important for sustainable development of the estuary. We did this in the interviews, but also in the first workshop, in small groups, letting them tell each other what was important for them: where did the Schelde help them?
3. By getting the stakeholders to actually put down their ideas together, they also feel responsible for those ideas, which also helped them to create a coalition.
4. Timing: in our case taking advantage of a 'window of opportunity': the fact that there was recently a new stakeholder platform in the Schelde, which was also looking for activities to undertake, helped us in the EMOVE project substantially. The stakeholders also felt an urgency to act after years of relative impasse.

The lessons above also indicate that trust and opening up for alternative solutions and processes can help to 'break' a deadlock situation. It can be argued that this might – in certain cases be an alternative to more top down oriented

approached which usually ask for more time and political urgency. In this sense, a bottom up urgency from an area, region or multi-stakeholder group itself is leading, instead of a political urgency.

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