How evidence-based policymaking helps and hinders policy conflict

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A popular explanation for governments' persistent enthusiasm for evidence-based policymaking (EBPM) is its expected capacity to solve policy conflict. However, research is divided on whether or not EBPM actually has a positive impact on conflict. On the one hand, EBPM is said to introduce a set of principles that helps overcome political differences. Simultaneously, EBPM has been criticised for narrowing the space for democratic debate, fuelling the very conflict it is trying to prevent. This article explores how EBPM structures policy conflict by studying the example of Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) in policy processes through reconstructive interviews and ethnographic observations. It argues that, although EBPM channels conflict in a way that prompts engagement from stakeholders, it also escalates conflict by misrepresenting the nature of policy processes. As such, the findings suggest that managing process participants' expectations about what evidence is and can do is key in fostering productive policy conflict.

Introduction

Evidence-based policymaking (EBPM) advocates an approach in which scientific evidence is a prominent determinant of what policies look like (Nutley et al, 2007; Head, 2008). In infrastructure policy, EBPM has led to decision–making processes which are increasingly centred around predictive analyses, such as the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) (World Bank, 2014a; 2014b; OECD, 2015a; 2015b).

Despite its central position in planning processes, evidence such as the EIA does not necessarily determine the outcome of a policy process (Weiss, 1979; Mouter, 2016; 2017). Nevertheless, evidence can have or is hoped to have important functions in policy processes in situations characterised by uncertainty by, for example, countering

political arbitrariness (Weiss, 1979; Mouter, 2017; Schlaufer et al, 2018) or sparking democratic debate (Boswell, 2014; Schlaufer et al, 2018). At the same time, scholars warn that EBPM tends to technocratise policy processes, which risks narrowing rather than expanding the space for democratic debate because of pressure to follow the evidence (Sanderson, 2006; Mouffe, 2009; Flinders and Wood, 2015; Wolf and Van Dooren, 2017). In other words: literature on EBPM provides a diversity of arguments for the (un)desirability of evidence use, stressing either the costs or the benefits.

Our contribution to this literature follows Boswell (2017) and others (for example, Douglas, 2009; Pearce and Raman, 2014) in going beyond a dichotomous view of *whether* evidence use is (un)desirable (see Newman, 2017) to investigate the circumstances under which evidence use has different effects (see also Weible et al, 2010; Parkhurst, 2017) and theorise the dynamics behind these effects (Strassheim and Kettunen, 2014). Boswell (2017) suggests that the main function of EBPM is not to improve the quality of decisions, but to create conditions that allow process participants to work through contestation. With EBPM having been shown to both open and narrow the space for contestation in policy debates, we wonder whether this positive effect on contested processes comes at a price. We investigate this by looking at the ways in which the EIA impacts existing policy conflicts. Because we describe the use of evidence in existing conflicts, the article also adds to policy conflict literature by studying 1) how conflicts are mediated (Heikkila and Weible, 2017; Wolf, 2021a) or 'negotiated' (Verloo and Davis, 2021) through evidence-based institutions and 2) EBPM's effect on conflicts as a salient 'theory in use' for dealing with contestation (Wolf and Van Dooren, 2018a).

The first section of this article outlines our conceptual approach to EBPM and policy conflicts. After this, we discuss how we selected three EIAs from Flemish policy processes as cases, and we explain our methodology for evaluating the effects of these EIAs on policy conflict. We then discuss the three major tensions we found in the way the EIA structures policy conflicts. Our analysis argues that, although the EIA can channel conflict in a way that prompts engagement from stakeholders, these tensions ultimately lead to EIAs obfuscating policy conflicts by misrepresenting the nature of policy processes.

The benefits and costs of EBPM

EBPM originally referred to a way to improve policy by testing policy solutions in experiments resembling those used in the natural sciences (Nutley et al, 2007). Based partly on pragmatic reasons and partly on changing ideas about the relationship between knowledge and democratic values, 'EBPM' is now also used to refer to a practice involving a wider array of analytical techniques and the idea that evidence can inform rather than dictate policy solutions (Douglas, 2009; Howlett and Newman, 2010; Oliver et al, 2014; Head, 2016; Feitsma, 2020). This section first discusses how practices connected to the broader notion of EBPM impact policy processes. Then, it addresses policy conflict and its link with EBPM.

EBPM and its impact on policy processes

Years of academic work on EBPM have resulted in myriad accounts of the impact of EBPM on policy processes (French, 2019). For example, studies and professional

literature describe EBPM as a remedy against political arbitrariness and a means for holding decision-makers accountable by asking them to be transparent in their reasoning behind a decision (OECD, 2015a; Mouter, 2016; Wegrich et al, 2016). Working on the basis of studies is also said to come with the potential to have more solution-oriented policy debates by translating complex dilemmas into concrete solutions of which the expected impact is easier to map and discuss (Bertolini, 2017).

Critics, on the other hand, argue that EBPM distracts from the essence of policy processes, portraying it as having insufficient attention to the limitations of research and undervaluing other forms of knowledge (Fleming and Rhodes, 2018), paying insufficient attention to the ethical and moral dimensions of decisions (Sanderson, 2006), and often carrying the underlying assumption that evidence knows better than politicians and other decision-makers (Flinders and Wood, 2015). In addition, the actual impact evidence can have is highly dependent on numerous contextual factors, such as the time and money to spend on studies, the openness of superiors to study conclusions, the staff resources required to disseminate research, and political pressure to come to a decision (Oliver et al, 2014; Dorren and Böhme, 2021).

Some suggest that these criticisms are not a reason to abandon EBPM, but a call to action. These studies argue EBPM can have a more positive impact if scientists make more of an effort to connect with policy practice, if policymakers 'learn' to work with evidence in a better way, if process participants have more realistic expectations about what evidence can and cannot do, or if institutions and processes get restructured (Pearce and Raman, 2014; Cairney et al, 2016; Head, 2016; Cairney and Oliver, 2017; French, 2019).

Boswell (2017) suggests that EBPM remains popular – regardless of whether it leads to better or worse decisions – due to its 'usefulness' as a 'myth'. As a myth, EBPM enables policymakers to act in a context of uncertainty because it strengthens commitment to the policy process, functions as a pragmatic source for arguments, and can further stakeholder involvement by making the process appear politically neutral. Other research appears to confirm Boswell's diagnosis. For example, participants in infrastructure policy processes frequently express that they value working 'objectively' rather than based on political values, and the presence of evidence seems to ensure their continuous commitment to the process (Wolf and Van Dooren, 2017; Dorren and Van Dooren, 2021). It has also been found that civil servants employ 'rational–technocratic' narratives of their decision making to invoke trust (Maybin, 2015), that predicting policy outcomes by means of studies enables actors to act under uncertainty (Mouritsen and Kreiner, 2016), and that EBPM allows actors to assemble coherent 'policy stories' in which they link policy proposals to the policy context and which can be used to move other process participants to act (Stevens, 2011).

This means that even if evidence would not lead to better or worse decisions, it helps stakeholders move forward by 'underpinning and enabling contestation' (Boswell, 2017: 211) in complex situations that are not merely technical but also persuasive processes. With EBPM being presented as an instrument well-suited to pragmatically help stakeholders work through contestation, but the criticisms discussed earlier also pointing to possible adverse effects, this article wonders how EBPM alters the nature of the contestation in which it intervenes.

Policy conflicts

Before we can examine how EBPM affects policy conflict, the latter requires additional conceptualisation. We define policy conflict as a process that arises when two or more parties manifest the belief that their goals are incompatible (based on Kriesberg, 2007: 2; Wolf and Van Dooren, 2018a). As democracy is organised conflict about goals, conflicts about public policy play an essential role in healthy democracies (Schattschneider, 1960; Mouffe, 2009).

We distinguish between three kinds of policy conflict (Wolf, 2021a). The first is substantive conflict, whereby participants perceive an incompatibility of substantive goals (Rein and Schön, 1996; Laws and Forester, 2007). Conflict of this type can lead to a more informed (Karl et al, 2007) and creative (Coser, 1956; Carnevale, 2006; Cuppen, 2012) dialogue. However, dialogue can also be hampered by an overwhelming emphasis on proving substantive points rather than engaging in conversation (van Eeten, 1999; Wolf and Van Dooren, 2017).

The second dimension of policy conflict focuses on policy procedures (Breeman et al, 2013; Wolf and Van Dooren, 2018b) when procedural goals are perceived to be incompatible. If a conflict focuses on the procedural dimension, actors disagree on what fair policy procedures are and whether the current policy procedures meet their demands or are instead biased towards the procedural goals of one of the parties (see also procedural justice literature, for example, Tyler and Blader, 2000). Scrutinising enables procedures to adapt to changing circumstances, but it can also distract from the policy issue at hand and may lead to a general distrust in 'the system' when procedures are persistently seen as favouring some interests over others (Rothstein and Teorell, 2008).

The third dimension of policy conflict focuses on the relations between parties (Wolf and Van Dooren, 2021). Here, participants no longer discuss content or processes but instead attack other participants because they feel that the intentions of the other party are to be mistrusted (Verhoeven and Metze, 2022). Because parties are focused on defeating the 'other' (van Eeten, 1999; Wu and Laws, 2003; Durnova, 2018) rather than resolving the original conflict, relational conflict is problematic for the democratic dialogue that lies at the heart of policymaking.

The role of EBPM in policy conflict

While EBPM can help stakeholders work through contestation, existing research suggests that its impact on policy conflicts might not be purely positive (Oliver and Pearce, 2017; Schlaufer et al, 2018). For example, evidence is often used because it fits the position of dominant process actors (Barker and Guy Peters, 1993; Topf, 1993; Stevens, 2007; 2011); when evidence serves only to reinforce existing arguments, it hampers rather than expands discussion (van Eeten, 1999). In terms of procedure, EBPM is said to provide clear procedures that promote transparent discussion of the way in which decisions are made, countering the feeling of procedural bias (Boswell, 2017; Williams, 2018). However, EBPM also prioritises scientifically advanced methods, leaving less room for laymen's knowledge or tacit knowledge (Triantafillou, 2015). Arguments that do not obey the specific logic of what is considered evidence – because the models used cannot calculate their effects, for instance – will be treated as less credible than arguments that do (Jasanoff, 1990; Gieryn, 1995).

Having looked closer at the relation between evidence and policy conflicts, we see that existing research paints a mixed picture. Where a substantive amount of research on EBPM focuses on how it can improve the quality of policy or how to make EBPM work, Boswell (2017) suggests that its main benefit is its 'usefulness', helping process participants move forward in situations characterised by contestation. While existing literature does suggest that EBPM can indeed open policymaking to substantive scrutiny and more transparent procedures (for example, Mouter, 2016; Wegrich et al, 2016; Schlaufer et al, 2018), there are also clear indications of evidence doing the opposite (for example, Rothstein and Teorell, 2008; Breeman et al, 2013; Wolf and Van Dooren, 2018b). Therefore, it is to be expected that the usefulness of EBPM comes with downsides that are problematic when evidence is used to intervene in policy contexts characterised by contestation. This article will investigate how and under what conditions EBPM restructures policy conflict on its various dimensions.

Methods

To study how EBPM can restructure policy conflict, we focus on an analytical tool often used by policy analysts working in evidence-based ways (Howlett and Newman, 2010): the EIA. The EIA is used to predict the environmental impact of different policy options by evaluating how various indicators may change as a result of their implementation (Howlett and Newman, 2010; Klaassen and Hakvoort, 2015). EIAs are generally a combination of different studies each covering a particular sub-domain such as mobility, air quality, landscape, sedimentation and noise made by specialised analysts. EIAs do not produce an overall ranking of policy options, but score the impact of each policy option on a scale from –3 (severe negative impact) to +3 (substantial positive impact) for each sub-domain so that policy options can be compared against one another on each domain.

Corresponding with EBPM's ambition to improve policy processes by introducing evidence, professional literature generally depicts the EIA as an information provider that improves policy processes by addressing information gaps and identifying flawed information in a relatively neutral way (Bartlett and Kurian, 1999; World Economic Forum, 2012; World Bank, 2014a; 2014b; OECD, 2015b). Recent empirical research has indicated that although the notion of neutral knowledge is contested in academic literature, process participants expect EIAs to make decision-making in policy processes more objective (Dorren and Van Dooren, 2021). Based on its depiction in professional literature and process participants' expectations, we take the EIA to be part of EBPM practice.

Cases

To study how the use of EIAs restructures policy conflicts, we analysed three large infrastructure projects in the Belgian region of Flanders. Large infrastructure processes are a fruitful site for studying the relationship between EIAs and conflict. Conducting an EIA is common practice in large infrastructure projects in Flanders as the EU mandates that policy choices for such projects are backed by an EIA (Decreet betreffende complexe projecten, 2014).[1] Large infrastructure projects are also often contested (Flyvbjerg et al, 2003; ECMT, 2005). In all three projects, the EIA was developed based on a mix of input from experts, politicians and citizens; this meant that the EIA was frequently

discussed in participative fora and was constructed via consultation. Appendix I provides a more elaborate overview of the projects used as cases in this study.

Data collection and data analysis

We relied on two types of data. First, we conducted interviews on one of the projects. The results of these interviews indicated that the EIA had a significant impact on the development of policy conflict. We therefore decided to follow up on the interviews by collecting observational data from two additional contested infrastructure projects to see if similar conflict-related patterns occurred. By making use of two data collection methods, we were able to track the role that the EIA played in those conflicts both retrospectively (through the interviews) and in real-time (through the observational data). We followed all projects in our capacity as university researchers, meaning we had no role other than studying the processes at hand. A more elaborate description of what the data collection and analysis looked like can be found in Appendix II.

A total of 32 respondents interview respondents were selected based on their involvement in the policy process. Appendix I contains an overview of the respondents. The interviews, which were conducted as part of a study about policy conflict in a highly contested infrastructure project, followed a narrative format, meaning that interviewees were asked to reconstruct the policy process on a timeline. Narrative interviewing is particularly suited to minimising justifications by respondents as it focuses on events rather than opinions, attitudes, or causes (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2007). In the interviews, respondents were asked to reconstruct their history of the project by reflecting on the most important events in which they had been involved over the years. For consistency, the narrative portion of the interview was supplemented by a semi-structured interview based on a topic list. One of the topics covered included the role of 'knowledge' in the policy process. The interviews were transcribed verbatim for our analysis.

Observations in a maritime transport project and a multimodal transport project were collected during 34 meetings, totalling 83 hours. They were recorded in fieldnotes. We had access to two types of meetings: public fora (10 meetings) and internal meetings (24 meetings). Public fora consisted of, for instance, information markets about the project or more focused participation sessions in which a wide range of actors (see Appendix I for an overview) were asked to give their input. The fora were attended by between 50 and 300 people. For one of the two cases, we also had access to project management team meetings. This team, consisting of a varying group of around seven public administrators, met at least bi-weekly and oversaw the day-to-day progress of the project. They were also responsible for the process of making an EIA.

Our analytical strategy followed an abductive logic, moving back and forth between data and theory (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). This means that we first coded the interviews and observation data inductively, and then linked these codes to the dimensions of conflict described in the theoretical framework. For example, a data fragment describing management team members seeking an analysis that is as complete as possible to prevent judicial steps against the project was linked to the procedural dimension, while stories about citizen stakeholders labelling politicians as 'dishonest' were linked to the relational dimension. We then looked for overlap and differences between the two datasets and found that the EIA was involved in three major tensions, linked to the different conflict dimensions.

As our study has a strong inductive character, the main criterion for the study's quality is its rigour or procedural quality (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2009; Nowell and Albrecht, 2019). This study has several rigour-enhancing features. First, the study relies on data triangulation. Combining observation data with interviews allows this study to move beyond being either a single researcher's interpretation of a case or interview respondents' idealised accounts of past events (Portelli, 1991; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2009). Second, the study combines two independently executed analyses based on consensus among the participating researchers; this increases the chance that the patterns found have meaning beyond an individual researcher's interpretation of events (Nowell and Albrecht, 2019). Lastly, a high-quality inductive study contains 'thick descriptions' of events, meaning that it does justice to the complexity of the phenomena it describes (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2009). For the sake of keeping the main text of the article concise, we provide additional empirical examples of the patterns we describe in our results section in Appendix III.

Results: the EIA in policy conflicts

We discovered that the way in which stakeholders engaged with the EIAs created tensions between the expectations of process participants and the reality of policy processes. This affected the dialogue between the various stakeholders by creating tensions in three distinct ways, relating to the three dimensions of policy conflict. Table 1 contains an overview of these three tensions.

The EIA as a political instrument or a technical exercise

Our description of an EIA as a technical comparative tool made by specialised analysts might make it appear to be far removed from the meddling of politics. Nevertheless, in

Table 1: Tensions between the expectations and reality of a policy process caused by the use of the EIA within three dimensions of policy conflict

Conflict dimension	Expectation		Reality
Substantive	**A political instrument** that produces a ranking which shows which policy option is objectively best.	vs	**A technical exercise** for comparing different policy options on different dimensions. Can be used for comparison, but does not show which policy option is objectively best.
Procedural	**A quest for completeness** in which the contents of an EIA are determined by a need for an as-complete-as-possible EIA, as the EIA needs to show decision-makers the correct answer to their policy problem.	vs	**An administrative process** in which the contents of an EIA are determined by administrative criteria such as feasibility and usefulness, as it is a necessary hurdle that needs to be overcome to be able to move the policy process forward.
Relational	A **horizontal undertaking** in which there is little hierarchy among actors because the EIA will show them which policy option to choose, rendering their influence more or less equal.	vs	A **hierarchical undertaking** in which politicians decide what policy option to choose and in which some have more opportunities to impact the EIA than others.

our cases, EIAs were used as a ranking instrument to argue for stakeholders' preferred policies. Stakeholders also distrusted other parties' use and interpretation of the EIA.

The EIA as a political instrument

In our reflective interviews, respondents unanimously described how much they appreciated the fact that an EIA would be conducted. Citizen stakeholders, who were generally distrustful of politicians and public administrators after years of conflict, participated actively in the procedure, hoping proposals would be compared in an 'independent' and 'scientific' way. Public administrators, in turn, went to great efforts to design a process that was inclusive of the various proposals and compared them to each other extensively.

Despite these efforts on behalf of public administrators, citizen stakeholders described how, after a hopeful beginning, the EIA was used as a political instrument as the process progressed. They suspected not only a selective interpretation of the results but actual manipulations and conscious omissions to make politicians' preferences look better. Politicians, for their part, used the EIA to find faults in alternative proposals by citizen stakeholders. They cast the EIA as an independent study that proved they were the 'winner' of the years-long political debate, with citizen stakeholders being unwilling to accept that fact. In the words of one politician:

> [The citizen stakeholders] have often said, 'We will wait and see what comes out [of the EIA]. And when it turns out that [my preferred alternative] is indeed an option, they say, 'It's an incorrect study. It's all wrong and a bad study that has deliberately been made in that way'. Sorry, but that's not the case.

Citizen stakeholders specifically attacked the results produced by the EIA by claiming that the measurements proving politicians 'won' were faulty and the models used were wrong. For example, one citizen stakeholder explained she had proposed to use the number of people living within a certain distance of infrastructure as a measure of health impact:

> Those people […] who had to make the EIA, they were really impressed and said 'Ok, we're going to incorporate that.' […] Then, [14 days before the results of the EIA were made public] they suddenly said, 'Yes, but we are changing those measurements […] I recalculated a few things from the figures of that EIA and very clearly [the policymakers' preference] looked very bad [in the original measurements].

This quotation illustrates the way in which opponents of the infrastructure project made sense of the EIA as a corrupted study, manipulated to make the state's preferred project score better than alternative proposals.

In our observations, while happy with the important role of the EIA in comparing different policy alternatives 'objectively' and 'factually' instead of in what was seen as a politically arbitrary manner, citizen stakeholders read the EIA results selectively. When quoting or criticising the EIA, citizen stakeholders mainly appeared to focus on parts that explicitly did (not) fit their policy preferences. For example, people opposed to the project questioned the EIA's validity by drawing attention to knowledge gaps, questioning the realism of its outcomes, or pointing out methodological shortcomings.

At the same time, proponents of the two projects – including some politicians, some interest group representatives, and business stakeholders – accepted EIA outcomes without asking these critical questions, stating, for example, that the EIA 'proved' that the worries of other process participants were unjustified.

The EIA as a technical exercise

That stakeholders would look at the EIA as a political tool might sound self-explanatory, but it is contrary to the view of the analysts conducting the EIA. During our reflective interviews, these administrators stressed that the interpretation of the EIA proving that one policy option was superior was not a technical interpretation of the EIA but a political one. According to them, the EIA did not draw definitive conclusions as to whether one project was 'better' than the other. It merely compared the different projects in relation to different dimensions. Politicians reached these conclusions based on their reading of the EIA prioritising some dimensions over others. As this analyst explained,

> On mobility it is clear that [the option politicians prefer] has a greater problem-solving capacity […] In terms of liveability, it is clear that [the trajectory preferred by action groups] scores better […]. So, it's up to the policymakers, not those conducting the EIA, to say 'We opt for mobility or we opt for quality of life.'

In our observations, the idea of the EIA as a technical exercise is what appeared to inform statements such as 'the [EIA] is at the basis of this decision, but there are also [other inputs]' (heard in a project management team meeting when discussing how to reply to a letter by a concerned citizen), or 'The Flemish government gets all information […], I'd be the last to say that I won't trust the government to make a good decision […]' (made by a project manager explaining to a group of journalists why he could not tell them what option was best). Statements like these suggest that civil servants were not expecting the EIA to point towards the best option but instead viewed the EIA as a decision-making aid.

Looking at the actors involved in the tension between the EIA as a political instrument and a technical exercise, it seems that those more intimately familiar with the workings of the EIA stuck to its intended purpose. Others were quick to use it as an arbiter in political conflicts despite its makers' intentions, overplaying the EIA's capabilities while at the same time labelling opponents as irrational or dishonest. This suggests that, even though the EIA initially provided a platform for conversation that was welcomed by the different stakeholders in the conflict, it also risks being seen and used as a political tool when used in a context already characterised by conflict.

The EIA as a quest for completeness or as an administrative process

The second tension involving the EIA was that between the EIA as a quest for completeness and an administrative process. On the one hand, our data showed that some actors were committed to producing an EIA which was as complete as it could possibly be. On the other hand, actors discussed the EIA as just another step in an administrative process where the EIA had to be of sufficient quality to be able to proceed and be finished on time and within budget.

The EIA as a quest for completeness

Two parties saw the process of making an EIA as a quest for completeness: public administrators and citizen stakeholders. Reflective interviews showed that public administrators who were responsible for project management wanted an EIA which was as complete as possible to prevent other stakeholders from questioning the EIA's quality. In fact, many respondents admitted that this was the most elaborate EIA process in which they had ever been involved. Still, after critique levelled at the eventual EIA report by citizen stakeholders because of the alleged incompleteness of the comparison, public administrators from the project team wished that the EIA had been even more elaborate. It should have left no room for the various stakeholders to dispute any of the results, 'even if [that would mean] it provides redundant information'. Completeness thus had the practical function of arriving at an unchallengeable decision.

In our observations, we found administrators striving for completeness but also observed tensions between different kinds of public administrators. One instance of this was the following discussion of a near-final draft of the EIA between analysts and the EIA assessment committee, an independent government body which had to verify the quality of the EIA:

> The member of the assessment committee says that she found it remarkable that the analyst was working with 15-year-old data. She then goes on proposing [various revisions]. The analyst replied that this all is a lot of work and that they already showed versions of the document to a lot of people outside the project staff. The committee member decisively said that she 'wants it to happen nonetheless'.

In this discussion, the EIA assessment committee viewed the EIA as a project in its own right, in which the scientific quality of the assessment had to be as high as possible. The analyst, on the other hand, saw the EIA as a task that had to be done well yet also on time and within budget.

Our observations revealed that citizens also tended to look at the EIA as a quest for completeness; they consistently asked for more details. Citizens encouraged the government to use more complex methods or wondered about very specific questions such as 'Did the EIA take into account that this project changes the waterflow and therefore the levels of mud residue, which not only has a negative effect on the fish population, as the EIA already indicates, but perhaps also has potential as a source of nutrients for birds?'. They offered these kinds of critiques when asked to provide input for the EIA but also when the EIA had largely been completed and the results had been presented, indicating that they valued completeness over completion.

The EIA as an administrative process

Despite some actors' emphasis on the importance of a complete EIA, the reality of the EIA was that it had to adhere to deadlines that were not based on scientific quality alone. Rather, many of these deadlines were dictated by political pacing. The reflective interviews indicated that in terms of timing, it was deemed of the utmost importance that the EIA be completed before the next electoral campaigns. This put a significant amount of time pressure on the end-phase of the EIA, resulting in a first public draft version containing many mistakes which were quickly picked up by citizen stakeholders. The very same public administrators who wanted to prioritise

completeness nevertheless felt compelled to compromise on completeness for the sake of the time allowed for the administrative process.

Our observations highlighted another way in which the administrative processes impacted the EIA as a quest for completeness. Administrators often decided what an EIA should look like based on the perceived administrative necessity of certain measurements. Consider the following example of a discussion among administrators in one of the projects regarding a potential blind spot in their knowledge of the project's effects:

> 'It is a comment we get often, right? That you cannot really make a decision based on the current [EIA] as you don't have a clear picture of the noise pollution [the project will cause]' a team member remarks […]

> Another team member asks for a clarification: 'so if we leave the research as is, and we proceed to the next phase…'

> The project manager interrupts: '…then it will definitely be an issue at a later stage.'

What the administrators are referring to as aspects that 'will be an issue at a later stage' is the fact that a decision based on incomplete knowledge can be a legal ground to block the project in court. In other words, the administrators in this scene have a pragmatic criterion for a high-quality EIA. They are evaluating whether the EIA they have made is of sufficient quality to proceed rather than if it is complete for the sake of completeness or so complete that it can counter any and all opposition.

The tension between the EIA as a quest for completeness versus an administrative process affected relations between administrators among themselves as well as citizen-stakeholders vis-à-vis administrative and political actors. Some administrators prioritised the completeness of the EIA as a pre-emptive strike or to protect its scientific quality, whereas other administrators wanted it to be sufficient enough to prevent successful legal appeals or to meet procedural requirements. Some citizens viewed the process of the EIA as one that should not end before every possible question about the project was answered, even though in reality the EIA had to be completed within a set amount of time. This suggests that, while the promise to compare proposals in evidence-based ways can prompt different stakeholders to participate in the EIA procedure, that same promise carries the risk of normal administrative and practical concerns being seen as anomalies disrupting the way an EIA *should* function.

The EIA as a collaborative or a hierarchical undertaking

The process of political decision-making itself was the subject of a third tension in the function of an EIA: that between the EIA as a collaborative or a hierarchical undertaking.

The EIA as a collaborative undertaking

In both the interviews and the observations, conducting an EIA appeared to be a collaborative undertaking to the outside observer. In our reflective interviews, all respondents described how the different stakeholders in the conflict over the

infrastructure project were invited to submit their trajectory proposals for comparison. Public administrators explained that the EIA had purposely been designed as a collaborative process to prevent stakeholders from criticising the process afterwards. Citizen stakeholders said that they appreciated this collaborative undertaking, stating that it would finally 'give voice to the people' and was 'a beautiful opportunity for participation'.

In our observations, those who chaired public fora used terms such as 'dialogue' and 'debate', invited people to 'contribute' and 'think along', and portrayed the meetings as 'learning opportunities'. The way in which fora were organised added to the horizontal appearance of the EIA's processes; long lists of all kinds of stakeholders were invited, from local action committees to large corporations with a direct interest in the project. These stakeholders were then asked to provide the project management team with all kinds of input that would feature in the analyses, such as their knowledge of the local flora or local traffic bottlenecks. In addition, they were asked to reflect on different iterations of the projects' EIA. The invited stakeholders participated in this process with great enthusiasm, with meetings that were well attended and that often lasted longer than planned. All this seemed to create the expectation that stakeholders would collectively work towards the best policy solution. This expectation became clear when stakeholders were surprised by the fact that the process in which they were involved was, in fact, not horizontal.

The EIA as a hierarchical undertaking

In the reflective interviews, respondents explicitly mentioned feeling misled about the nature of the policy process. While there had been ample opportunity for voicing critique on intermediate results in the earlier stages of the process, the same could not be said for the final phase. When the government, after studying the EIA results, announced their own proposal for the highway trajectory as the winner of the EIA, stakeholders that were supporters of other proposals which also scored well in the EIA felt betrayed by what they perceived as an arbitrary judgement. How could the government unilaterally present their preferred trajectory as the superior one when the EIA presented, in the eyes of these stakeholders, ambiguous results? Why were there no opportunities for further reflection and revisions in a process that up until now had appeared collaborative? In the various interviews stakeholder citizens made sense of this as proof of their suspicion that the EIA had carried political bias all along.

A similar pattern emerged in our observations. Here, the horizontal–looking policy processes were hierarchical in two ways. First, they were hierarchical by law. In all our cases, the mandate to decide what would be built ultimately resided with the Flemish government. They could decide to base their decision on the EIA's outcomes but could also decide not to do so. Second, a less formal hierarchy existed between those actively participating in conducting the EIA. For example, between a public administrator in the project management team and a stakeholder attending a public forum, the public administrator would meet often and directly with the analysts and have more in–depth knowledge of the analyses, whereas the stakeholder would have to rely on the public forum to deliver their input; this meant that it was easier to ensure that the public administrator's concerns were reflected in the EIA.

The discrepancy between the process' horizontal appearance and hierarchical nature caused frustration among the stakeholders who had attended the fora once confronted with the hierarchical nature of the process. In one of the projects, a minister requested

that an extra policy option be added to the EIA, prompting process participants opposing the project to wonder aloud if this meant that 'politicians [secretly] had a say in what would get studied' and to express their disappointment by stating that they thought 'we were going to do things the objective way this time around'. In the other project a minister decided to declare their preference for one of the options studied earlier than expected, causing citizen stakeholders to call the process 'a political game' in which they believed politicians thought that 'a bad decision is better than no decision'.

In conclusion, the tension between the EIA's appearance as a collaborative undertaking versus the process' hierarchical nature mainly affected conflict between governmental actors and citizen stakeholders. This tension surfaced when the policy processes reached the critical point of making a policy decision. Even if sceptical citizen stakeholders were enthusiastic about the collaborative spirit which they saw reflected in the EIA, the fact that the final decision-making was done in a hierarchical way caused them to actively distrust politicians who were acting within their mandate.

Analysis: how the EIA obfuscates policy conflict

Our results identify three tensions surrounding the EIA, all essentially caused by the expectations set by the EIA failing to meet the reality of the policy process. In the next section, we demonstrate how EIAs create confusion in the substantive, procedural and relational dimension through these three tensions. These distractions ultimately obfuscate the existing conflict in which the EIA intervenes. Table 2 contains an overview of the benefits and costs of the EIA, which we elaborate on further in the remainder of this section.

Distracting from content: repackaging politics as scientific fact

The first way in which the EIA created confusion was at the level of process content. We observed a tension between the EIA as a technical exercise and as a political instrument which obfuscated the substantive conflict between citizen stakeholders and politicians. Although the EIA was supposed to make policy processes more objective, proponents and opponents of policy projects mistrusted each other's readings of the EIA. Citizen stakeholders accused politicians of manipulating outcomes and

Table 2: The costs and benefits of EIAs in the substantive, procedural and relational dimensions of policy conflicts

Dimensions of conflict	Benefits	Costs
Substantive	The EIA creates a common language.	The EIA obfuscates dialogue when a technical comparison is presented as a (politicised) ranking exercise.
Procedural	The EIA follows a clear procedure, creating trust among participants.	The prominence of the EIA creates desires and ambitions that do not match the administrative reality that determines what the EIA can be.
Relational	The EIA creates a culture of collaboration among process participants.	The EIA creates distrust among participants by making political preferences seem like an unwanted influence.

questioned the quality of the EIA when it did not confirm their expectations about the projects' effects, while politicians accused citizen stakeholders of cherry-picking.

What is telling about the examples from both the observations and the interviews is that instead of arguing based on personal preferences, both proponents and opponents used the EIA as a source of arguments to prove their point. While this shared source of arguments makes it easy for stakeholders to communicate – they have a common object to discuss and a common language to do so – it also puts the EIA at the centre of a choice process, obfuscating people's motivations for choosing a particular option as the EIA promotes replacing original arguments by references to its outcomes. For example, instead of arguing with citizen stakeholders about the values driving preferences, politicians now simply labelled these preferences as irrational as proven by the EIA and thus meriting no further discussion. The ultimate effect of this focus on the EIA is that a policy conflict about advantages and disadvantages of different policy options is transformed into a conflict about the technicalities of measurements and their interpretations.

Compromising on process: repackaging feasibility as completeness

The second way in which the EIA caused confusion was by creating erroneous expectations about the nature of the policy process which obfuscated procedural conflict between citizen stakeholders and public administrators, as well as among public administrators themselves. At first, the process of making the EIA appeared to be a scientific quest for completeness which would inform a choice for the best-performing policy alternative. It was this kind of apparent procedural transparency that motivated external stakeholders to participate in the policy process with enthusiasm, as reflected in the fact that participation meetings were always well-attended and citizens kept offering suggestions to improve the EIA. However, the stated aspirations for completeness were hampered by the fact that the EIA was also an administrative process which had to be completed within a set amount of time and with limited means.

A quest for completeness and an administrative process operate according to different logics. In the quest for completeness, the EIA is at the centre of the process. The administrative process, however, is part of a hierarchical system in which an administration works to execute a political decision within set time limits. Because these time limits dictate the process, feasibility eventually trumps scientific completeness. The effect of the EIA repackaging an administrative process governed by feasibility as a scientific process striving for completeness is mistrust towards policy procedures. The promise of the quest for completeness is more than the administrative process can deliver, yet it is what process participants come to expect.

Confusing participants: repackaging hierarchy as horizontality

The third and final way in which the EIA restructured the interaction between stakeholders was at the relational level where the relationships between citizen stakeholders on the one hand and public administrators and politicians on the other were obfuscated. By inviting actors to participate a process in which different options are compared by means of an EIA, the impression was given that one's way of influencing the policy process was to provide good ideas or solid facts to improve

the EIA and the choice to which it leads. However, this is a misrepresentation of the true nature of a policy process in which, ultimately, politicians decide. In addition, public administrators working closely with the analysts arguably have more of a say in the processes of the EIA than non-governmental stakeholders.

Participants' disappointment when confronted with the hierarchical reality of the policy process reflects both a strength and a weakness of the EIA. It indicates that the promise of the EIA provided stakeholders with sufficient enthusiasm and trust to participate. Their disappointment can be explained by the fact that are told a story of co-creation in a horizontal setting that obscures the fact that this horizontal-seeming process is embedded in a more hierarchical context. Interference by politicians, though within politicians' mandate, lead to unrest because it violated what participants thought were the rules. In other words, the central role of the EIA directs participants' attention away from the substantive decision at hand and towards other individuals in the process by making their behaviour appear subversive.

How the EIA obfuscates conflict on the substantive, procedural and relational levels

Our analysis shows that EIAs can help stakeholders to work through policy conflicts by serving as a conversational platform. The prominence of the EIA caused stakeholders to formulate their arguments in the language of the EIA; this forced them to be specific in their argumentation and made the language of the EIA a shared language in which stakeholders could understand one another. In addition, the EIA came with a set of transparent procedures and provided stakeholders with enough trust to participate in public fora because of the collaborative spirit it promised.

The EIA's usefulness, however, came at a steep price. Even though the EIA did not necessarily give rise to new conflicts, it did play a role in the development of existing ones, obfuscating policy conflict on its several dimensions. In the substantive dimension, the technical comparative exercise of the EIA was used as a ranking to determine a winner in an ongoing political conflict. This distorted an open policy dialogue by creating confusion about why actors supported or opposed a policy alternative which particularly impacted the substantive conflict between citizen-stakeholders and politicians. If a substantive conflict can improve the democratic dialogue about the benefits and drawbacks of policies, that dialogue is hindered when political arguments need to be rephrased in technical terms in order to be allowed into the discussion. In the procedural dimension, the fact that an administrative process presented itself as a study interested in completeness created false expectations that eventually backfired. Public administrators managing the project did not seem 'objective' to other public administrators and citizen-stakeholders even though their job was to deliver an analysis within a set timeframe to keep the policy process moving. If a procedural conflict can improve the rules of the game when these rules become the topic of debate, this was not the case for the EIA. Rather than question the false expectations that the EIA projected, the EIA was seen as corrupt. Finally, in the relational dimension, politicians preferring one option over the other were thought to be interfering by citizen stakeholders, even though it is within their mandate to develop and act on a policy preference.

Conclusion and discussion

This article analysed how a very popular form of ex ante analysis, the EIA, restructures policy conflict. While the EIA provided participants with trust in the process and in other participants as well as furnished a common language and object of discussion, these benefits had a price. Our analysis demonstrates how an instrument meant for comparing policy options on different aspects is moved to the centre of a policy process where it is presented as a technical, complete and collaborative decision-making instrument that proves which policy option is best. The EIA makes a political process appear to be a neutral analytical exercise, meaning that the expectations of process participants do not match the way the policy process is actually set up. This obfuscates policy conflict on the substantive, procedural and relational dimensions rather than clarifying it.

Our conclusion reflects on the literature on EBPM in three ways. First, our study shows how the 'myth'-like qualities of EBPM (Boswell, 2017) are useful for convincing parties to the conflict to take a leap of faith and collaborate. However, these expectations become problematic when the administrative and political realities of a process are not acknowledged. Second, we highlight the pathways through which EBPM can hamper democratic dialogue; not so much because of qualities inherent to EBPM per se, as emphasised by others (for example, Parsons, 2002; Ansell and Geyer, 2016), but because of how the EIA was presented and viewed by process participants. This brings us to our third contribution: our study draws attention away from the intentions or naivety of individual actors (see, for example, Weiss, 1979; Roberts, 2010; Flinders and Wood, 2015) and suggests that the negative side effects of EBPM are at least partially caused by a mismatch between an analytical tool and the tensions and expectations its environment invites (see also, for example, Pearce and Raman, 2014; Cairney and Oliver, 2017; Parkhurst, 2017). Rather than policymakers out to manipulate the policy process under the guise of evidence-gathering, we see policymakers promote EBPM because it can help foster dialogue and support. The irony here is that the very thing enabling the parties to the conflict to collaborate is also what obfuscates and hampers their dialogue.

The study also contributes to the policy conflict literature. While various authors have promoted evidence-based methods for conflict settlement (Karl et al, 2007), this study demonstrates the risks of using evidence in the arbitration of conflict when expectations of what it means to use evidence in policymaking do not align with the reality. Additionally, this article further unpacks the interaction between institutional policy setting and policy conflict (Weible and Heikkila, 2017; Wolf, 2021b). More specifically, it showcases how evidence fosters conflict when it is introduced in situations where tensions between different process participants already exist, and when expectations of EBPM do not align with what it is actually capable of.

Our study has certain limitations which might provide fruitful avenues for future research. First, it has explored the role one EBPM instrument, namely the EIA, plays in three Flemish planning projects. Although the tensions we have identified are likely to figure in other administratively and politically constrained environments where evidence is used as a conflict arbiter, our findings are necessarily situated in the specific contexts we studied. They are likely also impacted by specific features of the EIA, such as its ability to be interpreted in multiple, conflicting ways and the fact that EIAs are completed cooperatively (Dorren and Van Dooren, 2021). Future

research should investigate the extent to which these finding are typical for EIAs as a particular EBPM instrument and for infrastructure as a policy area. Second, while this study suggests that managing expectations about the role of the EIA can mediate its undesirable impact on policy conflicts, future studies should investigate whether doing so will actually have this effect and whether expectation management will also adversely impact willingness to actively participate. Third, the explanations of this study were found in a context where the EIA was firmly embedded in the process design. Arguably, part of the reason that the EIA is able to structure dialogue in such a rigid way is that actors have no way of going around the EIA. Would its impact be different if it were disconnected from legal architecture? Or would we also lose its benefits as trust may be lower in the absence of institutional safeguards? These questions merit further investigation in different institutional settings.

The implications of our findings extend to the realm of policymaking, indicating that using EIAs for resolving policy conflicts may not always be effective as it can impede the dialogue rather than moving it forward. This poses a risk for politicians and public administrators, who may be seen as corrupting the process when they are acting within their mandate. It also, however, poses a risk for the EIA itself, and, arguably, EBPM more generally, which may be seen as corrupted when failing to deliver on promises that were unrealistic to begin with. Policymakers must therefore exercise caution in how they embed and present EIAs in policy processes. This includes refraining from positioning EIAs as a decision-making instrument and being clear about the EIA's place in relation to administrative timeframes as well as its function in hierarchical decision-making structures.

Note

[1] A governmental decree called 'general provisions environmental policy' mandates that every Flemish EIA is based on specific guidelines managed by the government. These guidelines state that a Flemish EIA covers nine different disciplines: soil; water; biodiversity; landscape, architectural heritage and archeology; sound and vibrations; air; people; climate; safety. For each of these disciplines, additional guidelines exist on what data, definitions, models and assessment methods to use. For example, with regards to soil, the guidelines say what maps to use (input), what constitutes a disruption of that soil (definition), how to predict if that disruption will take place (model) and how to assess the severity of the disruption (assessment method). This means that even though EIAs are always tailored to specific projects, the three EIAs featured in this study had a similar core.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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