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9: Conflict, consensus and the management of a good debate

Exploring the deliberative assumptions of group facilitating techniques

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Introduction

Facilitative modelling techniques, such as group model building (GMB), are built around explicit and implicit assumptions about the characteristics, and the likely consequences, of a good debate. Specifically the idea is that high quality deliberations help build a genuine consensus. One of the most important challenges for the facilitator of such debates lies in dealing with factors that preclude or at least complicate such a good debate or ‘open deliberation’.

This contribution seeks to identify and evaluate the assumptions of good debate underlying GMB. We juxtapose GMB theory and practices with the ideal-typical deliberative framework commonly associated with Habermas. We apply the concept to the textbook GMB approach (as developed in Vennix, 1996) and to an empirical case in which GMB was applied. The case study concerns a public policy decision making process on how to deal with public safety in a problem neighbourhood.

The multifaceted nature of the situation in this problem neighbourhood allows us to discuss the promises and pitfalls of applying GMB. Specifically we explore: -1- to what extent GMB can deal with conflicting values and interests -2- whether it is built around the notion of *aggregating* or *discriminating* between different opinions and/or stakes and -3- what kind of consensus (cognitive or social) it aims for. We argue that while GMB is particularly useful when dealing with so-called coordination problems, facilitators need to be aware of the limits of open deliberation. When dealing with conflicting values or interests, deliberations might have polarizing instead of unifying effects.

Facilitative modeling

‘If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences’ (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p. 572). While the Thomas theorem refers to many different social situations, it certainly applies to the trouble people experience in their own neighbourhood. Many cities in

many countries have so-called ‘problem neighbourhoods’: areas characterized by disturbances of public order, due to crime, improper use of housing and public areas, nuisance, the intimidation of and use of violence against other residents. Typically, those involved (residents and other stakeholders) have their own ideas about the cause(s), while few are able to provide definitive solution(s). Such problems are obviously not limited to neighbourhoods. For instance, currently European countries are faced with the influx of large numbers of refugees and asylum seekers. In many countries citizens have doubts and hesitations about this phenomenon. Many municipalities are trying to deal with this opposition by organizing community meetings, to involve the citizens in the decision making, and thereby broaden the basis for support. This is done with varying degrees of success. Although there are certainly examples of meetings in which participants shared opinions and had a degree of influence over the resulting decision, some meetings gave the impression of a ‘talking shop’: participant could speak their mind, but had no real say *in* the decision making. Others were rife with conflicts and accusations. Clearly, managing such meetings requires both recognising and respecting participants’ ideas as well as identifying the real differences of opinions so that these can inform policy choices. Chairing these meetings is about trying to find a balance between two extremes. On the one hand, emphasising respect for ideas could result in an uncritical exchange of viewpoints without confronting these with one another or other available information. On the other hand, a focus on voicing conflicting opinions, leading to demands to have one’s opinion taken into account, runs the risk of creating a stalemate.

Facilitative modelling techniques, such as group model building (GMB), are specifically designed for dealing with situations in which stakeholders all have a role in, opinions about and usually a stake in a particular issue. In the example on the problem neighbourhood, for instance, housing associations are concerned with the quantity and quality of their housing stock in the area under consideration. Since the early 1990s, Dutch housing associations operate at arm’s length of the central government and have a financial responsibility in managing their housing stock. In other words, rent income and costs related to housing stock and maintaining public spaces will also be an important concern. Residents in the neighbourhood, many of whom rent their apartments or houses from a housing cooperation, are equally interested in the quality of their living space and shared spaces. But it seems reasonable to expect that tenants would prefer a lower over a higher rent. Housing associations and tenants would probably agree that they both have a role in maintaining quality of dwellings at a desired level. Clearly housing associations and residents agree on

some interests, diverge on others, and may have different opinions on safety in their neighbourhood. Some of their interests are aligned, others opposed, and some goals can only be reached by a joint effort. Problems such as these have a cognitive ('objective') and a social ('subjective') dimension. Stakeholders are like the proverbial doctors facing a diagnostic task, in which they might have overlapping ideas, but do not completely agree on what ails a patient, and therefore have difficulty agreeing on a treatment. GMB intends to help them reach a consensus on the problem definition (not necessarily also on the solution) by means of open deliberation.

In this chapter we will engage, on a conceptual as well as empirical level, with the central claim of GMB, which is the ability to create a consensus by means of open debate (Vennix, 1996). Both these concepts are as pivotal as they are controversial. A 'consensus' can refer to anything from an absence of explicit contestation to truly shared convictions. Even more contested is the notion of a 'good debate'. Some tend towards more subjective interpretations, in which the quality of a debate hinges on the assessments of the participants. Simply put, what matters is whether they felt that they could share their opinions and that their contributions were treated respectfully. Others tend towards more objective interpretations, looking at the information that was exchanged in the debate, whether participants gained more knowledge of the problem situation and came closer to an 'objective' solution.

GMB ideally caters to both this cognitive (objective) and social (subjective) dimension of consensus (Haug, 2015). As part of the GMB approach, stakeholders are asked whether they themselves considered the sessions to be useful. But researchers also try to determine whether participants' knowledge and understanding of the problem has actually converged (e.g., Rouwette, Bleijenbergh & Vennix, 2016). In situations in which these two dimensions do not overlap, the focus is on the latter. GMB aims at creating shared perspectives and enhance commitment, rather than arriving at either-or verdicts (Vennix, 1996, pp. 2-3). The fact that next to consensus, commitment is also an explicit aim of GMB, is noteworthy. Typically, definitions are quite broad as to what consensus is about. Newcomb (1959, p. 279) mentions 'similar orientations to something'; Urfalino (2014, p. 2) refers to a participant in a meeting who 'advances a proposition to be decided on. In the case of an absence of contestation or counter-propositions, this proposition is deemed to be "accepted" and has conferred upon it the status of "decision" of that group'. Orientations as well as propositions may refer to perceptions of the actual situation, to the desired situation (including goals or values) or to proposed actions. What exactly consensus is about, is relevant as most time in GMB sessions

is spent on constructing a causal model of the actual situation. Actions follow from analysis of the proposed structure and a discussion on which levers are under control of the participants present in the sessions. Typically GMB ends with a list of recommended actions but not with an action plan or design for implementation.

GMB was originally designed for organizational settings, in which team members try to agree on a strategy for dealing with a problem that their organization faces (Vennix, 1996). One of the implicit assumptions behind GMB is that each member of the team possesses unique pieces of information, which need to be combined to get a complete overview of the problem (McCardle-Keurentjes, 2015). The underlying game theoretical notion is that of a coordination problem (Schelling, 1980). Team members essentially seek to form a (more) complete picture of the problem, identify jointly beneficial outcomes and from this basis to coordinate individual actions. The effectiveness of their actions depends on the actions of others. Some might gain *more* from sharing information than others, but nobody will be worse off. In addition, GMB assumes that none of the stakeholders has a full grasp of the messy problems he or she is confronted with (Vennix, 1996; McCardle-Keurentjes, 2015). Often this goes together with a sense of frustration of what may be perceived as other stakeholder's lack of cooperation. Cognitive conflicts, or differences of opinions, threaten to deteriorate into interpersonal conflicts when lack of progress in the issue is blamed on opposition of other parties. GMB assumes that during the process of model construction, some of these assumed differences in interests turn out to be differences in interpretation. Thus, the area of opposed interests are shown to be smaller than initially expected.

The GMB approach facilitates the participants in their sharing of that information. In its classic form, the starting point for GMB is a reference mode of behaviour: observed data over time on the central problem of interest. In the case of problem neighbourhoods, the reference mode could for example be the continuing disturbances of public order, persisting over a period of ten years. The reference mode gives a clear focus to the group discussion. Participants are in effect given a diagnostic task: Which structure is responsible for the problematic behaviour that we have observed? Or, in other words, how did we get into this situation? The focus of the GMB project and the reference mode is typically discussed with the contact person and chosen before the first session. In the first session of a GMB project, the first task for the participants is essentially 'additive' or 'divergent'; meaning a stock-taking exercise of the variables that participants think are relevant to the problem. The real debate takes place after this divergent phase. Participants are invited to reflect on the factors

identified and combine them in a joint causal model. In this convergent phase, it is unclear to what extent GMB departs from the notion of *accommodating* or *discriminating* between the different points of view, as they were expressed in the first session. Accommodation is about merging, whereas discrimination is about favouring one point of view over the others.

GMB's stated goal, which is to facilitate open communication (Vennix, 1996), resonates with the concept of deliberation, most commonly associated with Habermas (1995, 2005). Deliberation is built around ideas about 'open access', 'equal participation', 'respect' and 'open-mindedness' that are intuitively clear, but notoriously difficult to pin down into concrete observables. In the next section, we will discuss one of the very few attempts to operationalise the concept. Our purpose is to flesh out the key characteristics and determine how they are employed in the context of GMB.

The convergent part of the GMB session works towards a 'paper' output, a causal model of the issue under discussion, as well as a 'social' output: consensus between participants. Towards the end of the project, the contributions of the stakeholders have been combined in a draft final report. The central part of this report is a causal model which reflects the consensus reached on problem definition and proposed policy solutions. GMB researchers subsequently evaluate the outcomes reached, both in terms of changes in insight (subjective) and in terms of the quality of the conclusions (objective). For this, they use survey data and in-depth interviews. As we will show particularly in the empirical part, different paths lead from deliberation to consensus. Consensus, in the subjective sense of the word, is typically reached by means of accommodation. On the other hand, reaching an optimal outcome requires evaluation of and discrimination of different proposed actions. Our case study about dealing with problem neighbourhoods shows that when dealing with messy problems (i.e., conflicting interests, values instead of just opinions), one cannot have both.

Conceptual part

While the notion of deliberation has been the subject of many conceptual and philosophical debates, there have been very few attempts to turn it into an actual measurement instrument. A notable exception is the Discourse Quality Index, developed by Steiner et al. (2004), which is developed for analysing the quality of debates in parliaments. It operationalised deliberation in seven categories:

1. The degree of participation. Deliberation presumes free and relatively equal participation.
2. The level of justification. Deliberation presumes a willingness to supply arguments to back up a position or opinion.
3. The content of justification. Deliberation presumes a willingness to justify positions or opinions based on the general interest rather than on individual or sub-group interests.
4. The degree of respect or empathy for others. Deliberation presumes that participants value each other's contributions.
5. The degree of respect for demands of others. Deliberation presumes an ability to approach debates as positive sum rather than zero-sum games.
6. The degree of respect to the counterarguments of others. Deliberation presumes a willingness to engage with the arguments presented by others.
7. The level of constructiveness. Deliberation assumes a willingness to transcend initial positions and work towards a joint or common position.

Deliberation is built around the Habermasian idea of an 'herrschaftsfreier Umgebung' or 'ideal speech situation' in which the message to be transferred is decoupled from the (status of the) messenger. It is easy to make a mockery of the concept. Instead we should value any attempt to make a concept, that is pivotal for so many of our social interactions, a bit more concrete. First, an ideal speech situation does not presume negotiations taking place behind a Rawlsian (1971) 'veil of ignorance'. In other words, in some interactions it is informative to know who the source of information is or who proposed a particular action. In their study on decision support, Lyytinen et al. (1994) refer to decision making in the European Union, where it makes a difference whether Germany proposes a particular course of action or the Netherlands does. Second, equal participation is not about scoring the number of contributions made and showing empathy is not the same as faking sincerity. Third, open-mindedness should not be equated with a disposition to constantly adapt one's position to the opinions of others. Just as sticking to a point of view does not automatically imply an unwillingness to deliberate. Nevertheless, there are a couple of valid points of critique to this operationalisation, which will become important for our evaluation of GMB. So we can discuss them from this framework.

GMB focuses on categories 1 and 2: Getting everyone to participate, state *and justify* their position. In the divergent phase, the facilitator will not (allow other participants to) engage in an evaluation of these positions. In line with brainstorming guidelines, participants are asked to name factors contributing to the problem and essentially ‘anything goes’: Neither the facilitator nor other participants should voice criticism and the contributor has the last say in the exact wording of the factor. But in the convergent phase, when relations between factors are drawn, the facilitator will require a minimal level of justification. Just stating that there is a relation between two factors or variables will not suffice. Typically a participant proposes a relation, explains his or her reasoning behind it, and then the facilitator asks if other participants agree. Only if there are no objections will a relation be added to the model. Note that this comes down to a continuous testing of social consensus on the actual situation (Haug, 2015).

In the convergent phase another interesting thing happens: arguments are decoupled from their provider. The anonymous factors are aggregated in a first version of the model. Generally, participants will be able to recall what they themselves contributed in the first phase. They will have more difficulty remembering where the other factors or variables came from. This observation is relevant in relation to category 3: the need to justify arguments on the basis of general values or interests. This procedure makes it hard to include zero-sum arguments in the model, meaning arguments in which the gains of some equal the losses of others. Arguments by definition need to be framed in general terms and are therefore difficult to link to individual or sub-group interests. However, this does not mean that such individual or sub-group interests do not exist. Moreover, and potentially more problematic, it does not mean that these interests are actually *dealt with*. Instead they are weeded out by procedure. This has consequences for what happens in the further refinement of the model.

The dialogue leading to further refinement of the model is the most interesting from a deliberative perspective. It relates to categories 4, 5, and 6 in particular. Participants extensively discuss the factors that have made it onto the table. By means of step three, the decoupling the arguments from the provider, GMB helps to prevent empathy (respect towards others) from turning into empty rhetorical exercises. It makes shallow shows of sympathy (‘I think all previous points are valid’ or ‘I especially like your argument about...’) more difficult. Refinement of the model relates to category 5 and 6 of deliberation. Participants are invited (or obliged) to engage with all the claims and arguments that are on the table.

The second point of critique refers to the manner in which these claims and arguments are meant to be dealt with. GMB, more specifically the system dynamic modelling approach that underlies it, allows for complex modelling, and thus taking into account a wide variety of factors and interrelations. This is a particularly promising aspect of the approach, but it can also become a pitfall. Participants and facilitators might be inclined to adopt an accommodative approach to demands and arguments. It is tempting to keep including variables, to increase ownership of the model and give participants the confirmation that their contributions are visibly reflected in the causal model. Although the reference mode provides a focus to the discussion and the resulting causal model should in principle be able to explain the observed behaviour, in practice this provides only limited guidance to the discussion. In essence participants propose relations and thereby guide the ‘train of thought’ that the group follows. The facilitator may intervene after a subsection of the model has been discussed for quite some time and propose to switch to another part. Towards the end of the GMB project, essential parts of the model structure such as feedback loops are checked against observed behaviour. But in the absence of a fully quantified System Dynamics (SD) model it is very difficult to determine the behavioural consequences of a causal model of even limited complexity. This leads to the conclusion that if participants want to avoid discussing particular (conflicted or sensitive) points, there is ample room for doing so. Some topics may never make it to the agenda (Lukes, 1974). Participants are less forced to compromise, trade off, or settle for less, than they would have been in a bargaining situation. In addition, remember that participants in a GMB project spend most of their time on building a causal model of the perceived situation, while the desired situation and actions receive less attention. Bargaining in the sense that party A agrees to do X only if party B agrees to do Y, becomes only relevant when implementation of actions is discussed. While this is not a flaw or shortcoming per se, it does have consequences for the final session and for the outcome.

As mentioned, in GMB the facilitator continuously tests consensus on proposed addition to the model structure. As we argued in the introduction, both accommodation and discrimination can result in a consensus. It is just a different kind of consensus. Category 7, on the willingness to transcend initial positions, seems to aim for the maximalist version: a consensus that comes about through participant changing their position/opinion. This presumes discrimination in the previous phase. Invalid arguments, illegitimate values or individual and sub-group interests are weeded out. Two ways in which this may be achieved come to mind. An invalid argument proposed by a participant may be challenged by another.

Even when the first participant does not give in, the resulting lack of consensus will prevent this argument from ending up in the model. Another way in which the validity of contributions is checked, is by triangulation with other data. While qualitative GMB projects implicitly work from the premise that ‘the answer is in the room’ (Geurts, Altema, & Geluk, 2006), it may be that crucial information is missed by all that are present. Checking interpretations against other databases and/or developing a quantitative SD model with the group (Van Nistelrooij, Rouwette, Verstijnen, & Vennix, 2015) may prevent this.

A consensus, certainly a subjective one, can also be reached through accommodation. That is by reaching an outcome in which everybody sees his opinions and interests reflected, and *nobody* needs to change his position. We do not intend to pass judgement on which of these two outcomes is more valid or valuable. We merely contend that in most real world situations, it will be impossible to acquire both (Shapiro, 1999).

To sum up: the notion and operationalisation of deliberation makes it possible to flesh out the promises and pitfalls of GMB, specifically, when the technique is applied to complex social situations, like problem neighbourhoods. We will use this conceptual exposition in our empirical example. Specifically, we depart from three questions:

1. Seeing that the concept of deliberation primarily focuses on differences in substantive opinions, to what extent can it be used in a GMB setting to deal with conflicting interest and values, apart from dismissing or delegitimizing them?
2. To what extent does GMB depart from the notion of accommodating or discriminating between different opinions? How does it ensure that participants *respect* but at the same time *engage* with each other’s claims and arguments?
3. What kind of consensus does GMB intend to reach? Is it a consensus that comes about by (some) participants changing their position and/or a consensus that is built on the notion of everyone being acknowledged. The concept of deliberation seems to want to aim for both, which might not be feasible in any real world situation.

Empirical part

In this section we look at deliberation in a GMB project in a case on public safety. By comparing the above notions on deliberation to the steps in a concrete project, we can see if potential pitfalls and dangers materialise in practice. We end with a discussion on the degree to which conclusions can be generalised to a wider set of cases.

The public safety case reported by Rouwette, Bleijenbergh, Peters and Van Mullekom (2008) and Rouwette, Bleijenbergh, and Vennix (2016) dates back to 1999. The focus of the case was a ‘problem neighbourhood’ as described in the introduction. In the neighbourhood, at the outskirts of a Dutch city, there were public nuisance and criminality, improper use of public space and intimidation of new residents. The reference mode showed safety fluctuating at a too low level over several years. The Integral Safety Coordinator and the Municipal District Manager for this neighbourhood were the contact persons for this case and invited representatives of the municipality, police, public prosecutor’s office, housing associations, schools and the welfare office to participate in the project.

In the first session 12 participants were present and through Nominal Group Technique gathered over 70 variables related to the problem. The convergence phase then started by asking participants to link variables. A conflict around the topic of deviating values and norms, but after open discussion arguments of both parties were incorporated into the model. At the end of the first session a small model of 16 variables resulted. In the second session the model was expanded to 39 variables clustered around several themes: status, criminal behaviour, values and norms, undesirable behaviour, reactions of residents and physical infrastructure. Participants identified the ‘free-state idea’ as a central variable in the problem. This refers to the idea of some residents that they could do whatever they wanted. A number of positive loops reinforced this idea, for instance through deviating norms and values, to transferring values and norms by parents, improper use of public space and back to free-state idea. A set of negative feedback loops around pursuit of status showed how illegal and semi-legal activities contributed to obtaining wealth and building status. After participants expressed adequate confidence in the model structure, they turned to options to alleviate the problem. Nine options were identified, such as reducing the number of school dropouts, reducing physical remoteness of the area by changing the physical infrastructure, or reducing selective assignment of housing. As is typical for GMB interventions, these options were not prioritised, nor discussed in relation to the responsibilities of specific participants or organisations. In the third session the concept project report was discussed and amended. Interestingly, participants proposed to take out the section on validity of the model. This section in essence stated that the model depicted the opinions of participants and did not claim to be ‘true’ in an objective sense, as proposed variables and relations were not tested against

any other data. Participants proposed not to include this section and instead state that ‘this is the way it is, so that they will finally do something about it’.

For the evaluation of the case participants answered pretest and posttest questionnaires and participated in interviews. Implementation of some options, such as changes in physical infrastructure were started up soon after the sessions while others were delayed. Several months after the case and again about a year later the Integral Safety Coordinator met with one of the researchers to evaluate the project. In 2015, 16 years after the intervention, one of the researchers met with both contact persons to discuss if and how results of the case were implemented. In particular this last meeting indicated several factors that had a large impact on implementation of results:

- Problem urgency: the disturbances of public order were concentrated in one area of the neighbourhood. Because data were typically aggregated at the level of neighbourhoods this went unnoticed. The sessions brought together the insights of all stakeholders and revealed that the combined picture was far more serious than each was initially aware of.
- Familiarity and acceptance of facilitated approaches: the contact persons had experience with other methods that brought together stakeholders and continued using these after the modelling sessions on related problems.
- Aggregated level of recommended actions: as mentioned, the modelling sessions led to nine options to alleviate the problem. These were not prioritised nor assigned to particular participants or organisations. For the implementation of recommendations a careful phasing of options was designed, starting with giving the city administration a low-key presence in the area in the form of park maintenance. Gradually this presence was increased to cover other dimensions of public space.
- Support from key persons: the report was received by the city government and gained the support of key actors there. This helped to put several proposed actions into practice instead of fizzling out had this support not been there.

What can we conclude from this case with regard to our three points of critique on the notion of deliberation? We address each of the three points in turn.

To what extent can GMB actually deal with conflicting interests and values?

In GMB, interests and values are mainly important as drivers for past behaviour. The model structure aims to explain observed behaviour over time. In system dynamics, feedback loops

are essential parts of that structure. Many feedback loops are closed because an actor perceives a situation to be different than his or her desired state of affairs, and takes action to correct that difference. In the example on public safety, the model structure captures essential characteristics of the neighbourhood such as experience of annoyances. These characteristics are compared against desired states (presumably no annoyances although this is not explicitly included in the model) and drive behaviour (the model includes: ‘calling to account negative behaviour by third parties’). Desired states refer to interests or values and are important in many areas of the model but not always made explicit. Examples of model variables that refer to desired states are pursuit of status, deviating norms and values, and free state idea.

As mentioned, GMB emphasises problem diagnosis. Levers to change the situation for the better follow from an analysis of the structure and a discussion on variables that participants can control. As shown in the case on public safety, proposed options aim to improve the situation in the light of aggregated goals: reducing the number of school dropouts eventually improves safety which is a result that all stakeholders present in the sessions strive for. There is no attention for goals of a particular stakeholder. For instance, costs related to housing stock, an important interest of housing associations, is not discussed in the modeling sessions. This is relevant as these particular interests and values may block or support the proposed options. If a proposed option runs counter to the interest of a powerful stakeholder, it will very probably be delayed or not implemented at all. This relates to two of the factors that were seen to have a large impact on implementation of results: problem urgency and support of key persons. If a proposed option is relevant to an urgent problem, or if key persons publicly support an option, it becomes more difficult to oppose it.

In conclusion, GMB weaves interests and values into the debate by looking at how they drive actions that have shaped the problem. When it comes to proposing solutions, interests and values are largely ignored and this may hamper implementation. As such the method does not dismiss or delegitimize interests and values but does also not address them head on.

Does GMB accommodate or discriminate between different opinions?

Again, the answer to this question is different for the diagnosis than the solution design phase of GMB. In building a shared understanding of the problem situation, opinions are teased apart in variables and relations, explained by one member of the group to the rest, checked and tested for social consensus. This is more discrimination than accommodation. Modelling makes it easy to do this in several ways. One way is by further disaggregating statements and

including two sides of an argument. If one person sees a positive relation from variable A to B and another person insists the relation is negative, the facilitator will ask each participant to explain their reasoning in more depth. Typically it turns out that the first person had one path of influence in mind and the second another, and both will be included in the model. In a discussion that is not supported by visual modelling this is much more difficult and this may have looked like only one of the two parties could be right.

When agreeing on actions it seems that accommodation is more important. Actions follow largely from the model structure and there is no in-depth discussion on the implications of actions (other than their impact on other model variables). As mentioned, implications for particular stakeholders' interests are not explicitly addressed in the modelling sessions.

In conclusion, GMB seems to have found a way to respect and engage with opinions leading to an in-depth analysis of opinions. But this largely refers to the diagnosis phase and less so to the solution design phase. Indeed, solutions may be proposed which are not in line with one particular stakeholder's interests, this may have a polarizing instead of unifying effect. In fact, the evaluation of the public safety case (Rouwette et al., 2016) as well as an earlier GMB case (Vennix, Akkermans & Rouwette, 1996) point in exactly that direction: participants achieved consensus on the problem but had different opinions on which solutions would improve the problem situation.

Does GMB aim for cognitive or social consensus or both?

This again comes back to the ease in which GMB allows lines of reasoning to be incorporated into the model side by side. In this way, what looked as differences of interests may indeed turn out to be differences of interpretation. In the public safety case, the conflict on deviating values and norms was navigated successfully and both sides agreed to its inclusion in the model. In other words, the aim is not only to recognise everyone's position but also to bring about a change - convergence - of positions. There is continuous testing of social consensus and the expectation is that this translates into cognitive consensus as well. Evaluation results offer some indications that this is indeed achieved (e.g., Rouwette et al., 2016).

But it is an open question whether all major differences in interests will come out into the open in GMB sessions. As described by Rouwette et al. (2016): if all differences of opinions were aired, there was a chance that this complex working relationship between different organisations would be damaged. We can assume that some topics were avoided. Indeed,

participants may have tip toed around some of the more substantial conflicts in interests and values. Or rather, to only address them in very general terms ('free state idea', 'deviating norms and values'). Particularly noteworthy was the convergence of opinions around the fact that physical infrastructure was an important factor. Thus the municipal authorities decided to tackle this issue first. That was probably a factor in the model that did not offend anyone. The fact that this was one of the first options implemented does probably not follow from its large impact on the problem, but more from the fact that no one would disagree to this action. In conclusion, GMB aims for changing positions and evaluation results seem to support this. But because (at least the qualitative version of) the method essentially consists of a free-floating discussion, there is ample room to avoid contentious issues.

Conclusion and discussion

This article has scrutinized the central notion of GMB: the link between a good debate (open deliberation) and a consensus outcome. We used Steiner et al.'s (2004) Discourse Quality Index to reveal three points of critique on deliberation: to what extent is deliberation able to deal with conflicting values and interests, does deliberate result in accommodation or discrimination of options, and does deliberation aim for social or cognitive consensus? Using GMB as a special case of deliberation, we explored its practice in the light of these three considerations. An empirical case on public safety was used to show the choices made in a practical application of GMB. The results in the previous section show that there is a large divide between the diagnosis phase and the phase of designing solutions. Diagnosing the situation proceeds in careful small steps, aimed at creating shared insight into the problem and how it was shaped by (actions following from) interests and values. This may be seen as discrimination more than accommodation, resulting in social and cognitive consensus. However, there is ample room to avoid the real thorny issues that may endanger future cooperation between the participants in the sessions.

From the solution design phase a different picture emerges. The sessions allow for discussion on actions related to the greater good only, and interests of each particular stakeholder are never identified or addressed. These may come back to haunt implementation and then need to be counteracted by powerful stakeholders or perceived urgency of doing something about the problem.

All in all, we see room in GMB for a more careful consideration of actions. For this, we need to bear in mind that we can only truly deliberate over opinions. More precisely, deliberation helps to solve conflicts of opinions, while presuming a certain degree of shared values and interests. One can only bargain over interests and this may be a useful addition to selecting solutions in the final phase of GMB. One cannot be really compromise on values. Instead, one can ‘deal with’ conflicting values only through rhetorical strategies (silencing, shaming). However, this is not really solving the problem, but rather making sure it does not interfere with the group process.

Our main purpose with this contribution is to raise awareness of these thorny issues, rather than disqualify GMB for particular situations. We believe GMB helped a lot in bringing problems into the open. Without facilitation the public safety case would probably have become a mess or ended in a row. And this is exactly GMB’s purpose. It brings many dimensions of the problem out into the open and it does that in a relatively non-confrontational way. This is the promise.

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