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(Bureau AD)
by**

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Introduction

In a previous issue of the newsletter in 1999 (NL 2/14), we explained in some details the transition from the Institute for environmental engineering at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne (EPFL) to the present private company.

Founded in 1998 by the two authors, the company developed its activities with MCDA as a central competence. The first year was particularly difficult, spending most of our time in explanations about what MCDA was all about and a few small contracts. Seven years on, we are still in the business...

We will describe below our activities before taking the opportunity to practice some introspection.

Consultancy

Environmental planning

This field – taken in the broad sense – was the first to develop and remains the main one. Due to our previous activity, we had the connections and the knowledge; even so, it took time to convince the people that quitting EPFL did not change us dramatically (taking into account that Prof. Maystre kindly accepted to be our mentor at the company launch).

Energy

Our first (small) contract was in that field to investigate how MCDA could help the local planning of energy supply (Canton Geneva). Later, we have been involved – as a support to an EPFL laboratory within the international Alliance for global sustainability – in a study about the energy supply and demand for a whole Chinese province (Shandong) [Haldi, Pictet, 2003].

Waste

Waste management was a major topic at the EPFL and is still one in the Bureau AD. This connection was clear in one of our early contract to analyse the Swiss waste incineration plants in search of potential over- and under-capacities (Prices survey agency). It holds true for a very recent contract to compare proposed processes to treat incineration residues, as an update of a study realised during the EPFL era [OFEFP, 1998].

Over the years, we have audited one Canton building wastes control system (C. Geneva) and the comparison of sanitation processes for the Swiss second largest industrial landfill (C. Jura).

Most of our public procurement contracts are connected with this field (see below).

Waste water / Sewer sludge

This field has a lot in common with the previous one. We have been involved in a comparison of sewer sludge treatment processes with political innuendoes (C. Fribourg). More recently, we participated in projects to choose the location of two small or intermediate waste water treatment plants (C. Geneva).

Water

“How much water for the fishes downstream of a dam?” was the central question of a negotiation between a Canton, its energy utility and the fishermen associations (C. Fribourg). Another on-going contract for a French utility deals with internal and external legitimisation of a big canal renovation priorities (Société du canal de Provence).

Regional planning

We have been involved in a broad study to analyse alternative ways to deal with floods at a regional level for an area gained at the beginning of the 20th century over marshes. In this project, we had to deal with two groups of decision-makers (33 people) and numerous groups of experts (20 people) (C. Vaud) [Bollinger, Pictet, 2003; Pictet, 2004].

Transportation

A first study was about priority among various town-centre avoidance projects. A very recent one details one of these projects and deals with the choice between various road location possibilities (C. Geneva).

Organisation

Such projects deal more with the legal status, internal procedures and power issues among actors.

At an early stage, we helped design a regional utility aimed at co-ordinating communities needs for larger waste treatment plants (C. Vaud). Later on, we designed a procedure for the federal environmental agency to define priorities among the various projects it could

undertake (OFEFP). More recently, we supported the change process for the national body in charge of agricultural counselling, with two linguistic-based agencies (SRVA).

Public procurement

This field was quickly identified as an interesting one, as it provided a rather clear legal basis for MCDA, stemming from the Marrakech agreement (1994).

One of our first contracts dealt with the selection of a tenderer for a distant heating system (C. Geneva). Then we supported two incineration plants, one for a succession of calls for tenders, from the leading engineering consultant to the construction companies (C. Vaud, C. Valais), the other for the sewer sludge transportation to the plant (Neuchâtel). More recently, we helped several communities of a region in the choice of a solid wastes transportation company for each of them (C. Vaud).

An Austrian bank asked us to help them with a kind of public procurement procedure aiming at selecting pollution reduction projects abroad (Kommunalkredit Austria AG).

Our experience led us to write a book based on an analysis of the Swiss jurisprudence. We proposed a methodology that remains as near as possible from the actual practice but improves it when necessary [Pictet, Bollinger, 2003; NL 3/8]. To help the authorities implement our proposals, a spreadsheet is available to download (www.marches-publics.ch).

Miscellanies

Not all projects have a clear MCDA dimension. Interestingly, an on-going line of projects in databases stems from a preliminary study about the possible use of these databases to support decision-making. We found that there was a need to improve first the databases themselves, in connection with their online consultation. This explains why we worked on noise, rivers water quality and fishes populations over the years (C. Geneva)!

Teaching

While at the EPFL, we were both teaching MCDA at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. After “getting private”, the latter continued (environmental engineering and management). More recently, we have been asked to contribute to another postgraduate program (energy engineering and management).

We also train public officers for some years (C. Geneva) and, more surprisingly, nurses from the whole French-speaking area of Switzerland.

In 2003, we were responsible for the practical exercise of the International summer school on MCDA, held in Montreal.

Research

Research is not at the top of our agenda, as it does not “fill the fridge”. Moreover, attending conferences and buying journals is taxing for a small company. Nevertheless, we try to keep in touch, attending meetings when they are not too far (Hawaii is out of reach!) and writing papers when possible.

Jacques Pictet continues his fruitful collaboration with Val Belton initiated when he was in Glasgow. After their first paper about group MCDA [Belton, Pictet, 1997], they wrote two contributions together:

- one about compensation and incomparability within MAVT in French [Pictet, Belton, 2000] (an English version is underway),
- one about the non-mathematical dimensions of MCDA [Belton, Pictet, 2002].

An invited conference in Madrid about e-democracy led to an article in which we emphasise the distance between what researchers are able to propose and what we face in practice [Bollinger, Pictet, 2003]. More generally, Academia might be appalled by the basic level of MCDA on a day-to-day basis, mathematically speaking!

An interesting research topic deals with extensions of the cards procedure initially proposed by Jean Simos:

- use as a basis for the evaluation of criteria with interval scale, within outranking methods,
- use for evaluation and weighting within MAVT, under certain conditions [Pictet, Bollinger, 2004a],
- use as a group elicitation procedure [Pictet, Bollinger, 2004c].

A possible application to landscape evaluation has also been investigated [Tangerini et al., 2004].

We also try to inform the general public, or a more specific one, about the aim and potential of MCDA [Pictet, Bollinger, 2004b].

Introspection

Public / private clients

Our clients are public authorities or public utilities, but for a few exceptions. More precisely, they are mostly the French-speaking (or bilingual) Cantons. The community level might not require the formalism MCDA implies, except for public procurement. The federal level implies language difficulties that are not easy to overcome.

Private companies seem to be out of reach. The contacts we had over the years indicate that they rely on ad hoc methods and do not need the transparency public authorities have to accept.

Possibly, it is our own limitations that prevent us from accessing a larger circle of clients.

Collaboration / specific knowledge

Even if the projects are often connected with our background as rural engineers, we collaborate regularly with engineering companies or researchers. They provide the content skills that we lack. Having the basic understanding of the issues definitively helps us in our activity.

The field of public procurement, mainly in the hands of lawyers, needed a major effort in the first place to get into it (over the years, we collected on the Internet more than 3 000 A4 pages, size 10, of Swiss jurisprudence, not to mention the other countries).

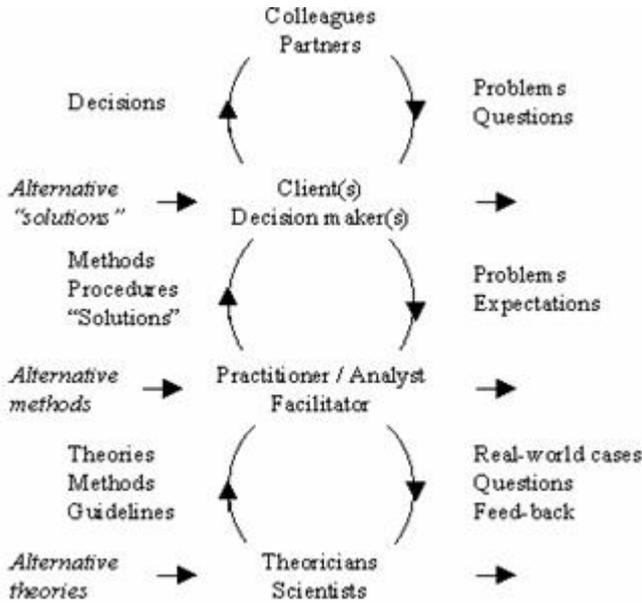
Can the MCDA practitioner survive?

This was a subtitle of a contribution made by Val Belton and Jacques Pictet in the Opinion-makers section in 1997 (NL 2/11). The question is not whether MCDA is lethal, but whether MCDA is enough to ensure enough work. The answer, in our case, is a mitigate one: it might be enough for the toast, but not (yet) for the caviar on it!

The way ahead

Nobody knows what the future will be, but we intend to go on and contribute to the dissemination of MCDA in practice. Possibly, we will have to reconsider the way we conceive our activity, our relationship with our clients and partners.

In the contribution mentioned above, Val Belton and Jacques Pictet presented the figure below, arguing that the “weakest link” was between the practitioners and their clients.



Looking back to it, one might wonder whether the gap between theory and practice is not getting larger by the day. Theory developments are far too quick to be followed by practice application and mentalities.

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