Summary

This is to summarize some experience with a process of communication, consultation and coordination of work that has been recently used in the Czech Republic under the name of Block Method. It has been used originally for policy elaboration, where the following conditions had to be met:

- Teams of stakeholders, public servants, private companies, NGOs, experts and other citizens, as well as individuals, participate in active work
- Citizens have also an opportunity to participate in a dialogue, i.e. to receive information and to state their positions without performing active work
- Responsibilities for dealing with the issue at hand are divided horizontally and vertically and may not be always clear
- Information to be processed is quantitative; in a professional language using defined concepts; or in a plain language
- All considerations, from long range and general to short range and specific, are potentially of importance
- There is an effort for consensus, but existence of many different positions and options has to be expected
- Definition of the problem, incoming information and positions of participants change in time
- Decision support is needed on partial small issues that have to be integrated into more comprehensive ones and so on up to four levels.

The main features of the method are as follows:

- The policy is being developed as a system of blocks, each of them again a system of blocks and so on. All blocks have a similar structure that does not interfere with its content
- The process is action oriented. Analysis, description, arguments are important, but secondary to the action-oriented components
- There exists a defined process for integration, desintegration, comparison and revision of blocks
- The method is flexible and can be adapted to situation. To change the main features would, however, probably lead to disappointments.
- Everybody can participate. There are only two limits on information processing: (a) cost of each component of the policy development work, (b) input information capacity of decisionmakers, i.e. danger of their information overload

The following experience has been made:

- The method and its specific application has been formally and informally evaluated as successful. It is, however, no universal approach. In each specific case a choice between methods has to be made. Improvisation, i.e. absence of any defined method, does not seem promising.
• The general atmosphere around was one of intensive power game. The power game has been mostly moved from the policy elaboration stage to the decision stage, but the impact of the general atmosphere on the team work could not be completely prevented.
• The procedure was (and has been seen as) transparent; the problem of potential information overload has been solved only partially.
• The method has been originally policy-elaboration oriented. It has been found to be also effective for networking, motivation and education. People seemed to learn more as actors than as students.
• The method has been used up to the national level. An extension to supranational level has been suggested, but no experience with this extension has been made yet.
• The following impacts of the method have been seen as positive: possibility to integrate knowledge internally within the policy and also externally; possibility to involve many different people, from scientists to people with limited education; good interface with the decisionmaker; resistance to sabotage and abuse.
• The following features of the method have been found as negative or missing: it needs political will to get started, but may in some cases prevent the decisionmaker to achieve his political tactical objectives and therefore may be hard to sell; it generates also fast output concerning urgent problems, but would be ineffective as a crisis management tool; most participants enjoyed using the method, but a small but important minority of people, who are more power-game oriented than joint-work oriented, participated only under pressure; no explicit comparison has been made yet with processes of the open method of coordination, and of reinforced co-operation; the role of media is defined, but has not been sufficiently tested.
• The process has been expected to include negotiations as a part of the power game; in fact there has been less negotiation than expected and more of joint work and dialogue.
• The method is faster than improvisation with broad consultation, but slower than an improvised centralized decision without consultation. It should make the decision process and especially implementation faster and less conflict prone, but no hard experience in this direction is available yet.
• The process helps to break down institutional barriers and to promote partnership.
• Without a specialized computer program support, the work would be prohibitively slow and expensive. Without effective management and well defined techniques, delays and conflict would probably occur. The computer support, the mathematical aspects, management and used techniques are not, however, the main features of the approach.
• Electronic communication is far most effective. The method must give, however, at every moment also a free choice between group and individual face-to-face communication, use of media, paper mail and several other mechanisms.
• Some people, even very intelligent and competent, hate any defined procedure. Mostly they can be somewhat educated, but it takes time.

The Block Method seems, on incomplete evidence, to be compatible with the conclusions of the White Paper on Governance, and with the following statement by president Prodi:
*I believe we have to stop thinking in terms of hierarchical layers of competence separated by the subsidiarity principle and start thinking, instead, of a networking arrangement, with all levels of governance shaping, proposing, implementing and monitoring policy together.*
The problem
Experience has shown that there are several formal objectives common to the process of policy elaboration in many different situations:

- To achieve a policy that will pass all the approval stages, will bring some benefit to the society in its own policy domain, and not do much harm in other domains
- To take into account the positions of citizens and other stakeholders, and their needs as they perceive them
- To prepare a policy proposal in limited time, with limited funds, and limited (but all available) information and in the existing general situation
- To be acceptable to those in power, for instance to maintain the power base, bring enhanced power, financial benefit, or a sense of accomplishment; to deliver acceptable decision background without information overload; and not to frighten them, so as to not prevent application of the process
- To facilitate mutual communication of citizens and their communication with governmental and other organisations.

Until the last few decades, the above objectives have been mutually exclusive. The hypothesis of the following text is that now, on the contrary, these objectives are only achievable jointly, and that none of them is achievable separately.

A policy elaboration method should consist of both:

- A management technique that helps to elaborate effectively on a policy proposal with as much joint work and as much dialogue as desired by society (aspect of management)
- A political mechanism that strengthens democracy by elaboration of decision background jointly with citizens and other stakeholders and in a dialog with them (aspect of governance).

There is a need to concurrently adapt both the policy elaboration process and the citizens’ participation process so that they fit together. What is occasionally criticized as citizens’ passivity is frequently a reasonable reaction to a process where participation is unlikely to have a real effect, where the whole policy process is insufficiently effective. Elaboration of a policy proposal is frequently so strongly influenced by power game in the elaboration phase that it is increasingly unsatisfactory to all participants, from politicians to citizens. A suitable method should minimize these dangers.

It is an important question to determine who makes the decisions based on a policy proposal. The described process tries to make abuse of the proposal elaboration process as difficult as possible, but does not directly interfere with the decision. The important question of who is the decisionmaker is left to other mechanisms. This increases the probability that the process is in practice applicable. It is assumed that the danger of abuse of a more effective process (or of the decrease of the conflict) is sufficiently low; no proof of this assumption is available yet.

Experience has shown that broad joint policy work is a communication tool that is less conflict-oriented and more coexistence-oriented than many other tools.

The following text is a discussion of one method from the mentioned points of view.
Block Method

Block Method is one of several policy elaboration procedures. It is based on experience in North America, Japan, and West Europe and has been positively evaluated by participants and decisionmakers. It is ready for the next application, but some aspects are yet to be verified and final evaluation will take some time. The method helps with participation and dialogue with the public, in integrating results from municipal to highest organizational level. It also helps integrate results different domains, professions and aspects. The method includes web support, techniques for dialogue and for professional impact estimates and political impact analysis.

Main Features of the Block Method

The procedure in a specific application is relatively simple, being a simplification of the general model described below. (It is somewhat like an atlas of geographic maps, where each user finds the maps he needs, relying on the authors that the maps are not mutually contradictory and that they will lead him, where he wants.) The general model can be applied for different applications and different conditions and has the following features

• The basic work is performed by an independent basic team, led by a coordinator. The team consists of the best available experts wherever they are employed and whatever are their opinions and positions. (A different approach, not used here, is working for instance only with experts from one ministry) Frequently some members are temporarily assigned full time, to the project some work part-time, some in an advisory capacity, and some on a volunteer basis.

• Every citizen and every organization may prepare their own policy option or any other document. These become components of the material. If the options are submitted to the coordinator in an agreed upon structure, they are compared with results of the basic team, as far as it is possible within limits of time.

• The procedure makes integration of partial results possible. The following dimensions of integration have been found as relevant:
  o primary domains, for instance transportation, agriculture
  o cross cutting domains that go across primary domains, for instance social aspects, environment
  o horizontal levels, for instance from municipal to European Union
  o epistemological levels (mathematical and formalized language, language with defined concepts, plain conversation language, unverbalized experience)
  o conclusions of partial teams
  o professions of participants, for instance lawyer, economist, expert on potatoes
  o professional and scientific disciplines, eg. economics, sociology
  o positions of experts and positions of other citizens, are identified during joint work and during dialog

From this list, only those dimensions are chosen that are relevant in a specific application.

• There are experts identified and professional teams organized, each working on one key problem, for instance, social impact of milk subsidies in the region Pilsen. Most key problems correspond to one position on each chosen dimension. If we see a proposal as a puzzle, each key problem is a building stone.
Main outcome from each team, so called block, has the same structure that fits for any position on any dimension and for any team. The block includes especially the following components:

- Overall vision and goals. The goals may be verifiable or nonverifiable and mostly serve as criteria
- Options of specific decisions
- Impact estimates of these decision or their joint impact. There is a procedure, how to use in the framework of the block both deterministic and probabilistic estimates and nonformalised position statements.
- Specification of conditions, under which the estimates have been made
- Auxiliary documents, for instance description and analysis of the situation and of the problem, list of literature and of sources of the information

The common structure has been developed by trial and error so that it can be used for any substantive content and that it can be used in all necessary operations.

- The first four mentioned components of each block are elaborated on in options that are mutually compared
- Several blocks, each describing one key problem, constitute together a block on a higher level. This situation may exist on several levels if needed. A very simple policy is elaborated on as one key problem
- Key problems are integrated as needed along all used dimensions up to the level of policy. The result of each integration step has the same block structure. There exist an integration procedure that can be applied, as far as it is known, in all mentioned dimensions. Integration of problems leads to larger and more heterogeneous working teams. The larger the teams are, the less effective is the work in face-to-face meetings and more effective is the work on the web.
- There exists a special internet program that supports elaboration of blocks, their integration, joint work, and dialog about them
- The integration goes from the bottom to the top. Concurrent is the process of specification that goes from the top down. It starts by options of the overall policy vision
- The policy proposal is continually integrated with other important documents, especially with other policies. This means to take into account potential impact of these documents on the policy under elaboration and, if possible, also vice versa
- The elaboration is cyclical. The first cycle uses usually a drastically simplified model. The next cycles are more perfect and are limited by time, funds, workforce and information. All proposals are only estimates and approximations. Their limits are explicitly specified.
- During the elaboration, the team summarizes and compares facts. It tries to avoid any substantive decisions, as this is a prerogative of the decisionmaker. The team tries to reach consensus, if it is possible without pressure
- The team also recommends one or some of the options.
- Depending of the agreement between the coordinator and decisionmaker, the team may also
  - consider the political aspects
  - negotiate

All conclusions of the team are preliminary and the final decision rests fully with the decisionmaker.
• From the start of the work, there are two common activities. Everybody who is interested gets information within limits of his interest. He may also state his position or identify an important problem
  o During joint work, any professional or another citizen and any organization and institution may elaborate on their own document on any level of integration and submit it to the coordinator. Typically they submit options of visions, decisions, or impact estimates of any block, including the policy as a whole. As far as possible, the basic team works with such documents in a similar way as with documents it created itself. Practically it is possible only if the received documents have the standard block structure and are submitted at a time that has been first agreed upon
  o In the dialog everybody may record his position even if he does not intend participate actively in the joint work. Positions may be related to existing documents or to informations that have been prepared in a simplified form for the dialog. If a partner in a dialog chooses to use the web, the existing program considerably simplifies the work and limits information losses.

The objective of a joint work and the dialog is not only to create to good proposal, but especially to strengthen communication within to the society, strengthen mutual understanding and habit to work together, rather than fight prematurely; and teaches practically democratic principles

• It is coordinator’s responsibility to take, as far as practically possible, all known positions into consideration and to inform the decisionmaker. This is limited by time, by funds and by input capacity of the decisionmaker. Practically, only the most promising options are being elaborated on to avoid information overload and loss of effort. No positions, however, are censored out on purpose because of their content. Options that the basic team cannot elaborate on may be elaborated on, in the standard structure, by any other team, usually at their own cost. The decisionmaker and the public will have access to them. No guarantees, however, exist as who will really study them and whether they will be accepted.

• The proposal is decision background for the decisionmaker and it includes:
  o Executive summary in a length, form and structure as requested by the decisionmaker. As far as possible it includes the most important options and positions. The summary includes references to the complete document. If an audio-visual presentation takes place, the summary may include selected items
  o Complete document, including :
    • More detailed specifically edited materials that are too lengthy to be included to the executive summary
    • All substantive documents and most important procedural documents, prepared during the elaboration

The decisionmaker has seldom time and energy to study certain parts of the complete document. More frequently the complete document is used by
  • advisor to the decisionmaker
  • authors of decision background for higher decisionmakers, for instance cabinet minister, cabinet, lower house, upper house, or president,
  • Authors of documents for media and by media themselves
  • Officers implementing the policy
  • The public, usually represented by organizations, evaluating the decisionmaker as a politician in the framework of the democratic process
Other considerations

There has been considerable impact of the process on some participants. Most remarkable has been the influence on stakeholders and experts, who worked jointly in teams. The degree of understanding that has been achieved has been considerably higher than are typical for discussions on paper or face to face. The necessary condition for this result seems to be one of the principles of the method: the goal of the elaboration is to prepare options and to compare them after some understanding has been achieved. Deciding as who is right comes later. Basically it is the responsibility of the decisionmaker. During the elaboration, only limited effort is spent to this purpose, mainly when recommendations for the decisionmaker are being prepared.

Impact on participants in the dialogue has been less obvious. It has been, however, much stronger than the impact of any other procedure that the participants in the dialogue have been likely to participate in. The feeling of partnership that develops in joint work develops less in the dialogue.

Another consideration is related to the process of negotiation. The Block Method has at this moment no specific features for the negotiation process. Either it delivers result to the team (eg. Exempt Staff) of the decisionmaker and they organize the negotiation, or some components of the negotiation process is performed by the policy staff on behalf of the decisionmaker. The organization and tactics of the negotiation process does not depend on the Block Method, but the input into the negotiation process is guaranteed by this method.

Work up to now

From mid-nineties, the Block Method has been developed and tested in several places, including the Ministry of Agriculture of the Czech Republic. It has been described in manuals and in other documents. There has been at one time a maximum of 150 team members with planned and coordinated activity. The number of participants in the dialog is not accurately known. At present, the method and documentation is being revised and an improved internet program is being prepared. The method has been favorably evaluated by the minister and deputy ministers, public servants, experts and citizens. The following positive features have been tentatively identified:

- Possibility of effective participation
- Good integration possibilities
- Relatively fast work. The specified structure and help by internet decrease workload of experts. It also decreases the risk that positions of some participants get lost, which would increase conflict and decrease motivation of these and other participants
- Low conflict during the elaboration phase (impact on the level of conflict during the decision phase is not known)
- Resistance to efforts to sabotage, censure or bias the work
- Possibility to finish, revise or partially integrate policies that have been started by other methods or by improvisation

The method has also some disadvantages and limits, and there are some uncertainties:

- Only some of the mentioned dimensions have been tested
- The final stages of the policy life have not taken place for political reasons
The result in a postcommunist country should suggest suitability elsewhere. However, this has not been proven.

Work and management procedures, usual in developed countries and not so usual in postcommunist and third world countries, have to be applied. It may take several months to establish them, even if participants are motivated. After this, the work in postcommunist society is similar to developed countries.

Where the overall effectiveness of management is low and the internal power game is very strong, some public servants may start by boycotting or sabotaging the work. Political will is needed to persuade them to communicate and to actively participate.

Some politicians are afraid, because they do not understand the method or methods or because of bad previous experiences with other methods. Some are afraid, because they do understand the method and do not wish a shift in policy orientation from their own to public interests. It would seem that the ongoing increasing failure rate of poorly prepared and unconsulted policies might make them occasionally reconsider. It may take time. In the meantime, it would seem necessary to develop the method, to implement it as far as possible, to evaluate results and to adapt the method accordingly.

The process has been found to be resistant to external political and economic pressure, but it is not clear, whether this will be true under any circumstances.

Only decades of time and dozens of complete applications will show, whether the method tends to prepare better or worse policies from the point of view of the society.

Block Method is not appropriate:
  o for very simple policies (where improvisation may be sufficient),
  o for policies with deadlines for first policy proposals under a few months (where crisis procedures might be more useful)
  o for confidential policies
  o in cases, when the solution is already known to the future decisionmaker and only implementation is looked for (this includes also dictatorial decisions from above, and use of policies to personal and other narrow goals)
  o in the absence of political will.

The method has been officially positively evaluated. The wording of the evaluation above has not been, however, independently verified. The experience it is based on is far too limited to be seen as a final proof.

Additional information

Several reports and manuals about the Block Method are being revised. Any comment and any information on comparable procedures would be welcome.