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Can Tour de France inspire SEA effectiveness? An analogy to encourage a broader systems thinking

Effectiveness is intensely debated in this journal (e.g. the 2019 special issue made by Therivel and González 2019; Cashmore et al. 2020). SEA effectiveness is often understood as ‘how well [SEA] works or whether it works as intended and meets the purposes for which it is designed’ (Sadler 1996). The debates centre around a wide series of elements related to SEA, e.g. specific stages in SEA (Polido and Ramos 2015), social processes (McLauchlan and João 2019; Arbter 2019), contextual factors (Therivel and Gonzales 2019), governance (Nooteboom 2020), and in terms of competences (Cepuš et al. 2019), guidance (Montaño and Fischer 2019), and legislation versus informal practice (Noble et al. 2019).

Concurrent with the intense debate on SEA effectiveness, a strong discourse on SEA and its contribution to UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is evolving with the aim of changing society to become more sustainable (UNECE 2017; Kørnøv et al. 2020; González Del Campo et al. 2020). Considering the urgency and complexity of the SDGs, it is argued that SEA has to be ‘geared up’ as ‘effective IA is essential to the implementation of the SDGs’ (Morrison-Saunders et al. 2020, p. 115). As we will argue in this letter, an element of gearing up of SEA is to employ a wider system perspective on actors and effectiveness. To illustrate this argument, we use the analogy of the Tour de France. This may at first seem odd or even obscure, but unconventional analogies have previously shown to bring thoughts and viewpoints out of the comfort zone and thereby allow new insight (see, e.g. Weick’s (2001) use of jazz music as an analogy for how we make sense of our surroundings).

We will compare the ‘instrument’ of SEA with the bicycle as an instrument and the Tour competition with the effort of getting attention and priority among decision-makers, which for SEA ultimately aims to contribute to the SDGs. The actors involved in the Tour are equivalent to actors involved in making change through SEA, and both endeavours involve the use of an instrument to go through a (often demanding) process to achieve the goals. Comparing SEA with a bicycle makes sense due to the fact that SEA is an international, well-defined ‘instrument’ that is highly dependent on how the human uses it. Many resources are invested in optimizing both instruments, hereunder its design and how streamlined it is.

However, although the optimization of the bicycle is important, it is only one among many parameters that are decisive for the success of the cyclist. A superb bicycle cannot make everyone win a stage or gain the ‘maillot jaune’. So, we need to go beyond the instrument to understand what makes a difference to the success of a cyclist. The Tour de France analogy may inspire our thinking about what elements of the wider system may be appropriate to consider when debating effectiveness.

A system of actors

The outline of actors relevant for achieving ambitions starts with the cyclist. They need to be in good shape, have the right mindset, and have the experience and intuition to know when to be attentive and when to attack. Comparing the cyclist to the SEA practitioner, it is well described in EA literature that the practitioner is important for EA effectiveness (e.g. Arts et al. 2013, Runhaar et al. 2013; Zhang et al. 2018; Kørnøv et al. 2015; Stoeglehner et al. 2009). Furthermore, the captain of the team of cyclists may compare with the SEA project manager making choices and having the key role. In effectiveness literature, the SEA project manager is found to have an important role in terms of communicating with decision-makers (Van Buuren and Nooteboom 2009).

Second, the cyclist needs a good team of cyclists to support them in the process by taking the lead from time to time, informing about the race situation, and discussing strategies. Correspondingly, the composition of competences in SEA teams is acknowledged in EA effectiveness literature (e.g. Théritel and Minas 2002; Zhang et al. 2013); however, the importance of their cooperation and performance as a team seems underexplored.

Third, the manager of the team, the Directeur Sportif, is placed in the car behind the peloton and must be a good strategist when making decisions among alternative strategies for the race. Quite appropriately for our analogy, the character and relevance of the alternative strategies change as time passes in the race. The Directeur Sportif compares to the competent authority, who has the overall responsibility of the team’s performance. In terms of EA effectiveness literature, studies have found that the role and attitude of the competent authority toward SEA at least in some

contexts directly affect SEA implementation (Zhu and Ru 2008; Wu et al. 2011).

Fourth, the sponsors of the team of cyclists are critical for their success. Without a sponsor, no cyclist or cycling team can race. The sponsor may not directly interfere with the race, but they have clear expectations for the results. For SEA effectiveness, this may compare to the decision-makers among the developers and authorities. Their commitment is well known to be crucial for SEA effectiveness (e.g. Runhaar and Driessen 2007; Sheate and Partidário 2010).

Fifth, we have the audience, who can play an important role for the cyclist's ambitions, either by encouraging them in difficult moments or being so massively present that it is difficult for the cyclist to see a way forward. The audience may compare with public and stakeholders in the planning process, although the level of encouragement and worshipping of SEA practitioners are not comparable. Furthermore, like the sponsors in the Tour, developers are also often highly occupied with reactions among the public. In EA effectiveness literature, the importance of the public is documented by, e.g. Lyhne et al. (2017).

Sixth, we have the general director of the Tour de France. They decide on a range of rules, including the technical requirements of the bike and the communication between the cyclist and the manager. For SEA effectiveness, this may equal the regulators and guidance providers that set legislative standards for SEA (see Retief et al. 2008; Noble 2009).

Seventh, we have the Tour officials and commissaries who make sure that everything is in accordance with the rules. These may translate to quality assurance institutions and mechanisms governing SEA implementation. For example, EA literature has outlined the importance of the Netherlands' Commission for Environmental Assessment (Arts et al. 2013; Lyhne et al. 2015).

Until now, the described actors are at least somewhat recognized in debates on SEA effectiveness; however, our system of actors is not complete. We must not forget the bicycle mechanics, the soigneurs, and the masseurs. The masseurs are highly important for keeping the cyclist fit for the race, the soigneurs for taking care of practical aspects, and the bicycle mechanics for keeping the bicycle fit for racing. Who are they, when comparing with SEA effectiveness? The soigneurs may be HR colleagues looking after the SEA practitioners. The masseurs may be the family and friends; those that make the SEA practitioner relax after a hard day of work and brings renewed energy into the life of the practitioners. The bicycle mechanics may be the team of specialists, who makes sure the SEA (the instrument) is ready for the next stage. That may entail programmers refining the software we use, data experts providing data for the SEA analyses, etc. If

these actors do a sloppy job, it is much more difficult to make a change as SEA practitioner.

Furthermore, journalists and communication in general play an important role in the Tour. They ensure communication of the progression of the Tour and cyclists, and they ensure transparency in terms of team composition, rules of the game, performance, etc., so that everyone is informed. SEA effectiveness literature emphasizes communicative capacities among the SEA practitioners (Sheate and Partidário 2010), but the importance of journalists and other communicators seems underexplored in terms of SEA effectiveness.

Finally, the other teams in the Tour may be seen as competing interests struggling to win the competition of attention and priority among decision-makers. Our 'Team Sustainability' is thus in direct competition with 'Team Turnover', 'Team Employment', and many others in being in front. In some cases, the cyclists of the different teams see a joint interest in collaborating on taking the lead, but in the end, one interest will be highest on the podium. Such coalitions and competitions among interests also seem underexplored in the literature on SEA effectiveness.

Learning from the analogy

The analogy of the Tour de France sheds light on the system of known and 'unknown' actors that are important for achieving a goal. It illustrates that it is relevant to discuss the effectiveness of one element to optimize it (e.g. the instruments of the bicycle or the SEA), but a far broader focus is needed to be successful in achieving goals that depend on a broader range of actors. We argue, based on the analogy, that our efforts on optimising SEA effectiveness in itself will have a minor role in efforts of achieving sustainability and SDGs. SEA itself cannot make 'substantive outcomes', as often called for (e.g. Bond and Dusik 2020). This becomes clear when looking at different forms of effectiveness (Cashmore et al. 2004) in a system perspective:

- Low substantive effect of SEA may be perfectly fine, if it means that planners and decision-makers already make decisions that promote SDGs.
- Low procedural effectiveness of SEA may be perfectly fine, if it means that the process already takes place in collaborative and more flexible governance processes with the involvement of relevant actors.
- Low transformative effectiveness may be perfectly fine, if the role of supporting transformation is better rooted through other processes or arenas.

As an example, findings in SEA effectiveness literature such as SEA leading 'to fine-tuning of plan policy wording and a more robust choice of development sites,

but to only limited wider influence on the plan' (Therivel 2019, p. 266), does not say much about efforts of making societal change, unless a broader system of thinking is applied.

The worst case is if we, as a SEA community, focus so much on optimising SEA that we sub-optimize the contribution of the system towards the SDGs! The second worst is that we invest our resources on the part of the system that has less potential for improvement. Are we aware of if our narrow focus on SEA effectiveness has already led to such unwanted consequences?

The Tour analogy may also inspire us to pay attention to how many actors need to be aligned both to win the Tour and to change society to become more sustainable. The many actors must have a common interest and motivation for contributing to the same overall goal of change, and with a higher number of actors in the system, interests are more likely to vary.

If we, as a SEA community, want to make a change, we need to go beyond our well-established focus on the optimization of SEA and employ a broader system perspective – recognizing that many things go on 'outside' the SEA. We need to think out of the box to explore ways to improve our engagement with a series of actors as outlined in the analogy. Some would perhaps argue that practice has always been broader than the literature on SEA effectiveness and that SEA effectiveness is a somewhat isolated, theoretical, and perhaps self-centred concept. Perhaps this critique reflects a shift in mindset in the field of SEA from a time in which the SEA community was building identity and therefore had a need to look inwards, to a time in which the SEA community is sufficiently strong to go beyond the narrow focus on SEA effectiveness and is faced with increased societal challenges and demands that require us to develop our focus.

Of course, SEA is not about winning a race, and luckily making a SEA is normally a less demanding task than completing the Tour de France. Furthermore, the analogy to the Tour fails to provide explanation for a series of other elements of SEA. However, although the analogy is not perfect, it is sufficient for our purpose: To inspire the SEA community, and especially people concerned with contributions to the SDGs, to go beyond SEA effectiveness and employ a broader perspective on the effectiveness of the system in which SEA aims to contribute to sustainability.

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