

Disputed evidence and robust decision making –  
the case for cross-disciplinary expert groups



Teknologirådet

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Why are cross-disciplinary expert groups a powerful tool when doing TA?



## A typical TA project

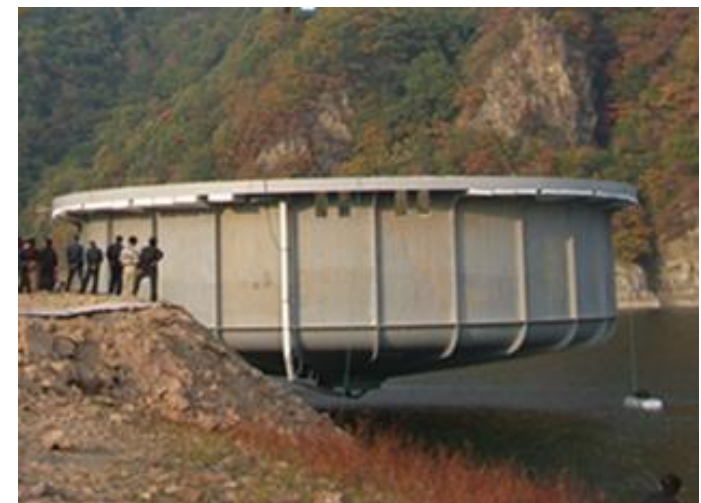
- Complex, cross-disciplinary issue
- Empirical “evidence”/data are central to the assessments
- Controversies about data, desired developments, values at stake, etc.

➡ TA requires meticulous ordering of facts, opinions and assessment



## Example: «The future of salmon farming»

- Problems meeting sustainability requirements
  - Directly related to key technology (open net pen)
- Key technology “unchanged” for 40 years
- Closed containment an alternative?
- Heated public debates/high levels of conflict
  - The industry
  - NGOs
  - Academic institutions
  - Government



# An illustration of complexity

- The salmon farming project assessed issues related to:
  - Economics of salmon farming
  - Fish welfare
  - Parasitology
  - Genetics
  - Nutrition
  - Water quality
  - Operational safety
  - Buoyancy of closed system
  - Waste management
  - Preservation of wild salmon
  - ...and more

## A typical expert group

- 5-8 members (in addition to project manager from NBT)
- + • Members recruited by staff of NBT
- Between 4 and 7 meetings during a period of 6-12 months
- Each meeting lasts half a day
- Expert groups members may influence framing of topic

# Three expert groups at the NBT

		<b>Project</b>		
		<b>Regulating online gambling</b>	<b>The future of salmon farming</b>	<b>A Norwegian carbon fund</b>
<b>Members of expert group</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lawyer</li> <li>• Psychologist, expert on addictive gambling</li> <li>• Expert on internet payment</li> <li>• Head of "Norwegian poker association" (NGO)</li> <li>• Expert on data filtering (working with Norwegian police)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Representatives from two large salmon farming companies (OSE)</li> <li>• Representative from two NGOs ("Norwegian salmon rivers" and WWF)</li> <li>• CEO of largest Norwegian supplier of salmon farming-technology</li> <li>• Two researchers (experts on aquaculture and fish farming)</li> <li>• Engineer from large offshore engineering company</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Two economists</li> <li>• Representative from one environmental NGO</li> <li>• CTO of solar panel company</li> </ul>	

## The four «cornerstones» of expert groups

- The institutional role of the NBT
- + • The multitude of perspectives and opinions
- Group dynamics
- Process facilitation



## The institutional role



- The NBT has a mandate to inform Parliament and Government
- The NBT has no interest in the outcome/policy development
- Participation is an opportunity to influence policy making

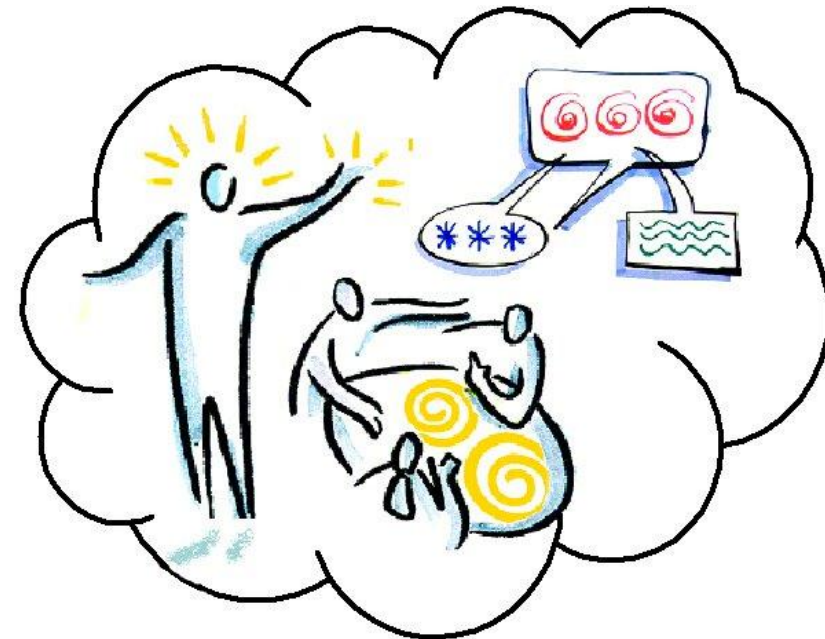
## A multitude of perspectives and opinions

- Help identify different sources of data
- Bring different assessments and opinions to the process
- Serve as «counter-expertise» for each other
- Help span out and structure the topic



# Group dynamics

- Experts commit to the process
- + • No expert holds «the truth»
- Experts «blindly» pursuing specific interests risk losing credibility
- Experts help each other stay «on target»
- Many conflicts quite easily resolved
- A few topics will remain contested  
*... but these are often highly interesting!*



## Process facilitation

- NBT project manager leads the groups and writes the report
- + • Start working with text at an early stage
  - Helps focus discussions
  - Forces expert to be specific
- Heated discussions are normal
  - Groups quite often “at the verge of breakdown”
- Dissent is OK – but should provide new/relevant insights

## What happened in the salmon farming project?

- Mapped key positions
- + • Made robust assessment of open net pens and closed systems
- Identified three core insights as a platform for policy proposal
- Developed policy proposal
- .... and the experts agreed

## Summing up

- TA can provide thorough analysis of complex and controversial issues
- + • Expert groups can be a very powerful tool in such projects
- The institutional role of the TA organization is important
- ... and so is process facilitation