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Interactive Governance and Governability: An Introduction

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Abstract: *This paper introduces two concepts - interactive governance and governability - with a view to exploring their applicability for assessing the governance of natural resource systems. Governance in its broad sense suggests that not only the state but also market and civil society have prominent roles in the governing of modern societies, from local to international levels. Interactive governance highlights the interactions between entities belonging to these societal parties. Governability is defined as the governance status of a societal sector or system such as a fishery or a coastal region as a whole. The assessment of such governability is approached by recognizing this whole to consist of three coherent analytical components: the system-to-be-governed, its governing system and their governance interactions. Distinguishing and conceptualising these three components forms a step in the process in which the governability of societal systems can be assessed. The paper uses examples from the field of capture fisheries to illustrate the potential utility of governability as an assessment framework.*

Key words: Governance, governability, capture fishing, natural resources,

1. Introduction

Scholars of natural resource systems increasingly refer to 'governance' as a crucial steering activity. For example, it is now common practice to speak of 'ocean governance', 'coastal governance' and 'fisheries governance' (e.g. Gray 2005; Hayashi 2004; Ehler 2003; Cicin-Sain and Knecht 1993). Governance, in this perspective, is qualitatively different from the related task of management in directing societal and environmental processes. Governance adds dimensions that are absent in a hands-on management approach. This paper introduces two concepts. The first concept, 'interactive governance', emphasizes solving societal problems and creating societal opportunities through interactions among civil, public and private actors. Testing its feasibility has already begun by work on capture fisheries and aquaculture (Kooiman *et al.* 2005; Bavinck *et al.* 2005a; Kooiman *et al.* 1999). The second concept, 'governability', provides a conceptual basis for assessing and improving the interactive governance of natural resource systems. There is a close relationship between the two concepts. An understanding that seeks to improve governance inevitably results in the need to explore and to assess governability. Governability of natural resource systems can vice versa only be understood by reference to their basic qualities. In this article we first discuss the main characteristics of the interactive governance approach. This is followed by an overview of the governability concept as this is the basis upon which the other papers in this Special Issue are built.

2. Interactive Governance

Governance has become a catchword in the social sciences as well as in the policy world. As is the case with other concepts in the popular vocabulary, the term 'governance' has different meanings for people using it (for recent overviews see Kjær 2004; Pierre 2000). These differences often revolve around the perceived role of the state, in a normative and an analytical sense. In the more normative approaches, such as those offered by the World Bank (1989, 2004) and the often quoted book 'Reinventing Government' (Osborne and Gaebler 1992), governments are often seen as failing to live up to the expectations of those whom they govern, as shown by many analyses of weak, unstable, collapsing or failed states. Where the state is unable to govern effectively, other actors from market and civil society

move into prominent governing positions and a case is made for lessening the governing role of the state. This is expressed in the phrase 'more governance and less government'. But there are also more analytically based conceptions of governance to which we add the one developed in this paper - although we do not deny there are normative ideas involved in them as well. 'Interacting' is often a more effective way of governance than 'doing things alone'. Among analytical approaches are those in which governance is viewed as networks (Sørensen and Torfing 2007); other perspectives identify governance in local situations (Hohn and Neuer 2006; Devas 2004), at regional levels such as Europe (Marcussen and Torfing 2007), and in a global perspective (see *the Journal Global Governance*).

In accordance with other approaches, the interactive governance perspective proceeds from the assumption that societies are governed by a combination of governing efforts (Kooiman 2003). These governing mixes are 'answers' to ever growing societal diversity, dynamics and complexity, and responses to major societal issues such as poverty and climate change. The interactive governance approach differs from others by focussing on its applicability and occurrence at different societal scales, from the local to the global and with overlapping, cross-cutting authorities and responsibilities. In addition to horizontal networks, all kinds of vertical governing arrangements between public and private entities are also seen as governance.

The main sources for discussions of 'governance' as conceptualised in this article are 'Governing as Governance' (Kooiman 2003), and its application in fisheries and aquaculture (Kooiman *et al.* 2005; Bavinck *et al.* 2005a and Kooiman *et al.* 1999). The main concept here is that of 'interactive governance' defined as:

"The whole of interactions taken to solve societal problems and to create societal opportunities; including the formulation and application of principles guiding those interactions and care for institutions that enable and control them" (Kooiman *et al.* 2005, p. 17).

The emphasis on 'interactions' constitutes the main innovation in this approach. Interactions are specific forms of action, undertaken in order to remove obstacles and to follow new paths, whereby

the definition of a problem or an opportunity depends on the issue at hand as well as on the position and understanding of the observer. The adjective 'societal' is best understood by way of its antonym, 'private', and is often replaced by the word 'public' - it is everything that has a common, social, and collective component. Institutions are also included in the definition as they are considered to be vital for any governance interaction. So too are principles according to which interactions take place and institutions function. The assumption is that governance arrangements lacking a normative basis suffer from ineffectiveness and illegitimacy in the long run.

Theoretically the interactive perspective on governance proposes that societies are made up of large numbers of governance *actors*, who are constrained or enabled in their actions by *structures*. Actors, in this perspective, are any social unit possessing agency or power of action. These include individuals, associations, leaders, firms, departments and international bodies. Structure refers to the frameworks within which these actors operate, these limit or widen their action potentials and which they therefore must take into account. These frameworks include culture, law, agreements, material and technical possibilities. According to sociological reasoning, actors are continuously making changes to these structures while at the same time being subjected to their influence (Giddens 1984; Berger and Luckmann 1966). The analysis of governance requires attention to both dimensions.

As a statement of fact, the interactive governance approach argues that many actors in different positions and levels of society are involved in governance. But there is also a normative side to the equation, an understanding that broad societal participation in governance is an expression of democracy and therefore a desirable state of affairs. Thus we are advocating broad participation in governance from a normative as well as from a practical standpoint.

Interactive governance also suggests that there are important differences between management, policymaking and governance. The differences between these activities are not straightforward and unequivocal, and may vary with culture and language. Thus what is termed 'policy' in Anglo-Saxon political culture may be known as '*gouvernance*' in

the Francophone tradition; American authors, on the other hand, may label the same phenomenon as 'management'. We take the view that governance is the more inclusive term, followed by policy, with management being the most instrumental of the three concepts. Thus governance considers longer term trends and requirements with regard to natural resources, basing itself on an assessment of institutions and a discussion of the values to be attained. Policy deals with specific subjects in tighter time frames, whereas management grapples with the practical dimensions of its implementation.

3. Governability

The interactive governance approach suggests relating governability to qualities of the object of governance (the system-to-be-governed), its subject (the governing system) and the relation between the two (Kooiman 2008). Governors, the governed and the nature of interactions among governors and the governed all contribute to governability. Governability can therefore be defined as: *The overall capacity for governance of any societal entity or system.*

The interactive approach assumes that the condition of governability of any system is continuously changing in response to external and internal factors. What may be high governability at a given time may be low governability at another. Similarly, what may be effective governance in one place may be ineffective in another. Acts of governance may influence governability as a whole or any of its components. However, many external factors influence governability as well, some of which cannot, or only incompletely so, be handled by the governing system. This often enhances uncertainty with respect to the governability of a societal system or entity.

The starting point for developing the concept of governability is to consider three sets of variables contributing to the governability of societal entities and the natural resources that they depend on. These entities are termed: 'system-to-be-governed', 'governing system', and 'governance interactions' - see figure 1.

In keeping with its definition, interactive governance considers governability as a composite property. In other words, the governability of any societal system depends on the nature of the system-to-be-governed,

the governing system, and governance interactions taken together. What a societal system looks like, how it is to be disaggregated, and what its boundaries and other qualities might be, depend on the perspectives of its observers. In the interactive governance approach, the systems concept is a heuristic tool without any teleological, functional or reification connotations (Jentoft 2007a; Jervis 1997). Many societal systems have a social and a natural dimension. Capture fisheries, for example - which include acts of harvesting, processing and marketing - thus leans on and is interlinked with a natural ecosystem. In previous publications (Kooiman *et al.* 2005), the system of capture fisheries was therefore depicted as a fish chain leading from the ecosystem to the consumer's plate. This practice is continued here.

Any system - societal, natural or combinations thereof - is part of a nested hierarchy. Where in the hierarchy a particular system is situated, depends on the purpose of study or definition. The more agreement there is among researchers and/or governors about the nature of a system and its features, the stronger potential judgements about its governability will become. Figure 1 depicts a societal system,

with a set of core features: diversity, complexity, and dynamics.

A societal system can be divided into a system-to-be-governed and a governing system with governance interactions taking place between them. Each component has its own governability aspects. In the case of aquatic resource systems, the governing system consists of different parties having varying images of their roles and tasks with regard to the system-to-be-governed. Governments, for example, may wish to prevent social conflicts and also take measures against overfishing. Market parties, however, are more concerned with integrating various parts of the fish chain. Civil society organizations may finally focus on public awareness of the degraded state of the aquatic ecosystems and on ecosystem conservation. The interactive governance perspective brings together in one conceptual framework all the ways and means by which governing bodies in a fish chain are in touch with the operational parts of that chain, in order to ensure that the concerns of the fish chain become part of governing efforts.

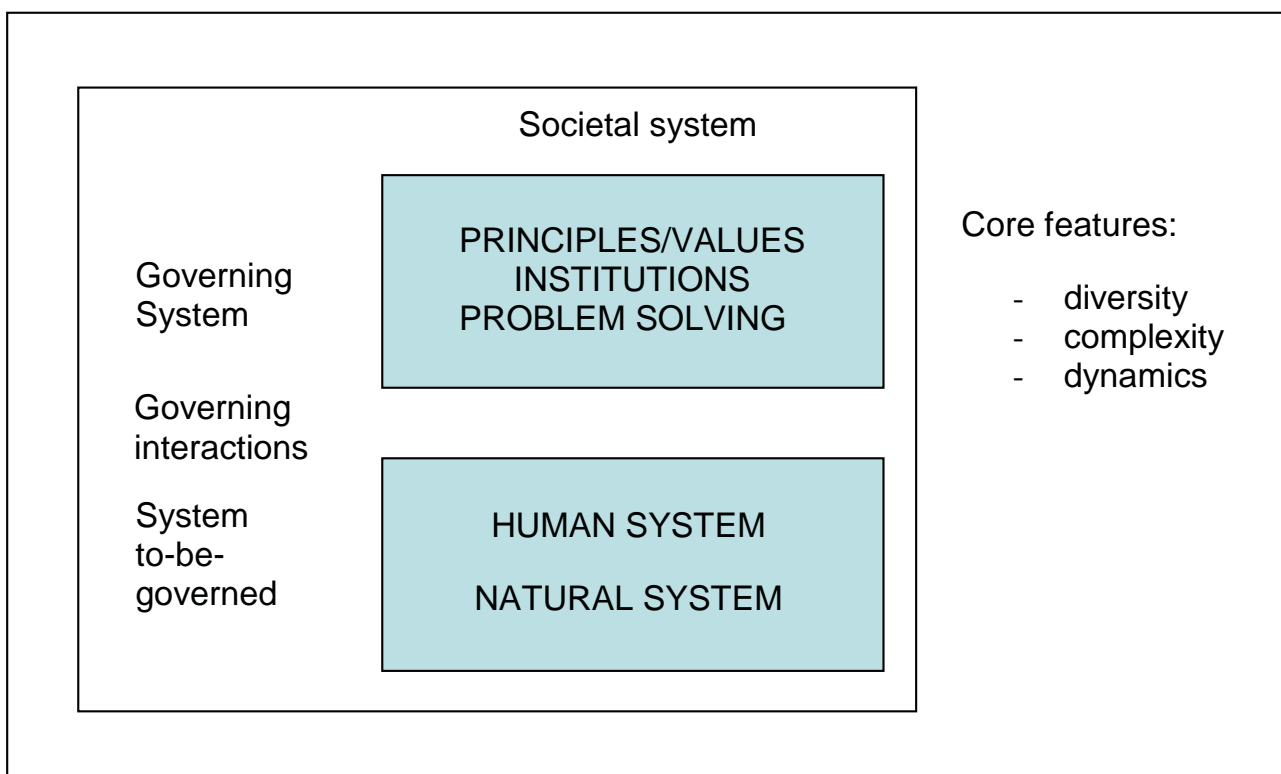


Figure 1. Integrated framework for governability of a societal system.

In the following sections, we discuss governability in relation to aspects of each of the three components. Work on complexity, diversity and dynamics and general literature on environment and natural resources provide inspiration for conceptualising the system-to-be-governed component of governability. The discussion of the governing system is mainly based on earlier governance literature. For governance interactions we have broadened the concept of interaction as developed earlier and made use of policy and participation literature, as well as of ideas on pressure and impact assessment. For all three components we have attempted to achieve a middle ground between giving expression to empirical richness and realizing the need to curb conceptual density.

3.1 Governability and the System-to-be-governed

Societal systems, including aquatic resource systems, are characterized by complexity, diversity and dynamics (Kooiman et al. 2005). Interactive governance theory argues that these features are generally intensifying: for example, through forces such as globalization and the lengthening of value chains. Aquatic resource systems are therefore becoming more diverse, more complex, and more dynamic all the time - an aspect which governors tend to overlook. In addition, governors must take account of the fact that systems have various temporal and spatial scales. This is easily illustrated with evidence from capture fisheries. Exploited fish species and the aquatic ecosystems that produce them have geographical ranges that vary from small-scale to global. The same holds true for different types of aquaculture and for the diverse markets for aquatic produce. Time scales play a role in ecology, as well as in social processes. They include the time perspectives of the actors involved – the periods over which they assess, judge, plan, and expect things to happen.

From a systems theory perspective, complexity is an indicator for the architecture of the relations among the parts of a system, among the parts and the whole and between the system and its environment. Complexity is not only an expression of societal interdependencies but also fundamental notions to it. It has to be reduced in responsible ways. Diversity is a characteristic of the entities that form the system and points to the nature and degree in which they differ. Diversity here is a source of creation and innovation, but also carries the danger of discord and possibly disintegration. Dynamics follow from tensions that

create flows of energy, materials and information within and among systems. Dynamics create potentials for change, but can also be disruptive. This appears quite neat and tidy in theory, but is not so in practice. If all governance efforts, at various scale levels, were to be diagrammed, the resulting picture would resemble a large, multidimensional, tangled and constantly changing spider web.

Still it is of great importance to conceptualise a system-to-be-governed in such ways that its core features can serve as an operational basis for assessing its contribution to governability. Too often governability is seen only as a quality of a governing system and its ability to govern a particular system-to-be-governed. However, the character of the system-to-be-governed also affects the governability of a particular societal system. For example, as Kulbicki (2005) observes, tropical coastal marine habitats are generally much more diverse and complex than temperate ones.

“This large-scale component is often overlooked when examining fisheries management, since most models do not take into account such regional factors even if they can play major roles in diversity and consequently in resource levels” (Kulbicki 2005, p. 48).

Often complexity, diversity and dynamics are seen as nasty complications for governance, and thus can be seen as potential sources of ungovernability (Kooiman, 2003). This may also apply to natural resource systems and not only due to short-sightedness of those governed and those governing, but certainly also to a general lack of interest in developing interdisciplinary insights on these features of these systems at different scale-levels. The papers in this Special Issue are a modest effort in redressing this shortcoming.

3.2 Governability and the Governing System

Governability from the point of view of the governing system is the capacity to bring about, organize and carry out governing interactions in the face of diversity, complexity and dynamics. On an abstract level governability may be described here as the balancing between the capacity of the governing system and the needs of the system-to-be-governed, with governance interactions playing an intermediary role. Interactive governance theory analyses the governing system in terms of elements, modes and orders of governance as indicated in figure. 2 (see also Kooiman 2003).

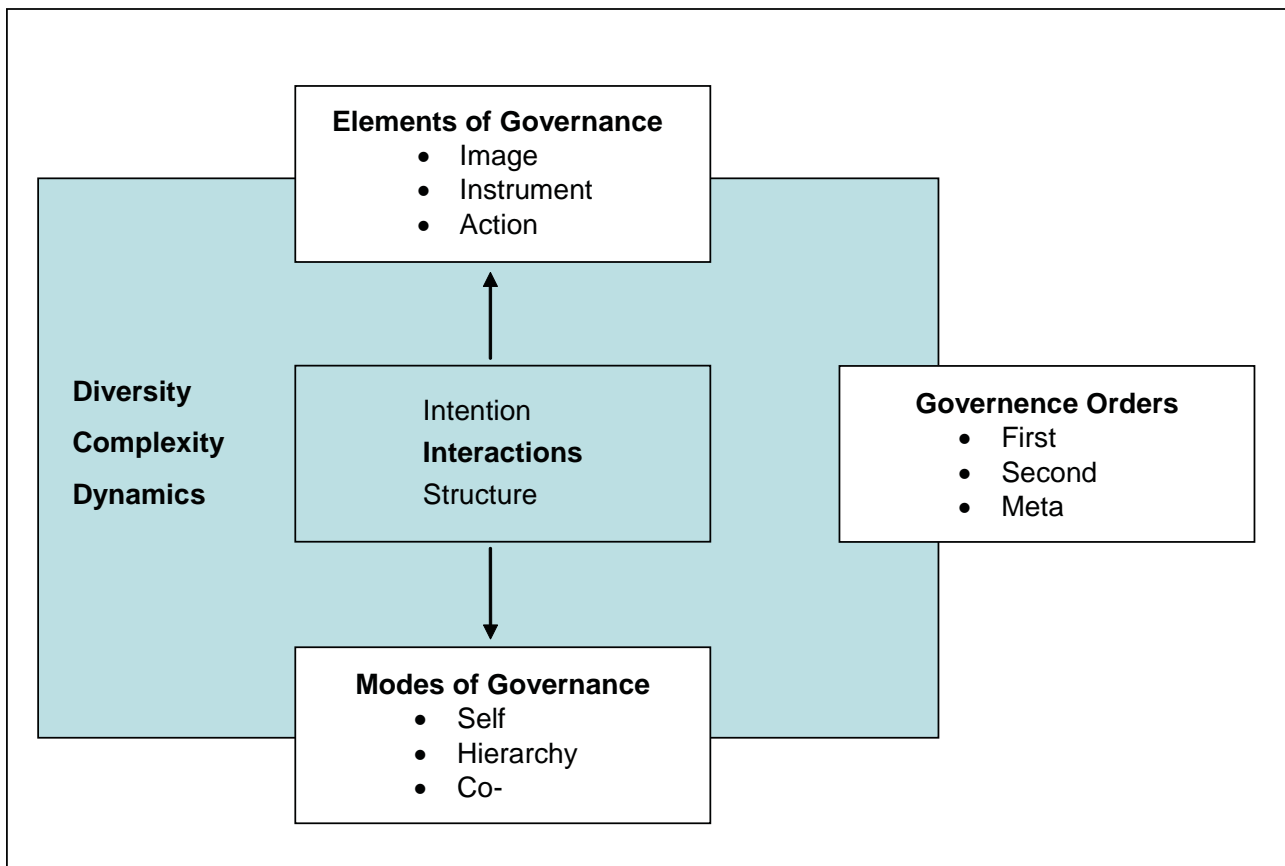


Figure 2. Components of the interactive governance model

3.3 Elements of Governance

As an intentional activity, interactive governance consists of three elements: images, instruments and action.

Images constitute the guiding lights as to the how and why of governance. They come in many types: visions, knowledge, facts, judgements, presuppositions, hypotheses, convictions, ends and goals. Images not only relate to the specific issue at hand but also contain assumptions on fundamental matters such as the relationships between society and nature, the essence of humankind, and the role of government. The main question is not whether actors involved in governance possess images - because everyone does - but how explicit and systematic they are.

The Tragedy of the Commons as coined by Hardin (1968) is undoubtedly the most influential image governing fisheries (and maybe natural resources in general). It predicts the inevitable depletion of a natural resource if exploitation is left to those using it. The assumption made is that fishermen

are individually motivated to catch more fish even when the harvest is already on the decline, thus causing a tragedy for all. One response is for the state to impose restraining measures; others, however, propose privatizing the commons, arguing that private ownership will provide sufficient incentive for restrained behaviour. Both lines of argument are based upon strong but contrasting governance images (McGoodwin 1990; Wilson *et al.* 2003).

Instruments link images to action. They are not a neutral medium – in fact, their design, choice and application frequently elicit strife. The range of instruments available to influence societal interactions is extremely wide. Instruments may be ‘soft’; e.g. information, bribes or peer pressure. They may also have roots in the legal or financial realms, and involve court cases, taxes, permits or fines. There are also the ‘hard’ instruments of physical force. It is clear that the choice of instruments is not free; one’s position in society determines the range available. In addition, instruments have a varying range of applicability, some being general and others specific, and they often show a dynamic of their

own, e.g. the individual transferable quota (ITQ) as a management instrument to curb over-fishing has become a fashion world-wide, although it was not designed at all for that purpose (Bavinck *et al.* 2005 (b) 317 ff).

The last element of interactive governance is *action*; i.e., putting instruments into effect. This includes the implementation of policies according to set guidelines, which is a routine affair. However, action may also consist of mobilizing actors in new and uncharted directions. In this case, the actors rely upon convincing and socially penetrating images and sufficient social-political will or support. The governing interactions that are the essence of this perspective emerge succinctly here.

With regard to elements various questions for the assessment of governability emerge. How do governing images, instruments and action elements used by governors contribute to governability? In which way do fact and value systems, resources and social capital contribute to the way governing images are formed, instruments developed and action-potential employable?

3.4 Orders of Governance

The theoretical framework developed here also relates to orders of governance. These can be imagined as three concentric circles nested as in the peels of an onion. The outer ring deals with day-to-day affairs, and is termed first order governance. The second ring - second order governance - deals with institutions, whereas the third - meta-governance - involves debate on the underlying values and principles. The three orders are closely related and always - even when they are not made explicit - available.

First-order governance takes place wherever people and their organizations interact in order to solve societal problems and create new opportunities. It provides the means of solving the constant stream of problems which surface in the system-to-be-governed - problems of supply, price, market, employment, work satisfaction, etc. In diverse, complex and dynamic societies, first order governance faces special challenges. It starts with the identification of problems, a process which takes place first of all in the minds of societal actors. The first step in the governance process is therefore the identification and formulation of societal problems, whereby the latter are distinguished from private problems by

their scale and shared nature. Once problems, and problem systems, have been identified, attention shifts to the solution space. It is important throughout to retain in the analysis the diversity, complexity, dynamics and scale of situations, as only then will images remain close to reality.

Second order governance focuses on the institutional arrangements within which first order governing takes place. Here, the term 'institution' denotes the agreements, rules, rights, laws, norms, beliefs, roles, procedures and organizations that are applied by first-order governors to make decisions. Institutions provide the framework within which first order governance take place, and constitute the meeting ground for those being governed and those governing. They provide the criteria against which success and failure are measured. Second order governance implies the reconsideration and adaptation of the parameters of first order governance. As *Fish for Life* (Kooiman *et al.* 2005) demonstrates, many of institutions supposed to govern capture fisheries are not up to the standards needed to fulfil that task effectively. In many developing countries, organizational structures have been copied from developed countries, not considering the completely different task they are confronted with. *Fish for Life* argues that in many cases the nation state is still the main governing institution while in many cases the problems fisheries are facing are of a scale that states are not able to handle properly. International institutions, on the other hand, are often too weak to fill this gap (Jentoft *et al.* 2005, 173 ff).

Meta-, or third order governance feeds, binds, and evaluates the governing exercise. Many principles govern activities in relation to natural resources. For example, the principles of sustainability and responsibility are recognized almost universally. In meta-governance, governors and governed alike take each other's measure in formulating norms by which to judge each other and the measuring process too. In response to recent developments and concerns in world fisheries, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations developed a Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, (CCRF, FAO 1995), which provides a principled framework for policymakers around the world. In conformity with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), CCRF applies to all fisheries, whether on the high seas, within the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), in territorial waters or in inland

waters. The goal is to establish principles and international standards for responsible fisheries, defined in relation to the effective conservation, management and development of living aquatic resources, with due respect for ecosystems and biodiversity. For the assessment of governability, orders have special importance. The crucial questions are: Are the three governing orders in a societal system complementary to one another, or are they at odds? Does each order receive adequate attention?

3.5 Governability and Governance Interactions

In the reality of modern societies an enormous variety in governance interactions can be observed. From the actor perspective they can be ordered into a few major categories: participatory, collaborative and policy or management interactions. At the structural level we find types called self-governance, co-governance and hierarchical governance (see Kooiman 2003 for the conceptual basis of these distinctions).

For assessing governability, it is important to know how social-political actors as individuals but also as societal and governance entities - such as organizations, groups, movements or other coagulated forms of collective action - participate in governing interactions. Where does such participatory action come from? Who acts and who reacts? What are the issues at stake, what do they look like, and what are their inputs and outputs?

The character of *participatory* interaction is basically determined by the responsiveness of those governing and of those governed. For the latter category such responsiveness has been called the 'repertory' of activities which they command and the resources needed for this (Barnes and Kaase 1979). This repertory is wide: voting, letter-writing and protesting as predominantly individual forms of activism, and protests, boycotts and participating in a movement or being a member of a focus or action group as more collective practices. Conceptually we see participatory interactions as directed from the system-to-be-governed to the governing system. Social movements are the classical example of this kind of spontaneous, loosely organized form of governance interaction.

The importance of *collaborative* forms of governance interactions is growing. Why are groups, organizations and authorities willing to share their activities for governance purposes and aim to do things together

instead of doing them alone? Often mutual interdependencies are mentioned as the main reason for such collaborative or co-operative interactions (Kooiman 2003). Partnerships between public and private entities are a popular form of such collaboration, but collaborative interactions between companies and NGOs are also found, although their motives may differ. Companies seem to be compliance-, risk-, value- or opportunity-driven, while motives for NGOs can be framed in terms of funding, capabilities or mission (Austin 2006). The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), created in 1996 by the World Wildlife Fund and Unilever, is an example of collaboration between market and civil society. It is an independent body overseeing certification and labelling for fish and fisheries products. MSC rewards environmentally responsible fisheries management and practices by permitting products emanating from such fisheries to bear its logo. By 2002, over 105 product lines in 10 countries across the world carried the MSC logo (Thorpe *et al.* 2005, 128).

Policy and management interactions are interventionist initiatives of governing systems aimed at having an impact on a system-to-be-governed. Public authorities possess numerous ways of interaction, dressed in policy terms, to bring about politically preferred societal changes (Mayer *et al.* 2005). Management is seen as a way to organize these interactions according to criteria of efficiency and effectiveness. Stakeholder identification, for example, has become a popular (interventionist) tool in this respect (Bryson 2004: 32-33). For example a study of stakeholder influence in the planning process of coastal zones of Norway shows that their salience is reliant on a) their power to influence this process, b) perceived legitimacy of their demands and c) the urgency of these claims. It also shows that interests 'on the rise' in social and economic importance such as aquaculture and tourism and those on the 'decline' as capture fisheries are represented in these governance interactions, but their influence is accordingly to this position (Buanes *et al.* 2004).

At the structural level three modes of governance can be distinguished, self-, co-, and hierarchical governance. These three modes roughly correspond to the three interaction modes at the action level of governance. All societies demonstrate, and require, mixes of these three governance modes, and all three modes contribute in specific ways to the role

governing systems play in maximizing governability. In capture fisheries, the three modes of governance all influence governability.

In modern society, *self-governance* refers to situations in which actors take care of themselves, outside the purview of government. Liberal political thinking typically highlights societal self-governing capacities, while socialist oriented ones downplay them. It must be emphasized here, that self-governance is not necessarily a government-created capacity, but comes about on its own accord. In fact, if a capacity for self-governance is not sustained, societal governance is an impossible task. The collective action school has made the most systematic analysis of self-governance with regard to the exploitation of common pool natural resources, such as capture fisheries (Ostrom 1990).

The essential element of *co-governance* is that societal parties join hands with a common purpose in mind, and stake their identities and autonomy to this process. Much attention has been devoted to co-governance and to the opportunities that it offers. In capture fisheries, a form of co-governance called co-management has been particularly influential (Wilson *et al.* 2003). Co-governance is much broader than the other governance modes and implies the use of organized forms of interaction for governing purposes. Governance theory contains numerous manifestations of co-governance, including communicative governance, public-private partnerships, networks, regimes and co-management (Kooiman 2003).

Hierarchical governance is the most classical mode, and is characteristic for the interactions between a state and its citizens. It is a top-down style of intervention, expressing itself in policies and law. Steering and control are the key concepts here. In recent years, perceptions of hierarchical governance have become redefined under the influence of market ideas and concepts like managing and client orientation (Ferlin *et al.* 2005; Lynn 2006). The state nonetheless remains the central governance unit in modern society. This is also the case in fisheries, although in many there is a tendency to decentralize actual control.

Power relationships and social-political cultural traditions find expression in governance interactions.

For example, it is often said that the Anglo-Saxon social-political culture does not stimulate formal interactions between governors and governed, in contrast to the continental tradition, where these are enabled and often institutionalized. Such differences may also explain why co-governing interactions, such as co-management schemes in fisheries, are more common in some political cultures than in others (Wilson *et al.* 2003). Scale is also an important feature in governance interactions. Market parties, such as multinational companies, may interact with NGO's at the global level, while at the local or national level they do not interact at all. Although power and influence certainly deserve to be taken into consideration when studying governance and analyzing governability, in fisheries they constitute a neglected research subject. Jentoft (2007b) argues that power and influence are general concerns in social sciences, resurfacing at regular intervals because applying influence and bringing power into play are facts of life in general. And as Bavinck (2001, 2005) has shown in his study on fisheries along the Coromandel Coast of India, power plays an important role also in the dialectic of sea tenure systems. He distinguishes two sub-sectors, a relatively egalitarian, small-scale fishery, in which religious attitudes permeate everyday life, and a trawler fishery, in which the laws of capitalism colour the dynamic. Every participant in the latter fishery, which displays a high degree of labour differentiation, strives to maximize returns. Power is an essential ingredient in both forms of social organization and sea tenure, playing an important role in the relationship between the fisheries sub-sectors. The Fisheries Department, as one arm of government, has deeply influenced the balance of power at sea in favour of trawler fishers particularly in the sub-sector's formative phase. But it has not always sided with the trawler fishers, conscious as it is of the fact that small-scale fishers constitute a substantial vote bank (Bavinck 2005).

It is important to note that governance interactions have intended and unintended consequences, the latter result from tensions among the goals, interests and purposes of actors, as well as among actors per se and their structural environment. In such scenarios, governance emanates from many sources because many actors strive to address the issues that emerge along their paths. As society does not pause, and is never in equilibrium, the totality of these governance

efforts is like a many hands moulding clay on a potter's wheel. Some hands have an advantage over others, but never such that they completely determine the shape of the pot being created. Moreover, unlike a potter's clay, actors who are being governed respond to the hands moulding them. Therefore, governance is not merely something that governors do, but a quality of the totality of the governing interactions among those governing and those governed – it is itself a set of interactions.

4. Conclusion

In this paper we have provided an outline of the interactive governance perspective and the concept of governability taking examples from capture fisheries and aquaculture. The next step is to develop and test qualitative and quantitative measures of governability, making use of empirical case studies at different scale-levels. Considering the strengths, weaknesses, and challenges of governance outlined above, opportunities for improving governability are generally vast. For this purpose, the scale and scope of the governing system may be matched with the features of the system-to-be-governed. Meanwhile the possibilities afforded by the pattern of governance interactions are to be explored. This involves promoting partnerships between governing institutions, across geographical and sectoral boundaries. In previous publications (Bavinck *et al.* 2005a; Mahon *et al.* 2005), we have also noted the importance of dialogue about principles and values guiding governance. In addition, we suggested the need for building learning into governance processes. All these opportunities can be pursued only, however, after the governability status of the societal system in question is assessed. It is toward developing this concept and methodology that this special issue is devoted.

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