

The effects of strategic workshops with housing associations

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In 1988, housing associations in the Netherlands experienced a fundamental change. Until that time, the Dutch government took a large responsibility in maintaining the associations' goals: administering houses and apartments. Subsidies were provided to enable associations to build a large amount of their stock in the low rent category. In this way, families with low incomes were provided with houses and apartments at an affordable rent. The situation changed when the government initiated a programme to make associations more independent. The goal of the programme is to have associations operating on a free market, deciding on their own housing policies and thereby generating their own revenues.

Attrivé, a consultancy firm that has a long experience in the field of social housing, offers strategic advice to help corporations in making the transition to the new phase. Having had experience with simulation games in the past, Attrivé decided on developing a system dynamics model for strategic workshops with corporations. The idea was to build a canonical situation model, a model reduced to its essentials so as to be applicable to more than one case. The model was developed in collaboration with two system dynamicists from Nijmegen University (see Vennix, 1996).

Attrivé has conducted a number of strategic workshops with management teams of housing associations. Typically, a project begins by identifying a preliminary formulation of the problem to be modelled. Data are retrieved from documents and by interviewing members of the management team. This information is used to adapt and test the canonical model. The resulting base run is presented to the client team and extensively discussed. Discussing the model results in a further structuring of the problem and the selection of a limited number of policy experiments. In the final phase of a project, consultants of Attrivé conduct and analyse the experiments. The results and policy recommendations are fed back in a final report.

In order to identify the outcome of workshops, which generates useful information to make workshops more effective, Attrivé aims to evaluate projects. The use of the model is expected to contribute to strategic decision making by 1. making participants more aware of their knowledge; 2. changing their knowledge by making it more consistent, realistic, aligned with other members' opinions and by increasing perceived control over strategies. On the basis of Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior a number of specific expectations about the effects of the workshop are formulated, which are subsequently investigated. In this paper, the aim and scope of the research and some preliminary results are described.