The question of which concept is the best concerns more than the systematic, rational identification and assessment of various alternatives. In the front-end phase, the interests and prioritizations of various parties become evident, intervene and lead to decisions that often are far from that which appeared logical and rational at the outset. Hence, understanding this process is as vital as questions regarding the information base and the rational analysis choice of method.

Logic is a means to arrive at the wrong conclusion with complete certainty.

—Gudmund Hernes

15.1 Reason and experience

Reason and experiences are illustrated by the following small experiment. A bottle lies on a window sill, its bottom against the window and sunshine outside. A bee and a fly are inside the bottle, trying to escape. What happens? The intelligent bee flies towards the light. It buzzes constantly against the bottom of the bottle, until it drops dead of dehydration and exhaustion. The fly, with its lower intelligence, flies randomly, in all directions, until it by chance flies out through the narrow bottleneck and escapes. Chance triumphs over reason.

In the front-end phase of a project, we often see much the same thing. The forward march towards a final decision to finance is characterized by mixes of reason and chance. Sometimes one starts with a well thought out strategy. In other cases, strategy is based on happenstance. However, a rational, well-founded starting point is no guarantee of a fitting
decision. The process is influenced by the decisions of stakeholders and politicians. The end result may be something different from the beginning. Correspondingly in other cases, a poor starting point can be improved in a process that more or less depends on chance.

From the bee in the bottle we might learn that it’s futile to rely on reason only, even though most of us are more comfortable with it. If the bottle had been turned around, its mouth towards the window, the bee would have escaped first. Nonetheless, with no latitude for flexibility and chance, we fall out of step with reality and probably reduce our chances of success.

In Chapter 12, realism as a basis for rational choice was discussed, with the conclusion that much of the work of the preparatory phase is equally justified as it helps us get ready for any tactical adaptations in a future uncertain situation, such as making the optimum strategic choice. At the same time, experience shows that strategy work is essential in identifying worthy concepts.

Much of the discussion on front-end phase assessment has focused on the information base used, on the choice of method and on the quality of the decision basis. The IT revolution that started in the late 1960s brought about dramatic change that extended beyond technology. As a consequence, the social sciences have also become increasingly sophisticated. For example, dynamic simulation models have come into use to describe complex social systems.

Since then, many questionable analyses have been presented as credible and have met harsh professional criticism. Consequently, mathematical simulation has increasingly been acknowledged as unsuitable to the analysis of self-adjusting, societal processes. The root problem is that the output of an analysis is no better than the quality of its input data, as reflected in the neologism of quantitative analysis, GIGO, the abbreviation for ‘Garbage In, Garbage Out’. Worse yet, applying simulation models in the social sciences risks ‘Quality In, Garbage Out’; even with good input data, the results may be useless.

In recent years, there’s been a trend of using simpler methods. The methods are simpler in the sense that they go to the opposite extreme in using analytic processes mostly based on qualitative assessment. The methods may be extremely simple and, for example, conflict with basic mathematical principles of stochastic analyses. On the other hand, there’s been greater emphasis on better information bases in such