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Making waves

Reimagining policy transfer in the context of development cooperation

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1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Funded by the Dutch Research Council (NWO) research programme “*Urbanising deltas of the world (UDW)*”, my PhD research forms part of the research project ‘Strengthening strategic delta planning processes in Bangladesh, the Netherlands, Vietnam and beyond’. My position and identity as a researcher were more or less pre-described in the project proposal: I was “*PhD 2*”, a Bangladeshi researcher who was to study “*how and to what extent do participatory planning tools contribute to turning stakeholder asymmetries in motivation, perceived threats and opportunities, and abilities into a productive force of change in the development of strategic delta planning?*”¹. After being selected for the PhD position, I enthusiastically started exploring ways to tackle this question. In the process of doing this, the PhD project and the question itself changed considerably. I use this introductory chapter to explain why and how this happened, something that also serves to outline the broad contours and context of my research trajectory and of the thesis itself. In this introduction chapter I also reflect on how I have become intellectually intrigued by and emotionally attached to the topic of my research – the travels of the Dutch Delta Approach to Vietnam and Bangladesh – as well as to those whose work makes these travels possible.

The initial research focusses on the use and effectiveness of participatory planning tools in Dutch government initiated delta planning processes in Vietnam and Bangladesh did not emerge in a vacuum. It clearly stemmed from the distinct context in which the project emerged and was funded. This context is the broad ambition of the Dutch government to strengthen development cooperation with selected deltaic countries, including my home country Bangladesh. It wants to do this by “*exporting*” their delta planning knowledge and expertise, an aspiration that hinges on branding it as the Dutch Delta Approach (Netherlands National Water Plan 2009–2015; Minkman and Van Buuren, 2019).

¹ From the research proposal “*Strengthening strategic delta planning processes in Bangladesh, the Netherlands, Vietnam and beyond*”, submitted by the research consortium of Dutch, Bangladeshi, and Vietnamese partner organizations to NWO in September 2013. More than a year later in April 2015, I started my PhD journey.



Figure 1.1: Schematic representation of the twelve building blocks of the delta approach (Original source: Rijksoverheid, 2014 in: Minkman & Van Buuren, 2019)

This branding and exporting of Dutch Delta planning expertise happens as part of larger efforts to (i) establish the Netherlands' position - as the "world's water leader" - in global policy institutes and directives, and (ii) to create a wider market for the Dutch Water Sector (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017; International Water Ambition, 2019). This also explains why the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs is one of the funding partners of the Urbanizing Deltas of the World research programme, and thus of my own research project (Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research, n.d.). The research funds thus come with underlying expectations: the research projects and findings would strengthen relations of collaboration between the Netherlands and the countries targeted for receiving Dutch delta planning expertise, and would help improve the transferability of this expertise (Netherlands Ministry of Finance, 2013; Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013). Hence, the initial research plan for my project was designed to assess (and to improve) the performance of three specific planning tools that the Dutch mobilize as part of their efforts to transfer delta knowledge to other countries. I, therefore, consider these planning tools as important embodiments (instances or manifestations) of Dutch delta knowledge and expertise; ways of packaging it to make it mobile enough to make it travel to countries like Vietnam and Bangladesh.

1.2 Knowing the participatory planning tools

As I gathered knowledge about participatory planning tools in the process of developing my research proposal, I started noticing that most scholarly writings do not question the intrinsic effectiveness or ‘goodness’ of these tools. Also, the tool developers I had initial conversations with displayed a strong belief in the tools they developed and used. I learned from the literature and these conversations that the participatory planning tools² (developed by universities, research organizations as well as private companies) serve to help address a key challenge in multi-actor planning processes. The challenge of bringing together actors from a wide variety of sectors who represent different and sometimes conflicting interests; who have different ways of prioritizing and framing problems; and who have different visions for a delta’s future (see for example, Seijger et al., 2016). Planning tools are expected to facilitate participation of and dialogue between diverse actors, and to help sharing information, and creating consent (Terwisscha van Scheltinga et al., 2013; Bucx et al., 2010; Janssen et al., 2006). The tools do this because of how they help summarize and visualize information and plans in clear and easy-to-digest ways.

When critically reviewing the literature, I started realizing that most assessments of planning tools are carried out by their developers and promoters, often with financial support from the same projects that funded their development, promotion or use (Janssen, et al., 2006). Also in the case of the project that I was hired to do, the tool developers and promoters of the three target tools were important partners and co-contributed funds to support the project³. Most studies assess the performance of the tools-in-use against design expectations, often based on research (or test) settings or pilot projects. This mode of analysis does not question the very use of tools, and leaves the merits of their development (and developers) outside of that what is questioned. Most analytical attention is instead directed to the context of use; and trial sessions serve to improve their adoption or methodical use so as to optimize their intended performance. Most research on tools does also not allow for the possibility that the tools do not perform, or perform very differently than expected (Evers et al., 2019). How tools give sense, meaning and direction to the expectations, imaginations, and creativities of both tool developers and those using the tools in delta planning processes remains unexplored (Hasan, 2016). I realized I was not intrinsically interested in the tools itself, but more in the relations between the actors and their relations around the use of these tools in the delta planning processes in Bangladesh and Vietnam. I therefore explored other theories that would enable me to study these relations that give meaning to participatory planning tools and the delta planning.

² I used a wide definition of participatory planning tools, as many authors refer to the planning tools as for example, decision support systems/tools.

³ This is part of the UWD research programme design. Private parties need to contribute time and finances to the project. Also, the academic parties need to keep the private parties as research partners, as this is expected to help them focus on the practical use of their theoretical knowledge development. The hope also is that it will increase the likelihood of private sector parties using the developed knowledge and tools after completion of the research programme.

Insights from Actor-Network Theory (Law, 2009; Latour, 2005) for studying how technologies or knowledges obtain prominence helped me articulate a more agnostic approach for studying participatory planning tools. Rather than positively identifying with their intended purpose, these prompted me to instead more broadly study the role of planning tools in the actor networks that constitute delta planning processes. The most important insight here is that what planning tools are and do changes with changing actors and the network configurations in which they appear. Hence, what a planning tool does or how it performs does not just depend on its internal characteristics, but also on how it is aligned to other technologies, discourses and actors in networks. A planning tool gets its meaning through the numerous ‘others’ (people, technologies, words) it comes across during its development, promotion, and use, and to how these associates themselves with the tool (and its planning output). The implication of this theorization is a realization that participatory planning tools do not necessarily perform the way they are expected to on the basis of their design features (Hasan, 2016); their ‘behaviour’ and performance may be unpredictable and unanticipated (Hasan, 2016).

1.3 Engaging with people involved in delta planning

After successfully defending my research proposal - in which I proposed an examination of planning tools in delta planning following the Actor-Network theorization discussed in the previous section - I went to Vietnam and Bangladesh to collect data about one of the tools identified for the study, (participatory) scenario development⁴. Using a snowball sampling method, I traced and identified the actors involved in the use of the tool in first the development of the Mekong Delta Plan (MDP) and later the Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100 (BDP 2100). In the semi-structured interviews, I focused on getting to know and discuss their activities, experiences, expectations and opinions about the use and outcomes of this tool. I noticed how the interviewees were cautious about expressing their ideas and views about the outcomes of the use of the scenario development tool. Some even displayed discomfort when being invited to reflect on what they did and achieved. Particularly the Dutch and Bangladeshi seemed reluctant to openly share their ideas with me. But this may be caused by how, as a Bangladeshi studying in the Netherlands, I find it easier to notice the discomfort and unease in Dutch and Bangladeshi people than in those born in Vietnam.

In line with carrying out the in-depth interviews, I managed with the help of some interviewees to gather and analyse unpublished planning reports and reviews, meeting

⁴ In the Dutch delta planning, the scenario development promotes as a tool that helps describing plausible situations of what futures may hold (i.e., scenarios) in terms of external factors, mainly socioeconomic development, and climate change (Van Aalst et al. 2016). In planning workshops, the developers construct and/or share developed scenarios with invited users by using narratives, maps, schematic representations of historical and projected data, and modelling (e.g., hydrological, climate). They construct four scenarios by placing the two external drivers on the x and y axis of a four quadrant matrix, mapping them in terms of influence and uncertainty. The Dutch organization Deltares promotes and used the tool in Vietnam and Bangladesh for communication and creation of consent between participating actors to identify planning strategies, and measure their robustness on the basis of developed scenarios (Deltares, 2014).

minutes and official letters. I also closely observed the then ongoing development process of the BDP 2100. My engagement with the BDP 2100 process was more than with the MDP, as in the first case the process was still ongoing while I was researching it (the MDP was heading into a next phase of implementation following its completion in 2013). Attending (often closed door) planning events was interesting as it allowed me to capture the planning process from close-by, observing the interactions between my interviewees and between them and others from the larger BDP 2100 process. In these events, those with whom I was yet to get familiar would sometimes sceptically ask who I was and how I got access to the meeting. This confirmed my impression that the process of delta planning is a well-guarded one. This is true also in terms of how people allow themselves and others to talk about it and make sense of it. Many of those whom I talked to preferred roughly sticking to the official story, perhaps because they invested so much in making it happen.

I decided to invest more time in building a relation of collegiality and trust with them. My hope was following this approach would help to convince many of my interviewees that even the details that they considered mundane or trivial – for instance about their more off-stage or informal actions and efforts – were important to patch together the story of use of the planning tools in the development of a Delta Plan. I thus considered building collegiality and trust as a useful entry-point for understanding the actors and networks of the delta planning which formed part of the tool's use. Also in identifying the actors and participant observation of the delta planning, I noticed that being a Bangladeshi, a young woman of colour (with adequate amount of melanin in her skin) I do not easily fit in the usual older male dominating, engineering mind-set centred delta planning networks in Bangladesh, the Netherlands, and Vietnam. In my appearance and sometimes in initial impressions and assumptions of some actors and/or interviewees I appeared as an 'outsider' who is trying to understand their trusted and well-guarded networks.

In building collegiality and trust, I decided that adopting the stance of a storyteller was a useful one. I tried becoming a storyteller who is not invested in or automatically convinced about the 'goodness' of delta planning tools, or of the effectiveness of delta planning processes modelled after a Dutch example. I learned to become someone whom people involved in delta planning can trust with stories of their work, experience and opinions. The advantage of calling myself a storyteller, is that it made it possible for many versions or accounts of delta planning processes to co-exist. By avoiding or postponing assessment of which version is better, my storytelling stance created room for multiple experiences and practices of delta planning. Positioning myself as a storyteller in this way (who is telling and combining the stories of the people she meets, talks with, and interviews) helped me to remain open and curious, and triggered my critical awareness of how and why certain versions of delta planning dominate. My storytelling approach was also useful in bringing together different actors – without glorifying or demeaning any one - in a timeline plot that involves moments of reversal and recognition. In adopting a storytelling position, I made conscious use of my own positionality and identity as a Bangladeshi young academic who

is curious to understand delta planning processes without prior assumptions about what or who is good or bad, even though her doctoral research is funded by the Dutch government.

While still using the scenario development tool as an entry point for conversation, I began asking questions about the overall work of the involved actors in the development of the MDP and the BDP 2100. I (re-)approached some of the interviewees and those others who had been actively involved in the overall development of the MDP and the BDP 2100. I (re-)introduced myself as ‘a storyteller interested in knowing about their engagement in delta planning; a storyteller whom they can trust with stories of their work, experiences, opinions while remaining anonymous’. This approach resonated well with most of the interviewees. Many of them (gradually) opened up and took much time to share and explain what they knew about, did in the making of (also with/for whom), and thought of the MDP and the BDP 2100 and of the other actors involved in the planning processes (among others). Many of these conversations were lively and engaging. Once, a discussion with a Dutch interviewee was so animated and interesting that I even decided to miss my flight from Hanoi to Ho Chi Min City that was scheduled after the interview. Following this approach also sometimes sparked tension, and in some occasions my curiosity and interest caused suspicion or irritation. Once a Bangladeshi government official for instance rebuked me for asking ‘unnecessary provocative’ questions when I requested him to reflect more on some of his specific work and on the specific outcomes of the scenario development in the BDP 2100. In some cases, the interviewees were reluctant initially to share anecdotes of tensions, frictions or difficulties that conflicted with accounts of delta planning development as a smooth, rational, and linear process, perhaps also because such accounts seemed to shed doubts on their own professionalism. But in most cases, the interviewees became less cautious and more enthusiastic once engaged in more in-depth conversations, conversations in which I displayed interest in and respect for their work and ideas. Overall, once the main actors involved in delta planning processes became convinced of my trustworthiness and integrity and started understanding my interest in the actors and actions behind the plan, they became keen to keep me up-to-date about the nitty-gritty details of the negotiations required to make progress. In Bangladesh, I had the impression that I sometimes knew more than others about what had happened or was going on. I became a participant observer in the true sense of the word.

With planning tools as the entry-point and inspired by Actor-Network Theory approaches, I collected empirical data that gradually yielded an account of the transfer of Dutch delta knowledge that differed considerably from more official versions of what happens. In what follows, I discuss this in more detail and explain why I decided that it is important to also tell this other story of the travels of the Dutch Delta Approach – and how I changed my research objectives accordingly.

1.4 Creating my own research path based on engagements with people

An important initial finding of my first round of fieldwork, and very much confirming my theoretical assumptions, was that how (effectively) a planning tool is used in a delta planning process is contingent on those who use it (or not) and on the wider context in which Delta Plan development happens. This finding resonated with what some of the interviewees told me: ‘the tool (scenario development) did nothing; it is the people who used it’. When learning more about the tremendous effort, dedication, struggle, disappointments, and creativity of those involved in delta planning, I realized that a focus on just tools would reveal little about delta planning processes, or about the travel of Dutch delta planning knowledge. Worse, it would also not yield much with which to answer my initial research question about what tools do. This is when I decided that I would mobilize my agnostic framework to not just examine planning tools, but to instead more broadly study the travels of the Dutch Delta Approach to Vietnam and Bangladesh. My first field visits and interviews yielded ever more details about the actions, motivations and strategies of the different actors involved in this process, and in how they themselves make sense of and justify what they do. My respect and admiration for them grew when I became aware of the many (sometimes difficult and long winding) negotiations, diplomatic, convincing, and networking efforts that they engaged in to develop something like a Delta Plan. This is partly why I found it ever more striking to realize that most (formal) accounts of the transfer of delta planning (or even of policies more generally) to other countries remain relatively silent about the actors involved and their actions.

Some interviewees (those with whom I developed collegiality) advised against my drawing attention to ‘what happens behind the scenes’ when a Delta Plan is transferred or developed. They feared that the stories that I wanted to tell would contain sensitive information, and warned me about how this could have negative repercussions to my PhD research and future career. Taking these warnings to heart, it is important to note here that the intention of the thesis’ focus on actors, actions and networks is not to damage reputations - for instance by suggesting wrong intentions or hidden interests – or deny the existence of friendships, collegiality, and collaboration. On the contrary, my aspiration is precisely to show more of the ‘do-ers behind the deed’ in transferring delta knowledge and developing delta plans. In both countries, but especially in Bangladesh, it became very quickly clear to me that the development of the Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100 was possible thanks to a long history of collaboration and friendship between Bangladeshi and Dutch individuals. These have not just emerged because both countries are deltaic countries (something that facilitates cooperating in the water management and delta planning domain), but also because of shared interests in amongst other agriculture, education, business and wider geo-politics. Rather than talking about these individuals and the relations between them in generic or abstract terms - as if they were mere representatives of their respective countries and professions - or talking about their actions and interactions as if these are marginal to the

process of policy transfer, I aspired to make them central to my explanation. Through this PhD research, I myself have become a part of the networks that constitute the larger ‘Dutch-Bangla friendship’, and I feel responsible for helping maintain it. I am convinced that to do this well, it is important to more explicitly thematise and reflect on the nature and dynamics of these relations.

While studying the BDP 2100 planning process, some of the Bangladeshi interviewees hinted to me that adhering to the official story is also important because it forms part of wider efforts to maintain the longstanding diplomatic and friendly relations between the Netherlands and Bangladesh. I indeed noted that some of the people involved felt uncomfortable with me drawing attention to or revealing the negotiations and discussions that accompany delta planning transfer and development processes. They feared this would damage the carefully crafted brand of the Dutch Delta Approach, also because zooming in on the details of delta plan development processes in Vietnam and Bangladesh reveals that these are very different from each other as well as from the Dutch example. The promotional narrative that positions the Netherlands as a model for others suggests that because deltas across the world face common problems, they need a common policy solution: the Dutch Delta Approach for sustainable delta management (Zegwaard et al., 2019; Netherlands Water Partnership, 2014). This narrative rests on the idea that Dutch delta planning expertise is better or more advanced than that of for instance, Bangladesh and Vietnam (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). In theoretical terms, the narrative adheres to the idea of policy transfer as diffusion (Stone et al., 2020; Porto de Oliveira and Pal, 2018; Dolowitz, 2017; Latour, 1986). By assuming that there is a need for transfer, or that transfer is good, this conceptualization of transfer implicitly identifies with and hopes to support those who initiate or promote it. In this sense, telling the transfer of the Dutch Delta Approach as a story of diffusion is useful in marketing, as it serves the purpose of positioning a product – in this case the Delta Approach – as something attractive and desirable that can bring about many benefits for other deltaic countries. But it is not useful for explaining what happens between the engaged actors and in the delta planning process.

1.4.1 Revised problem statement

When described in terms of diffusion, analyses of transfer of a policy model – in this case the Dutch Delta Approach - ascribe the mobility of a policy or its capacity to travel to its intrinsic quality, often using some reference to the advanced state of development of its place of origin as an indicator of this quality. In the context of development cooperation, policy models are expected to travel from economically, technologically, or institutionally more advanced places to places that are considered less advanced. The belief or assumption is that the adoption of the transferred policy by the country of destination will help bring about advancement, development, or progress. By making the contents of that what travels an important cause of its mobility, and by more or less assuming that the meaning of development (some form of economic growth) is given, the diffusion theory makes it difficult to see, acknowledge and understand the actions of those involved in making transfer

happen. Also, the diffusion narrative both assumes and creates a hierarchy in knowledge and expertise between the origin and the destination of policy transfer. It represents transfer as a rather unilateral process that is importantly steered by its initiators. As a result, what largely remains out of the focus in transfer as diffusion stories is the object of transfer itself: the precise contents of what that makes its transfer happen, or not, and what that is transferred.

1.4.2 Revised research objective

My dissatisfaction with the transfer-as-diffusion narrative led me to revise the main objective of this thesis. I became interested in exploring ways of conceptualizing and discussing policy transfer in international cooperation contexts that allowed recognizing not just the agency and influence of the senders or initiators of the transfer, but also that of the ‘receivers’. In other words, I wanted to tell the story of policy transfer more symmetrically or horizontally. To do this, I reviewed the literature on policy transfer. Most of the literature of policy science and/or water management indeed seems concerned with reflecting on and recommending how to do transfer better (Shipan and Volden, 2012; Stone, 1999). Yet, there is also a much more critical stream of scholarship, with some scholars for instance exposing policy transfers as a form of neo-colonialism (Biriukuva, 2019) or as an exponent of neo-liberalism-at-work (Büscher, 2019). What these debates have in common is that they start the analysis from an opinion of policy transfer as either ‘good’ or ‘bad’. My interest is not so much to (help) qualify whether the transfer of the Dutch Delta Approach is something positive or not. While it is not always possible to completely stay away from quality judgments, my first interest and objective is to rather agnostically document and analyse how policy models emerge and obtain relevance outside of their place of origin.

1.5 Research outline

Towards the research aim, I used a (semi-)ethnographic approach to document the development of the MDP and the BDP 2100 (details in Chapter 2, p.138, and Chapter 3, p.33). Taking inspiration from the Sociology of Translation of Science and Technology Studies (Latour, 2005, 1986) and the anthropology of development cooperation (for example, Li, 2007), I experimented with a conceptualization of the transfers of the Dutch Delta Approach to Vietnam and Bangladesh as a process of translation. This is indeed a more agnostic way of representing and understanding what happens when a policy model travels, one that does not a priori identify with the ‘goodness’ of that what is transferred, nor primarily intends to support the originators of transfer. The theorization of transfer as translation forms the backbone of the thesis.

In the following chapter (Chapter 2), I discuss what the conceptualization of the transfer of the Dutch Delta Approach as translation means for the case of Vietnam. The chapter draws attention to the work that goes into making the Delta Approach useful elsewhere – in this case work of many Dutch as well as Vietnamese actors in Vietnam. It also shows that the

transfer was enabled by financial and political support, and highlights the importance of relations of trust and diplomacy in advancing the development of a Vietnamese version of a Delta Plan. The chapter also shows that this version significantly differs from the original. The chapter shows that telling the story of policy transfer in terms of translation allows shifting the pre-occupation with the speed or success of transfer to one with the involved people and the relations between them.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the transfer of the Dutch Delta Approach as a process of translation for the case of Bangladesh. Based on an identification of the Dutch and Bangladeshi actors involved in the transfer process and by re-tracing their actions, I document and analyse the efforts of the involved actors to develop a Bangladeshi version of a Delta Plan. The analysis highlights that in the course of the transfer process and because of the negotiations and contestations that the process entailed, the Dutch Delta Approach became something else altogether, something rather different than what happened in the Netherlands or in Vietnam. Like the previous chapter, the chapter concludes that telling the story of transfer as translation is useful as it allows recognizing and giving credit not just to those who initiated the process, but to all involved.

In Chapter 4, I further explore how stories of policy transfer in the context of international cooperation can be told in ways that are more symmetrical, and that allow recognizing the contributions of all involved. I do this by building on and expanding the earlier analyses of the transfer of the Dutch Delta Approach to Vietnam and Bangladesh: by more closely zooming in on the kinds of work needed to make policies travel. Through a systematic categorization of the empirical observations and data, the analysis shows that most of this work consists of efforts to create and maintain alliances and political buy-in. The analysis shows that how the transfer process unfolds is importantly shaped by those with whom the initiators engage and negotiate. The effectiveness of people involved in the transfer process thus does not so much depend on the technical planning or water expertise for which many of them are hired and appreciated, but on their skills in for instance salespersonship, negotiation and diplomacy. I argue in the chapter that recognizing that this is so provides a good basis for rethinking how capacities for doing transfer can be developed and nurtured, and how these are (to be) distributed. Better acknowledging the influence and efforts of those in the recipient countries also usefully troubles simplistic notions of development as a unilateral process of modernization, civilization or advancement that continue to implicitly inform stories of policy transfer-as-diffusion. Acknowledging this, in turn, provides a useful starting point for more explicitly using policy transfer as an opportunity and occasion to engage in more symmetrical exchanges of knowledge and experience between transfer partners.

In Chapter 5, I build on my findings that policy transfer is a relational and dialogical process to re-imagine policy transfer processes. I propose and explore a conceptualization of policy transfer processes as symmetrical conversations. The re-imagination hinges on not a priori positioning those originating the transfer (and their knowledge) as superior to the 'receivers'. I nourished my creative re-imagination by re-engaging in conversations with

many of the interviewees, while I also approached many others actively involved in studying and doing the transfer of the Dutch Delta Approach. I shared my reflections and analyses with them, and invited them to think along with me. I also engaged them in a reflection on how one's positionality matters for knowing and understanding policy transfer.

In Chapter 6, I present a synthesis of the empirical research findings and my reflections on what I have observed, studied and understood as the transfer of the Delta Approach and what its implications are.