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Making waves

Reimagining policy transfer in the context of development cooperation

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THE WORK THAT GOES INTO POLICY TRANSFER: MAKING THE DUTCH DELTA APPROACH TRAVEL¹

Abstract

The government of the Netherlands is active in framing the country's delta planning expertise as a must-have solution for sustainable delta management in other countries. Texts that explain or promote the transfer of delta planning expertise tend to portray it as something that happens because of the intrinsic qualities of this expertise. The starting point of this paper is discomfort with this portrayal, a discomfort that importantly stems from the hierarchy it assumes between the country of origin and the country of destination, and from how it prioritizes the initiators of transfer in explaining what happens. We mobilize insights from the sociology of translation, the anthropology of development cooperation and scholarship on policy entrepreneurship to explore how policy transfer can be told in ways that are more symmetrical and that allow recognizing the contributions of all involved. We use empirical material about the travels of the Dutch Delta Approach to Vietnam and Bangladesh to reveal that policy transfer in these cases mainly consisted of two types of work: maintaining or developing alliances and creating political buy-in. The effectiveness of the actors involved in this work does not so much depend on the technical planning or water expertise for which many of them are hired, but on their salespersonship, diplomacy and skills in negotiation and dialoguing. 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. We show how it also supports more dialogical ways of writing and talking about transfer, ways that foreground it as a process of mutual learning between 'initiators' and 'receivers'.

¹ This chapter is under review as: Hasan, S., Evers, J., & Zwarteveen, M. (under review by the Water Alternatives). The work that goes into policy transfer: Making the Dutch delta approach travel.

4.1 Introduction

The Dutch government exports its Delta Approach² to selected deltaic countries, presenting it as a *must-have for sustainable delta management* (Netherlands Water Partnership, 2014, p.10). Next to supporting others in making their deltas climate resilient, an important hope and expectation that accompanies new delta-collaborations is that these will help make the transition from aid to trade (International Water Ambition, 2019, Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013). The Dutch government, therefore, proactively mobilizes efforts and resources to brand the Delta Approach as an attractive export product (Minkman and Van Buuren, 2019; Minkman, Letitre and Van Buuren, 2019). We use this article to show that in addition to the more visible efforts of branding and promotion, transferring the Delta Approach to countries like Vietnam, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Mozambique and Myanmar (see for example, Hasan et al., 2020; Ivars and Venot, 2019) also requires efforts and work that is much less visible. This is the work of those engaged in the day-to-day actions needed to make transfer happen: the Dutch actors (bureaucrats, diplomats, NGOs and private sector actors) and their partners in the transfer destination countries. In most representations of the transfer, these people and the work they do hardly figure; they remain under-recognized. As we have explained in more detail elsewhere (Hasan et al., 2020; Hasan et al., 2019), promotional narratives tend to explain policy transfer as a rational process of *diffusion*³, attributing the mobility of the Delta Approach to its inherent qualities. This creates the suggestion that the approach travels almost by itself, making any attention to the involved actors and their efforts of only marginal importance in analyses of transfer processes.

Transfer as diffusion stories assume and confirm hierarchies in knowledge and knowing – in this case about delta planning – between the country of origin and the country of destination. After all, they rest on the idea that Dutch delta planning expertise is better, or more advanced, than that of for instance Bangladesh and Vietnam (Büscher, 2019). In this way, writing about policy transfer as diffusion matches a familiar theorization of development, one that sees development as an almost evolutionary process of modernization, civilization or advancement, with some countries (the wealthier Western world) ranking higher on the ladder of progress than others (Mosse and Lewis, 2006). The modernity of these countries tends to be importantly attributed to technology and science, which is why the transfer of expertise from wealthier to poorer countries is important in strategies to achieve ‘development’. In this same way, transfer as diffusion stories are useful

² In the promotional texts, the Delta Approach appears as a package of twelve planning approaches drawn on from the reputed Dutch Delta Programme (for a brief description: see “*The Dutch delta approach*” by Holland Trade and Invest, a Government of the Netherlands portal: <https://www.hollandtradeandinvest.com/feature-stories/the-dutch-delta-approach>. Retrieved on April 2, 2020).

³ Analyses in terms of diffusion tend to explain differences in spread and pace by a combination of the intrinsic qualities of that what is transferred; the friction or roughness of the route (i.e., the type and number of obstacles faced when traveling), or the responsiveness of the recipient (with words like ‘pioneers’ or ‘champions’ identifying those who are very responsive, and ‘laggards’ marking those who are slow in adopting new ideas or technologies) (Porto de Oliveira and Pal, 2018; Mukhtarov, 2014).

in marketing, as they serve the purpose of positioning a product – Dutch Delta Approach – as something that is attractive and desirable, something that can bring about many benefits and goods.

Our interest in telling the story of policy transfer differently is that there are important reasons to reject the idea of ‘development as evolutionary progress’ on which it is implicitly based. This is both because it becomes increasingly difficult to deny that western ‘development’ and wealth was and is achieved at the cost of mal- and underdevelopment elsewhere: that wealth and poverty are connected by unequal terms of trade and divisions of labour that are maintained through economic, political and military powers (Zwarteveen, 2009). It is also because the debate on climate change forcefully questions what progress – change, modernity, and development – is and should be about. The path of industrialization followed by Western countries can no longer be taken as the standard and model for the rest of the world. The implication is of this is that the Netherlands – and its water and delta expertise – can no longer be unequivocally assumed to be an example for others. This is why we are reluctant to uncritically go along with the idea that Dutch expertise is useful for supposedly less developed countries, the idea on which accounts of policy transfer as diffusion are based. We think there is merit in more agnostically comparing how different countries deal with and have dealt with the challenges of socioecological change in deltas that climate change is compounding, also recognizing the potential of expertise that is not developed in the Netherlands. For us, the idea that deltaic countries like Vietnam, Bangladesh and the Netherlands can learn from each other in their attempts to grapple with uncertain futures is a more attractive starting point to start telling the story of policy transfer.

There are several bodies of theoretical scholarship on policy transfer that potentially make it possible to do this. These shift attention away from that what is transferred - with analyses focusing on the speed and direction of transfer - to the people involved in doing transfer. Both the sociology of translation and anthropological studies of the workings of development cooperation explicitly foreground the actors and their actions in explanations of how and why a policy or technology travels. The sociology of translation conceptualizes transfer as translation, emphasizing that the transfer of a fact, technology or policy model from one place to another always involves adaptations and transformations: it is a process in which involved actors modify, deflect, betray, add on to or appropriate the object of transfer (see Latour, 2005). In a similar vein, the anthropology of the workings of development cooperation maintains that development happens through the active mediation of those who are responsible for making the travel of ideas, technologies or policy models happen (Li, 2007). Inspired by such theorizations, in our previous work we developed accounts of the transfer of the Delta Approach to Vietnam and Bangladesh by tracing the involved actors and documenting their efforts based on their own re-collections and reflections.⁴ By thus making the actors and their efforts much more prominent and central to understanding policy transfer, we showed that the transfer of the Delta Approach is the

⁴ For details of our semi-ethnographic approach see Hasan et al., 2020, p.163.

outcome of the actions of the many actors who happen to be involved (Hasan et al., 2020; Hasan et al., 2019). Our analyses highlighted that what is transferred – the Dutch Delta Approach - changes in the process, sometimes making it hard to recognize the original in the final outcomes.

In this article, we build on these analyses to dive deeper into the kinds of work that actors engaged in policy transfer do in support of our wider ambition to provide an account of policy transfer in more symmetrical terms. Our objective is to characterize the work that goes into policy transfer, as a further step in making it visible and explicitly acknowledging it. For our characterization, we draw on and creatively combine theoretical insights from the already mentioned sociology of translation (Akrich et al., 2002a and 2002b; Callon, 1986) and the anthropology of development (Li, 2007), while we also take inspiration from ideas about policy entrepreneurship (Huitema and Meijerink, 2010; Kingdon, 1984). The policy entrepreneurship literature describes how policy problems and policy ideas are translated into policy decisions (mostly focusing on political agenda setting). Policy entrepreneurs are those actors who actively aim to create alliances in support of specific policy problem diagnoses or solutions. Where much of this scholarship sets out to find ways of supporting policy entrepreneurs in doing their work better, we use it here to more agnostically help characterize and discuss the work done to transfer the Dutch Delta Approach to other countries.

More than focusing on the contents of that what is transferred, these bodies of work draw attention to the practices and behaviours of policy actors in explaining the dynamics (and the success) of processes of policy transfer. They, therefore, provide useful suggestions about possible ways to talk about and identify, define and name the efforts, strategies, actions, and skills of these actors. We make use of these suggestions to typify the activities of those who were involved in the development of the Mekong Delta Plan (MDP) and the Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100 (BDP 2100) (details of actors in table 1, p.6). Rather than literally following the languages and conceptual terms from the reviewed bodies of literature, we have used the spirit of their insights to come up with our own categorization of policy transfer work. One important criterion here was that the actors recognize themselves and what they do in the chosen terms, as it was important for us to embed our analysis in an ongoing conversation about different ways of understanding, doing and organizing processes of policy transfer and learning. To do this, the first author presented and discussed our findings at targeted thematic sessions on delta planning and management between October 2018 and April 2019 in Bangladesh and the Netherlands.⁵ These meetings were attended by expert consultants and government officials who are actively engaged in the transfer of the Dutch Delta Approach, as well as by researchers studying development

⁵ In the Netherlands: at the research synthesis workshop on strategic delta planning on 12 November 2018. In Bangladesh: in the sessions of (a) “*Transdisciplinary Research in Urbanizing Deltas*” at the 7th International Conference on Water and Flood Management on 03 March 2019 and (b) “*Dutch Sector in Water Management*” at the Dhaka Water Knowledge Days 2019 on 27 October.

interventions in the deltas in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Mozambique, Netherlands, Vietnam, and the USA.

Our analysis shows that policy transfer consists of two main types of activities: (1) to create and maintain alliances; and (2) to create political buy-in. Both types of activities are intrinsically social and relational, and build on longstanding bilateral relations and prior development collaborations between the initiators and their transfer partners. We noted that how the transfer process unfolds is importantly shaped by those with whom the initiators engage and negotiate. We also noted that the effectiveness of people involved in the transfer process 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.

In the following sections, we first discuss the insights that we inferred from the three reviewed bodies of scholarship, to arrive at a categorization of transfer work in two main categories. We then present iconic examples from our analyses of the MDP and the BDP 2100 development processes to further explore how an account of policy transfer in terms of work can help make the conversation more symmetrical. We use the final section of this paper with some final reflections about how the transfer of the Dutch Delta Approach can be characterized, discussing it both against more general theorizations of policy transfer and against the ambition to shift the terms of the policy transfer debate.

4.2 Conceptualizing policy transfer as the work of people

As mentioned in the introduction section, in our quest for different ways of conceptualizing policy transfer processes we found inspiration in three bodies of scholarship that share an interest in actors and their actions in policy transfer: the sociology of translation (Akrich et al., 2002a, 2002b; Callon, 1986) the anthropology of development cooperation (Li, 2007; Mosse and Lewis, 2006) and policy entrepreneurship (Huitema and Meijerink, 2010; Kingdon, 1984). In translation terms, Callon (1986) calls those who initiate transfer and try to make it happen the ‘main actors’ and Akrich et al., (2002a) talk about these people in terms of ‘spokesperson(s)’, while Kingdon (1984) refers to them as ‘policy entrepreneurs’. Li (2007) instead calls them the ‘trustees’ (of expertise): those who designate themselves as having the ability and expertise to help solve an identified problem. While using different terms, these different bodies of theoretical work positively resonate with each other in three major ways: (i) their conceptualization of transfer processes as being the work of people; (ii) their consequent emphasis on the actions and strategies of involved actors, and (iii) their attention to the relational and political nature of transfer processes.

First, the three bodies of scholarship conceptualize policy transfer as a complex, iterative process in which different actors negotiate to promote and protect their own interests, or push for their preferred interpretation of whatever it is that is transferred. Methodologically,

thus foregrounding actors and processes implies less attention to what is transferred in favour of attention to how transfer happens by literally following the actors and focusing on what they do and why. Secondly, there are interesting similarities in how the three bodies of work discuss and define what actors involved in policy transfer processes do: their actions, behaviours and strategies. Hence, they all highlight that transfer requires the initial actors to frame a situation in terms of a policy problem and positioning themselves as indispensable in helping solve this problem. Effective policy transfer then importantly entails convincing enough important others of the salience of this problem framing or diagnosis (the particular interpretation of a problem) as well as of the effectiveness of the proposed solution. Doing this importantly hinges on having – building and maintaining – stable alliances with those others: contacts in the forms of relations of trust, friendship and collegiality are crucial to create receptivity for content. Callon (1986) refers the work that goes into framing a problem and convincing other of the validity of this framing as ‘problematization’. Building on Callon (1986), Li (2007) shows how problematization tends to entail a process of rendering intrinsically political problems technical, as this helps position those doing the problematization as the neutral technical experts needed to help solve it. In the terminology of Huitema and Meijerink (2010), these acts of framing are strategies of developing and selling new ideas and building coalitions.

The three bodies of scholarly work provide complementary insights on how actors create alliances and negotiate consent. Callon (1986) identifies four overlapping phases that together constitute a policy (or technology) transfer process. These help name and recognize the ways in which actors actively interpret, construe their roles and relate to the interests of others while trying to make transfer happen. Callon’s phases are: problematization, interessement, enrolment, and mobilization. Callon notes that beyond benevolent attempts to negotiate, convince and entice, persuasion and seduction also happen through manipulations of power and sometimes even consist of coercion. Callon emphasizes that transfer processes always involve translation. This emphasis is useful as a reminder that policies change when they travel, troubling assessment of effectiveness or success in terms of the degree of resemblance to the original. For our purpose in this article, the term translation also serves a useful reminder that that policy processes are characterized as much by the actions and ideas of the ‘receivers’ as by those who initiated them. Primarily focusing on and more positively identifying with those who do transfer and with the goodness of that what is transferred (and therefore somewhat less agnostically), Huitema and Meijerink (2010) use a review of practices in policy transfer from the policy science literature to identify five main strategies. They illustrate these with empirical evidence from water-centric cases. In addition to developing and selling policy ideas and building coalitions, they identify the strategies of the spokespersons or policy entrepreneurs that include recognizing and exploiting windows of opportunity; recognizing, exploiting, creating and/or manipulating multiple venues for policy change proposals; and orchestrating and managing networks. In discussing these strategies, Huitema and Meijerink (2010) describe transfer actors as needing to be perseverant, passionate, reliable, and competitive. In an attempt to

come up with recommendations to help transfer actors become more successful in what they do, they suggest that these actors need to be willing to invest their time, reputation and knowledge, and be flexible and strategic enough to re-frame a policy problem so that it best fits into a particular institutional and social context. They stress the importance of good negotiation and communication skills, as these allow those involved in transfer to act as advocates and brokers of the policy ideas or concepts they promote.

Lastly, all three conceptualizations draw attention to how policy transfer is a deeply political process, with actions and interactions being shaped by power relations that are often outside of their direct realm of influence. Kingdon (1984) emphasizes that transfer actors can only accomplish the development and selling of policy ideas when they align these ideas with larger political goals or ambitions. By mainly locating politics and power as residing in ‘the context’, Kingdon admits that policy transfers are shaped by prevailing political-economic structures and institutions. He appears less interested in examining the workings of power and politics as part of transfer processes. This is different in theorizations of transfer as translation, which more explicitly trace how power is enabled, accepted, and diffused through the transfer process. In particular the forging and creating of acceptance for the distinction between what Li (2007) calls trustees and the ones that are in need of being improved or helped is riddled with political and power hierarchies. Like Latour (1996, 1986) and Callon (1986), Li shows how the power needed to be accepted and respected as a bringer of a solution needs to be actively wielded.

We mobilize these bodies of work to examine how they allow tracing, mapping and characterizing the actors involved in and the actions that constituted the transfer of the Dutch Delta Approach to Vietnam and Bangladesh. Our account of the transfer of the Delta Approach presents it as a continuous process of problematization and translation in which the involved actors have to work hard to (i) create and maintain alliances, and (ii) create political buy-in (see figure 2). In identifying the actors, we were just not interested in those who initiated the transfer, but also in those actors whom they approached and interacted with. We call the two groups of actors whom we followed in the transfer of the Dutch Delta Approach to Vietnam (a) Delta Warriors – the Dutch experts involved in the development of the MDP and (b) Retired Reformists - a group of Vietnamese retired academics and experts. In the Bangladesh case we followed (a) Dutch Water Flagbearers – a group of Dutch government officials, (b) Water Friends - a group of Dutch and Bangladeshi consultants and (c) Macroeconomic Supporters – a group of government officials from the General Economic Division of the Bangladesh Planning Commission. We have given the groups of actors these somewhat allegorical, innocuous names to protect their identity and also because of some of them explicitly requested to remain anonymous. In characterizing the work of these actors, we give particular attention to how they created demand, receptivity and enthusiasm for Dutch delta planning knowledge and expertise, as this was the phase of the transfer process that we were able to closely study. We also focus on understanding how they managed to forge alliances and political connections with a range of others from government, academia and international development organization (among others).

Table 4.1: Actors involved in policy transfer (Source: Author)

Actors	Who are they?	Major designated work
Delta Warriors	<p>a) A group of Dutch consultants selected to develop the MDP. Mostly coming from a (water) engineering background, the experience of these experts mostly stems from their engagement in water projects outside of the Netherlands.</p> <p>b) A former Dutch government official who made a passionate shift in his career to work as a water consultant.</p>	<p>a) To develop the MDP following the Dutch Delta Programme.</p> <p>b) To coordinate the MDP development project.</p>
Dutch Water Flagbearers	A group of delegated government officials mostly from the Dutch Ministries of Foreign Affairs and of Infrastructure and Environment ⁶ , and from the Netherlands Embassy in Bangladesh.	To start with the efforts to create demand, receptivity and enthusiasm for the Delta Approach in Bangladesh.
Macroeconomic Supporters	The chosen representative of the Bangladesh government in developing the BDP 2100. Prominent members of the General Economic Division of Bangladesh Planning Commission, responsible for preparing policy frameworks and (macro)economic development plans in accordance with the government's development goals and political aspirations.	Monitor, supervise and approve the plan contents developed by the consultants.
Plausible-Future Makers	A group of mainly Dutch and some Bangladeshi consultants affiliated with academia, (Dutch) water consultancy and government organizations.	To develop scenarios (plausible futures) for the BDP 2100 following the Dutch Delta Programme.
Retired Reformists	A group of retired, influential Vietnamese water experts.	To convince the Vietnamese government and the Communist Party leaders of the need for and the attractiveness of the MDP.
Water Friends	The consultants of the Delta Preparatory Team. Mobilized by the Dutch government, the core team consists of four Bangladeshi and three Dutch consultants.	<p>To create awareness, support and (political) commitment for the BDP 2100 Formulation Project.</p> <p>To support the Netherlands Embassy in identifying the Bangladeshi agency that can lead the Project.</p> <p>To develop a plan outline.</p>

⁶ Renamed as the ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management in 2009.

4.3 The work that went into transferring Dutch Delta Approach to Vietnam and Bangladesh

In this section, we mobilize the insights from the theoretical bodies of scholarship discussed above to discuss our empirical evidence from the development of the MDP and the BDP 2100.

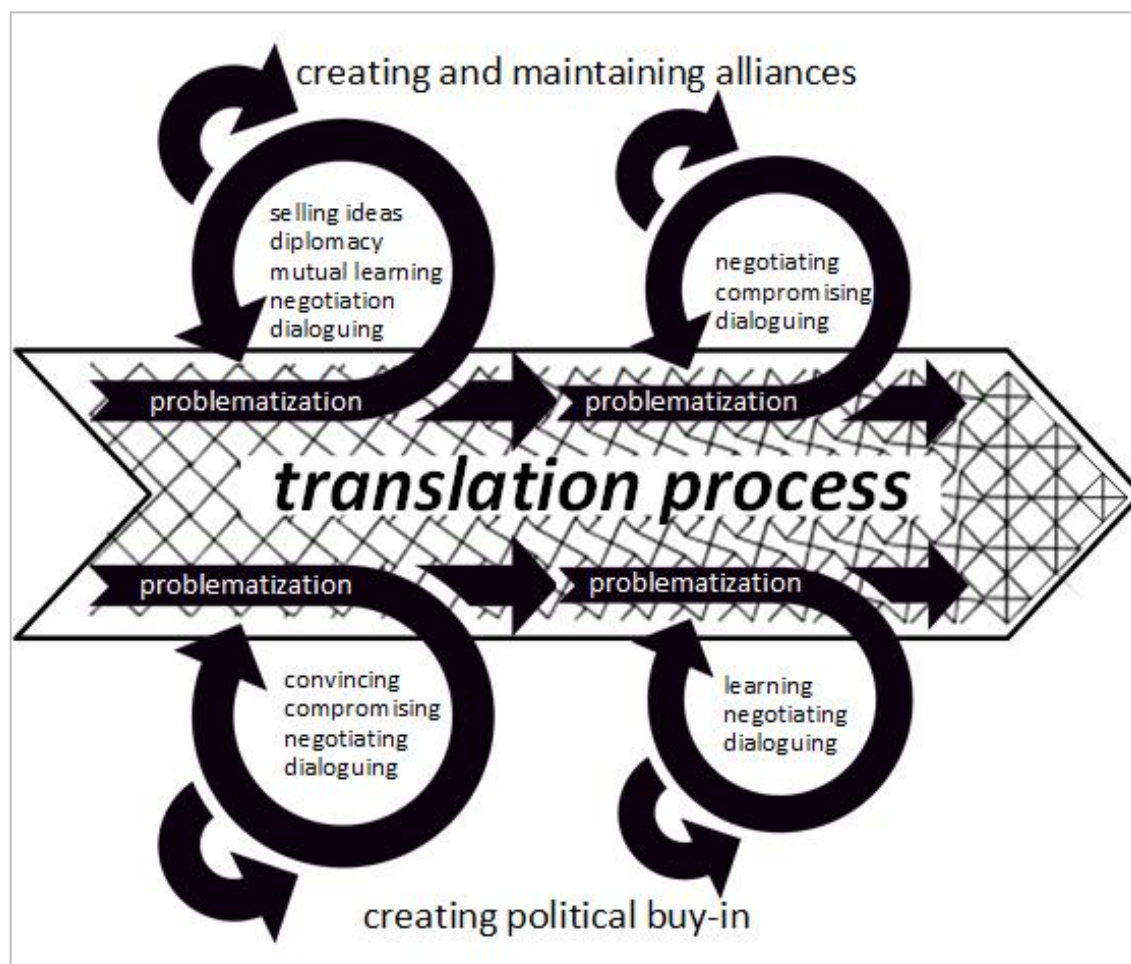


Figure 4.1: The work that goes into the transfer of the Delta Approach (Source: Author)

4.3.1 Creating and maintaining alliances

In both the MDP and the BDP 2100 case, the work of creating and maintaining alliances happened in a specific transfer context which lent it a distinct character: it formed part of long-term bilateral relations between two countries. Hence, the transfer of Dutch Delta Approach followed from prior and ongoing development cooperation programmes on water and beyond (e.g., health, gender, human rights, education, and business). They often built on existing alliances and friendships that were given new significance and shape as part of wider attempts of the Dutch government to re-invent their development cooperation and make it part of a trade agenda (Hasan et al., 2020). Hence, much of the work to create and maintain the alliances that would make the transfer of the Delta Approach possible consisted

of the careful nurturing and reviving of existing relations of diplomacy, friendship and collegiality that already existed between many of the involved actors. As the transfer of the Dutch Delta Approach happened as part of longer development cooperation relations that combine the transfer of financial or economic support with the transfer of expertise, promises or expectations of future funds importantly coloured these efforts (see Hasan et al., 2019, p.1588-89). Also because of this, many actors in Vietnam and Bangladesh were hesitant to be openly critical about or reject the MDP or the BDP 2100, even when many of them did initially were not very enthusiastic. Instead of a widely shared problem diagnosis and broad agreement on a solution, the willingness to go along with developing something akin to a Dutch Delta Plan stemmed from the existence of prior relations of collaboration and the desire to maintain these relations in the future. This perhaps also explains why many of the original ideas that started the process of the transfer were adapted and changed during the negotiations with Vietnamese and Bangladeshi partners. A shared understanding of what had to happen in the respective deltas only gradually emerged as the outcome of many negotiations and interactions, with the Dutch Delta Approach only forming the start of this conversation. What seems to have been at stake during the negotiations was not so much the exact transfer of a Dutch original, but maintaining diplomatic and trade relations. We discuss this in more detail below.

In Vietnam, the Dutch government wanted to use the transfer of its Delta Planning Approach to re-invigorate existing bilateral relations (Hasan et al., 2019). An outcome of the initial Dutch efforts was a new MoU between the two countries on integrated river basin and coastal zone management in 2009. The Dutch saw this MoU as a good basis to start creating Vietnamese interest in, and support for, the Dutch Delta Approach. In contrast, the Vietnamese government saw the renewed MoU as an opportunity to maintain and reinforce their bilateral relations with the Dutch, especially after the planned phasing out of Dutch development aid to Vietnam in 2012. Vietnam also hoped the MoU would help mobilize funds for future water development projects. To convince the Vietnamese counterpart of the usefulness and effectiveness of their delta planning expertise for the Mekong delta, the Dutch government invited a high-level Vietnamese government delegation to the Netherlands. During the visit, they showed them the Dutch Delta Works: large hydraulic engineering structures that are an iconic manifestation of the Netherlands' advanced ability to deal with complex water problems. The Dutch strategy was to convince the Vietnamese government representatives that Dutch delta expertise can help make the Mekong delta in Vietnam safe and resilient, also in view of climate change. Their strategy paid off: the Dutch received a proposal from the then visiting Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister to extend the newly signed MoU into a strategic development partnership. The signed strategic partnership arrangement between the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment, and the Vietnamese Ministries of Natural Resources and Environment (MoNRE) and Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) further paved the way for the Dutch government to start the process of convincing the Vietnamese that they needed a Mekong Delta Plan, modelled after the Dutch example. The Vietnamese government was above all

interested in creating opportunities to widen the scope for future collaborations between the two countries beyond water, to also include business and education. The alliance around the development of a Delta Plan, therefore, was not so much based on a shared problematization, but on its ability to bring together a range of interests and agendas.

In the process of transfer, the Dutch Delta Warriors faced unanticipated challenges in maintaining the enthusiasm and interest from the Vietnamese government officials of MoNRE (Hasan et al., 2019, p.1591). Yet, withdrawal from the project was not an option for the Delta Warriors, not just because it would risk the long-term bilateral relation between the Netherlands and Vietnam, but also because it would damage the reputation of being a water leader that the Dutch government has been carefully building. In attempts to re-ignite interest and support, the Delta Warriors identified new strategic entry-points into the Vietnamese political arena. They approached some highly-reputed, respected and politically well-connected Vietnamese academics and retired senior government officials to help create acceptance and enthusiasm for their ideas. They fondly named these experts Retired Reformists. The Dutch had worked with many of them before in Dutch water projects in Vietnam, and had developed relations of collegiality and sometimes friendship with them.

In developing a MDP, the Delta Warriors outlined a future for the Mekong delta based on agro-business industrialization. The idea to go for one specific future rather than for the broader and more flexible strategic planning framework that resembles the Dutch Delta Plan emerged from the Delta Warriors' concern over the growing socioeconomic disparities and the environmental degradation in the delta. In spite of its contribution to the national GDP through the production of three rice crops per year, much of the Mekong delta is an economically poor and marginal part of Vietnam. In fact, the national triple rice policy is a cause of resentment between the South (where the delta is located) and the North (Hanoi, the political centre) (Benedikter, 2014). Abandoning the triple rice policy in favour of agro-business industrialization was an idea that positively resonated with the Retired Reformists who had long been concerned about the consequences of this policy and its impacts on the delta and its inhabitants, but had so far not been very successful in questioning it.

The future scenarios developed for the Plan projected that agro-business industrialization would potentially create alternative attractive socioeconomic development pathways for the delta as well as for the whole of Vietnam. To create additional support for abandoning the triple rice policy, the Delta Warriors convinced a large number of international development agencies operating in Vietnam that their proposed agro-business strategies would be attractive for new investment projects. A strategic alliance could thus be created between themselves, donor agencies, and the Retired Reformists around the abandonment of the triple rice policy. In the process of creating this alliance, the Delta Warriors and the Retired Reformists took inspiration and learned from each another in imagining a(nother) future for the Mekong delta, one that not necessarily fitted the Vietnamese political consensus about delta management. Later, their alliance became important in brokering agreement to the draft MDP among members of the Vietnamese government.

In the process of breaking up of the initial alliance with MoNRE and establishing a new alliance with the Retired Reformists, the initial problem diagnosis of ‘an unsafe and vulnerable Mekong delta to climate impacts’ changed into ‘increasing socioeconomic degradation in the Mekong delta, in particular the loss of annual target rice production, due to climate change induced rising water’. In the process, an integral part of the Dutch Delta Approach – scenario development – changed. In maintaining the formed alliance, the problem diagnosis had to keep changing until the Vietnamese government was ready to accept a draft of the MDP. The diagnosis at the end of the development of the MDP became: ‘socioeconomic development of the Mekong delta hinges on the implementation of an agro-business industrialization’. As a result, rising water induced by climate change no longer was the main problem, but instead became more of an impact of climate change that the Vietnam need to embrace and strategically adapt to. In conclusion, the development of the MDP was not so much about creating enthusiasm and acceptance for an existing diagnosis and solution, but about creating and maintaining alliances and relations between the two countries. In the process, that what was initially transferred – the Dutch Delta Approach – was translated almost beyond recognition.

In Bangladesh, the Dutch Water Flagbearers pro-actively attempted to create interest for a Dutch Delta Plan among Bangladeshi government officials. In their meetings with Bangladeshi officials, notably from those closely associated with the Prime Minister’s Office, the Flagbearers highlighted how Bangladesh globally ranks among the five most climate vulnerable countries to underscore the importance of integrated, longer-term policy measures.⁷ They argued that existing water-centric plans and development programs in Bangladesh, because of how these address very specific water problems for target stakeholders or regions, would not be sufficient to deal with the impacts of climate change. The Flagbearers also linked the importance of a more integrated delta planning to the Bangladeshi government’s ambition to maintain a GDP of at least 7% in order to achieve middle-income status by 2021, making this central to their problem diagnosis. The strategy of the Flagbearers thus consisted of aligning their plans to the political aspiration of the Bangladesh government, making anticipating and addressing projected impacts of climate change seem a necessary condition for achieving economic growth.

To create sympathy for their solution– a Dutch Delta Plan for Bangladesh – the Flagbearers drew attention to the similarities between the Netherlands and Bangladesh: both are deltaic countries that are located in two river basins. Because of these similarities, so their reasoning went, the climate challenges that the two countries face are also similar. This is why, they require similar adaptation measures and approaches. All this underscored their central message, which was that for Bangladesh to be able to deal with climate change, the country would be well advised to follow the example of the Dutch in developing a delta plan: an

⁷ The projections are based on the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Stocker, T.F., D. Qin, G.-K. Plattner, M. Tignor, S.K. Allen, J. Boschung, A. Nauels, Y. Xia, V. Bex and P.M. Midgley (eds.). doi: 10.1017/CBO9781107415324.

integrated approach to secure water safety, food security as well as to strengthen their governance infrastructure (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). The Bangladeshi government officials went along with this problematization of the Dutch actors, accepting that *Bangladesh needs a delta plan* (ibid), something that it could realize through engaging in an alliance with their Dutch counterpart. An important reason for the Bangladeshi government to go along with the Dutch problematization was also that they hoped and expected that the development of a Delta Plan would allow maintaining or even reinforcing the bilateral relations with the Netherlands, and perhaps bring in future investments or help attract other bilateral and multilateral donors and funds.

After the process of transfer had been set in motion with the signing of a MoU (memorandum of understanding), the Water Friends built on the diagnosis of the Flagbearers to increase and widen the support for the BDP 2100 Formulation Project among those considered to be influential: employees of relevant Bangladeshi government agencies, knowledge institutions, NGOs and media. Together with the Dutch embassy, they refined the initial diagnosis by stating that ‘sustainable socio-economic development and security of life and livelihoods in Bangladesh could remain beyond reach’ without the development of the BDP 2100 (Choudhury et. al, 2012, p.18). If developed and implemented, the BDP 2100 would bring in a range of benefits and opportunities for Bangladesh - from capacity building, ensuring good governance, to strengthening cooperation with international development partners (Choudhury et. al, 2012. p.25).

The Water Friends, nonetheless, had to create a strategic alliance with the Macroeconomic Supporters to create the necessary political support and acceptance for a BDP 2100. The Macroeconomic Supporters belong to the agency responsible for developing (macroeconomic) development plans in accordance with the Bangladeshi government’s social, economic and political objectives. Because of their dedicated responsibilities, the Macroeconomic Supporters possess the political clout and legislative authority to coordinate many ministries and agencies. This is the kind of influence that those involved in previous Dutch water development projects (e.g., the Ministry of Water Resources and its two leading agencies the Bangladesh Water Development Board and the Water Resource Planning Organization) do not have. The Dutch wished to make delta planning central in the Bangladeshi planning culture to prevent that its attraction and impact fades away, something that had happened with many previous Dutch funded water development projects. Moreover, the Macroeconomic Supporters are the ones who articulated the government’s goal to achieve middle-income country status by 2021 (i.e., the Vision 2021) in the Perspective Plan of Bangladesh 2010-2021. To bring in and enrol the Macroeconomic Supporters required reconciling their distinct perceptions and interests with those of the Flagbearers and the Water Friends, something that required much effort.

Together with the Dutch embassy in Bangladesh, the Water Friends articulated the benefits that the Macroeconomic Supporters would gain from an alignment with the development of the BDP 2100. They particularly highlighted the opportunities that the BDP 2100 would offer the Macroeconomic Supporters to expand their work arena and influence from

macroeconomic development to water management. This expansion would come with the new authority to approve, monitor and supervise water-centric projects in the implementation of the BDP 2100. Initially, the Macroeconomic Supporters had little idea about and interest in Dutch delta planning. But it was difficult for them to refuse to be part of the delta planning because of the diplomatic pressure that the Water Friends created by expressing about Dutch interest to align with the Macroeconomic Supporters. The strategies of convincing and mobilizing diplomatic pressure had paid off: the Water Friends had succeeded in enrolling the Macroeconomic Supporters in their project.

The Water Friends, nevertheless, had to continue with their lobbying work of in order to maintain the created alliance. Once convinced, the Macroeconomic Supporters wanted to obtain an understanding of the contents of the Delta Approach, and of how it could contribute to the macroeconomic development of Bangladesh. As the outcome of their review, they suggested for the inclusion of a macroeconomic framework in the development of the BDP 2100, making it also an investment-oriented development plan. They recommended that a group of experienced Bangladeshi macroeconomic experts draft the delta plan, with technical advice from the Dutch consultants. In their view, Bangladeshi experts would better understand the planning culture and unspoken norms of the country and would better be able to express the plan in the language preferred by the Bangladeshi government, while they would also be better positioned to negotiate the underlying political interests. Hence, they emphasized that Bangladeshi expertise was indispensable for the transfer, and fundamentally altered the original Dutch meaning and contents of Delta Planning.

The Water Friends did not immediately go along with these suggestions; they emphasized that a macroeconomic framework does not belong to the original Dutch Delta Plan idea. The Macroeconomic Supporters nevertheless insisted that their experiences of planning and policymaking for the Bangladeshi government needed to be taken seriously of the BDP 2100 was to become a reality. After all, they knew best how to interest Bangladeshi policymakers, and how to ensure enough political buy-in for the plan. The Water Friends (and the Dutch embassy officials) had little other choice than to compromise some of their initial ideas for the sake of maintaining their much desired newly formed alliance. Nevertheless, to prevent that the Macroeconomic Supporters would gain too much power in the transfer, the Water Friends negotiated that the Dutch embassy - the representative of the Dutch government in the transfer – would be the main authority in managing and disseminating project funds, most of which came from Dutch development aid.

The work of the Delta warriors in Vietnam and the Water Friends in Bangladesh and their interactions with their chosen allies shows that the creation of alliances in policy transfer processes does not happen spontaneously: the choice of allies in both cases was importantly influenced by the existence of prior relations of collaboration. Much effort went into enticing them to collaborate, something that required making compromises and navigating through politics and power. Rather than forming the reason for people to come together, our cases suggest that the transferred policy provided a good occasion and starting point to

strengthen and sometimes re-negotiate relations of diplomacy and trade. The choice of allies often importantly determines not only the direction and speed of the transfer, but also strongly shape and change the contents and nature of what is transferred. In nurturing and maintaining the alliance, involved actors often need to make compromises or (re-)negotiate their position, ideas and interests, with the allies influencing or indeed translating that what is transferred and importantly co-steering the course of the overall transfer process. In this sense, the MDP and the BDP 2100 provided important spaces and moments of conversation and mutual learning between all involved about how to best deal with future challenges of climate change in deltas.

4.3.2 Creating political buy-in for a delta plan

Next to the work that goes into creating and maintaining alliances, a significant amount of the work of transferring a policy consists of creating political buy-in for that what is transferred – in our case the Dutch Delta Approach. This is not a politically neutral or symmetrical process, as transfer happens as part of geo-political and trade relations that are marked by differences in influence and negotiating power. Transfer also entails dealing with political relations, planning and decision-making cultures and sensitivities in the places of destination. This is a work that often happens behind the scenes, with those initiating policy transfer importantly relying on partners in the destination countries to help them do this. We try making some of this work visible by analysing how the contents of the transferred policy changed during the transfer process, considering those changes as manifestations of translations and negotiations.

In Vietnam, the Retired Reformists were crucial in re-igniting the interest from the Vietnamese government in the Delta Plan by approvingly referring to the draft MDP at high level meetings of Vietnamese national development committees, in which many of them held influential advisory positions. Simultaneously, in one-to-one conversations they tried convincing Vietnamese vice ministers, ministers, deputy Prime Ministers, provincial party leaders as well as prominent Communist Party leaders who hold decision-making powers in the one-party state regime in Vietnam. In Bangladesh, the Macroeconomic Supporters were the ones who actively intervened in the development of the scenario development and the delta governance framework – two integral elements of the Delta Approach – to increase the chances of Bangladeshi policymakers buying into and ultimately approving the BDP 2100.

In Bangladesh, the Plausible-Future Makers developed contextual scenarios⁸ for the BDP 2100 that more or less replicated the example of the Dutch Delta Plan of 2008. In Dutch

⁸ Scenario development is a planning tool that consists of the development of coherent narratives of alternative hypothetical futures. The scenarios are developed by using different combinations of two main external drivers and are schematically presented on the x and y axes of a four-quadrant matrix. In this way, the scenarios represent plausible and often simplified storylines of different futures set in a logical plot and narrative, and entail a sequence of possible events leading from the present situation to future conditions (Terwisscha van Scheltinga et al., 2015).

delta planning, the scenarios were used as a means to assess the robustness of preferred delta plan strategies. Using different combinations of the two external drivers used in the Dutch Delta planning - climate change and socioeconomic development - the Plausible-future makers came up with four possible plausible futures for the whole Bangladesh as a delta. The Macroeconomic Supporters disagreed with this way of representing possible futures for Bangladesh. In particular, they questioned the merit of developing delta plan strategies on the basis of something that they considered “*very subjective*”⁹: something that, when not accompanied by estimated probabilities, only provides a vague indication of what might happen in future. In their critical reviews, they also questioned the use of the same four scenarios for regions in Bangladesh that are very different in terms of geo-hydrological features. In addition, they disproved the use of global climate projections for developing the scenarios, rather than the available, localized climate data. They also noted that the used figures for population growth and GDP projections were different than those used by the Bangladeshi government. A major concern of the Macroeconomic Supporters was that the developed scenarios would not sufficiently speak to Bangladeshi planners, politicians and policymakers. This would make it difficult to gain their support for the draft BDP 2100.

Even after the Plausible-Future Makers included the recommendations and reviews from different groups of Bangladeshi actors in the development of scenarios, the Macroeconomic Supporters remained reluctant to endorse it (details in Hasan et al., 2020, p.168-169) Those who provided comments were: (i) the participants from the scenario development workshop – mostly representatives from Bangladeshi ministries and agencies, (ii) the scenario development experts experienced in developing explorative strategic scenarios with policy options for Bangladesh, specifically invited by the Macroeconomic Supporters to review the developed scenarios, and (iii) the macroeconomic experts of the BDP 2100 Formulation Project who reviewed the scenarios on the invitation of the Macroeconomic Supporters. These are the people with whom the Macroeconomic Supporters had established relations of collegiality and trust over many years of working together on developing policies and plans for the Bangladesh government, in line with its overall vision (including Vision 2021 for achieving a middle-income country status).

In the views of the scenario development workshop participants, the development challenges that Bangladesh faces – ranging from population growth and political unrest to transboundary water sharing (among others) – are different from the future challenges that the Netherlands identified in its delta planning exercise. In particular, they emphasized that for Bangladesh, it makes no sense to isolate climate change from socioeconomic development, while they also underscored the importance of including other possible uncertainties. In the review process, the scenario development experts focused on how to improve the technicalities of scenarios to make them more valid for the context of Bangladesh (details in Hasan et al., 2020, p.168). The macroeconomic experts were primarily concerned about gaining enough political support for the proposed plans. For

⁹ Record notes of presentation on “*Scenarios of Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100*” on January 06, 2016 at GED.

instance, they feared that if the scenarios were not accompanied by a thorough (macro)economic analysis, they would not be endorsed by Bangladeshi policymakers and politicians. They also signalled that the negative sounding terms *congestion* and *stagnation* that were used to label two of the scenarios (to allow for the possibility of low economic growth under business as usual situations) might not be the best to spark political enthusiasm. In their interpretation, alluding to the possibility of congestion or stagnation might be interpreted as a criticism of political leadership. In the overall assessment of the macroeconomic experts, the development and use of the scenarios in the BDP 2100 was nothing but ‘impractical and a mere waste of time’, something that would make it difficult for the Macroeconomic Supporters to get approval for the draft BDP 2100 from the Bangladeshi policymakers¹⁰.

In trying to accommodate all comments and suggestions, the Plausible-Future Makers found it hard to hold on to the original Dutch meaning of scenarios. If the transfer process was to go ahead, the Plausible-Future Makers had little other choice than to adapt the scenarios in terms of contents and method. They had to cautiously navigate in doing this, as the final outcome needed to remain similar enough to the Dutch Delta Programme to continue to be seen as inspired by a Dutch example (and deserving financial support from the Netherlands as well as requiring Dutch expertise), while it also needed to be different enough to fit the expectations from the wider groups of BDP 2100 actors to continue counting on their buy-in. The Plausible-Future Makers proposed doing this by adding two additional external drivers - transboundary water management and land use changes – in the scenario development exercise. They combined these additional two drivers with the already identified Dutch drivers: climate change and socioeconomic development. They updated the four scenarios with illustrations of extreme plausible changes in flood management, water in agriculture, water supply and environmental protection (among others) (Van Aalst et al, 2016). They also agreed to rename two of the scenarios as moderate and active respectively. By doing this, they hoped that people would ‘no longer interpret the names of the scenarios as an act of desiring a bad future for Bangladesh’¹¹.

The Plausible-Future Makers sought support from Dutch embassy officials to resist the suggestion of developing even more scenarios, however. Their reasoning was that the updated four scenarios already served as the corner flags of a range of plausible uncertain futures. This provoked a long-winding negotiation. Together with the embassy officials, the Plausible-future makers told the Macroeconomic Supporters that resources allocated for the scenario development exercise - funds and the budgeted time for the expert inputs – depleted quicker than expected and estimated in the project formulation. Thus, the most the Plausible-Future Makers would be able to do with the limited resources was to develop two additional scenarios (i.e., the business as usual approach and fast urbanization). In parallel to the

¹⁰ Record notes of presentation on “*Scenarios of Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100*” on January 06, 2016 at GED.

¹¹ From the interview with a Plausible-future makers. The interview was taken on August 08, 2016 in the Netherlands.

negotiation with the Macroeconomic Supporters, the Plausible-Future Makers managed to negotiate for additional funds for the development of the two agreed scenarios.

In spite of going along with the Plausible-Future Makers, the Macroeconomic Supporters remained doubtful about the use of the scenarios. They sought the help of their long-term allies, the macroeconomic experts, to make scenario development in the BDP 2100 attractive enough to obtain approval from the policymakers. The macroeconomic experts proposed to use the scenarios in support of a new problematization, one in which the BDP 2100 becomes a tool to support the Bangladeshi government in achieving their desired socioeconomic development by 2021. They developed and used a macroeconomic analysis framework to assess the specific contribution of the BDP 2100 towards achieving middle-income country status by 2021 and an upper-middle income country status by 2041. In doing this, they changed the meaning and method of scenarios: from plausible predictions of future uncertainties, the scenarios became projections of the impacts of specific development.

The Plausible-Future Makers continued trying to convince the Macroeconomic Supporters about the merits of the original scenario development exercise. Yet, they understood the importance of making the scenarios convincing enough to policymakers, which is why they agreed to combine their scenarios with the policy options¹² developed by the macroeconomic experts. They were reluctant to completely let go of Dutch delta technicalities as they wanted to continue emphasizing the importance and usefulness of Dutch expertise for the development of Bangladesh.

Apart from the scenario development, the Macroeconomic Supporters felt that to avoid political resistance and actively wield political buy-in for the BDP 2100 it was necessary to also change the proposed delta governance framework. The premise of the Dutch delta governance framework is that delta planning should remain relatively detached from normal and relatively short-term political decision-making. This is done through a Delta Act, which legalizes the establishment of a Delta Fund and a Delta Commission which operate relatively independently from normal political processes. As in the Netherlands, the plan was that a Delta Commission in Bangladesh would direct a multi-governmental process of delta planning, policy development and implementation. This role was supposed to be assumed by the Macroeconomic Supporters. Yet, various Bangladeshi ministries responsible for cross-cutting water issues feared that the proposed structure would shift part of their authority and power to the Macroeconomic Supporters, who would become responsible to select and prioritize future water-centric projects in the implementation programme of the BDP 2100. In particular, the Ministry of Water Resources and the Ministry of Planning under whose directorate the Macroeconomic Supporters are positioned therefore started to oppose the development of the BDP 2100.

As they needed the support of these actors, the Macroeconomic Supporters felt compelled to propose a different Delta Governance Framework, which they called the Delta

¹² The macroeconomic experts named their developed scenarios *policy options*.

Governance Council (DGC). Instead of making the delta planning relatively independent from normal political decision-making processes, they decided to make the implementation of BDP 2100 part of normal political and bureaucratic planning processes in Bangladesh. The DGC is a high-level inter-ministerial forum chaired by the prime minister and co-chaired by the planning minister, the leader of the Macroeconomic Supporter's parent ministry. Ministers from the (influential) ministries of finance, water resources, land and agriculture, environment, food, and shipping (among others) became actively involved as strategic advisors in the implementation of the BDP 2100. The Macroeconomic Supporters also secured their own influence by negotiating with the leading ministries to obtain responsibility for the coordination, facilitation, monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the BDP 2100. They also lobbied to obtain the positions of secretary of the DGC, and that of chair of the BDP 2100 project/programme selection committee (the second coordinating committee followed by the DGC). By negotiating for these positions, they made sure that they retain a powerful influence in the selection and prioritization of water-centric projects in Bangladesh.

In conclusion, it is clear that the development of the BDP 2100 was heavily co-shaped by the Macroeconomic Supporters. This led to a plan that only remotely resembles to the Dutch Delta Programme in terms of contents (for example, from contextual scenarios to strategic policy scenarios¹³), and in imaginaries of futures for deltas. Just as what happened to the MDP in Vietnam with the Retired Reformists, in the process of creating political buy-in for the BDP 2100 the initial ideas about Delta Planning which with the transfer process started kept being negotiated and changed until enough political supporters were brought together, and until enough resonance was created with wider political agendas and powers-that-be.

4.4 Discussion and conclusion

In this article we build on and expand our earlier analyses of the transfer of the Dutch Delta Approach to Vietnam and Bangladesh (Hasan et al. 2019; Hasan et al. 2020). By defining policy transfer as a process of translation, these analyses did not refer to the intrinsic quality of that what was transferred to explain its mobility. They also did not posit or assume a knowledge hierarchy between the country of policy origin and the country of destination, or prioritize the deeds of the initiators of the transfer in telling the story. Instead, our accounts of policy transfer-as-translation highlighted the work of all those involved in transfer, showing how the efforts of both the initiators and the receivers are needed to make a policy that originated elsewhere useful for a new context.

In this article, we more closely zoomed in on the kinds of work needed to make policies travel. Through a careful analysis and categorisation of our empirical observations and data, we showed that most of this work consists either of the efforts needed to create and maintain

¹³ Strategic scenarios deal with images of the whole, i.e., they combine policies and contextual development. Strategic scenarios are used to clarify strategic choices between different kinds of developments or policies by providing insight into the expected effects (Enserink et al., 2010, p.125).

alliances or entails creating political buy-in. Making policies – in our case the Dutch Delta Approach – travel, therefore, importantly depends on continuous acts of diplomacy, dialoguing, persuasion and negotiation. It also entails the cautious navigation of cultural and power differences. More than or in addition to the technical knowledge of the specific policy that is transferred, successfully doing this work requires knowledge of cultural, political and governance contexts at the place of destination. Our analysis further suggests that transfer importantly hinges on the willingness and ability of the involved actors to engage with and learn from each other. Continuous investments in relations of collegiality and friendship are, therefore, an important part of transfer work, with transfer becoming easier when building on historical relations of collaboration.

This article's analysis underscores the deeply social and relational character of transfer. In doing this, it helps appreciate that the direction and nature of transfer processes are as much shaped by the actions and ideas of the initiators as by those of the recipients. This also implies that the hierarchy between countries – in terms of stage of development or in terms of the quality of their policy expertise - that is often assumed in more conventional conceptualizations of transfer starts to crumble, or at least becomes less meaningful in explaining the process. Indeed, in our account of the travel of the Dutch Delta Approach from the Netherlands to Vietnam and Bangladesh, the relation between the senders and recipients emerges as much more symmetrical. It is a process of mutual learning and of continuous adjustments, in which those at the receiving end have quite some power and influence. In Vietnam as well as in Bangladesh, their active interventions helped turning the object of transfer into something that fitted their country's political agenda, governance reality and imaginaries of the future. In fact, our analysis suggests that the position of the Dutch actors in both countries was rather precarious: they needed to simultaneously keep their own governments and funders happy by upholding the reputation of the Netherlands as a source of advanced water and delta expertise, while also satisfying their allies and partners. The latter often meant diluting the Dutch-ness of the transferred expertise by changing and re-shaping it to make it fit the context, needs and interests of the country of destination. Doing this required much creativity and dedication. All involved in the process learned from each other; a learning process the quality of which importantly hinged on the overall quality of the relations between them.

In this way, foregrounding the actions and efforts of those involved in accounts of the transfer of Dutch Delta Approach also draws attention to the fluidity and malleability of the object of transfer: the Dutch Delta Approach emerges as a broad umbrella term to denote a wide range of climate adaptation projects, plans and initiatives, broad enough to fit a range of interests and accommodate different storylines or development visions. The translation theory of Latour (2005), Akrich et al. (2002a, 2002b) and Callon (1986) suggests that relational work is needed to hold the transfer object stable enough to make it fit for (translate it to) the transfer destination. Our analysis instead suggests that in the case of Dutch Delta Planning, the stability of the transfer object was less important than it was to maintain relations of diplomacy and trade between the involved countries. The Dutch Delta Approach

thus appears more as a means to allow creating or expanding opportunities for future collaboration and trade than as a strictly defined Dutch policy package needed or useful to help make a delta country more resilient to climate change.

Our analysis suggests that the Dutch Delta Approach is a somewhat peculiar object of transfer, one that is different from for instance engineering solutions which are literally more concrete and less malleable. The broadness and malleability of the Dutch Delta Approach is perhaps both boon and bane. Both the MDP and the BDP 2100 – which can be considered the major outcomes of the transfer process – are very different from the original Dutch Delta Plan. To continue talking and writing about these plans as if they are inspired by Dutch Delta Planning is analytically not very useful. Yet, it can perhaps itself be seen as part of a wider politics of knowledge in which the political and business stakes involved in safeguarding and even expanding the reputation of the Netherlands as a source of advanced water and delta expertise are very high. Simultaneously, maintaining the fluidity and malleability of the Delta Approach helps to create future projects in which Dutch and Vietnamese or Bangladeshi or other partners can collaborate and learn from each other in solving development challenges in deltas in relation to water and climate change.

On the basis of our analysis, we argue that better realizing this mutual learning potential of policy transfer projects in the context of development cooperation calls for active efforts to diversify the conceptual languages used to think and talk about them. Adhering to conventional stories of transfer-as-diffusion may be useful in branding some types of expertise or promoting specific imaginaries of futures, but makes it hard to recognize the deeply dialogical and relational character of processes of policy transfer. Instead of focusing analytical attention to how what happens in countries of destination resembles the original, there is merit in also showing the agreements reached and the relations maintained or strengthened. This is so because it helps more explicitly reflecting on how capacities for doing transfer can be developed and are (to be) distributed. Better acknowledging the influence and efforts of those in the recipient countries, moreover, 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. It helps nurture respect for the expertise and ideas that are present in places and people considered as not(-yet) modern and developed. 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 countries that are faced with similar climate change and water challenges.