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Reimagining policy transfer in the context of development cooperation

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DELTAS IN DIALOGUE: IMAGINING POLICY TRANSFER AS A SYMMETRICAL CONVERSATION¹

Abstract

Processes of policy transfer involve a range of actors and actions, both on the ‘sending’ as well as on the ‘receiving’ end. All of them contribute experience and knowledge, working in collaboration with each other to somehow – through translation and mutual learning - create a version of the transferred policy that fits its new context. In this paper, we argue for a more explicit recognition that policy transfer depends on interactions and relations between ‘senders’ and ‘receivers’ alike. This provides the basis for re-imagining policy transfer processes in less hierarchical and more reciprocal terms, not a priori positioning those originating the transfer as superior or more advanced than those on the receiving end. To do this, the paper proposes a conceptualization of policy transfer processes as symmetrical conversations: conversations in which many knowers and knowledges are mixed together to co-produce plans and policies that are relevant and specific. Beyond better acknowledging the importance of the receivers, we hope that this conceptualization will also open up the discussion about what ‘good’ policies (or policy knowledges) are, as well as allow for more explicit reflection about how different knowledges and knowers relate to each other in policy transfer processes.

¹ This chapter is under review as: Hasan, S., Evers, J., Verzijl, A., & Zwarteveen, M. (under review by the WIREs Water). Deltas in dialogue: Imagining policy transfer as a symmetrical conversation.

5.1 Introduction

There is a slowly growing body of critical scholarship – emerging from diverse fields, including policy studies, water management and governance, urban planning and the anthropology of development – about Dutch interventions in deltas outside of the Netherlands (see for examples, Laeni et al., 2020; Ivars and Venot, 2019; Minkman et al., 2019; Richter, 2019; Shannon, 2019; Weger, 2019; Yarina, 2018; Colven, 2017; Khalequzzaman, 2016; Vink et al., 2013). Some of the critique focuses on the social and ecological impacts of large infrastructural projects that the Dutch help finance, design and implement, particularly questioning how such projects provoke the displacement of people who are already very vulnerable (see Richter, 2020; Shannon, 2019; Batubara et al., 2018). Other scholars shed critical doubts on the role of private investors and consulting firms in delta projects, expressing reservations about whether their profit motivations can be reconciled with objectives of sustainability and inclusiveness (see Büscher, 2019; Kemerink-Seyoum, 2019). In this paper, we engage with a related critique, one that focuses on how the Netherlands positions (or tries to position) itself as a global champion of climate adaptation, particularly when it comes to dealing with floods. Drawing on a version of its own water history that is carefully manufactured for the purpose, the Dutch Government claims that its experience and knowledge can be mobilized to help other deltaic countries better prepare for climate change (Netherlands International Water Ambition, 2019; International Water Ambition, 2016; Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017, p.13). Packaged and branded as the Dutch Delta Approach (Minkman and Van Buuren, 2019), the Dutch Government posits that Dutch water expertise is a must-have for sustainable delta management (Netherlands Water Partnership, 2014, p.10). Next to being an explicit strategy to expand the market for Dutch water and engineering solutions (see Büscher, 2019), in the context of development cooperation thus emphasizing the superiority of Dutch water expertise can easily appear as a form of neo-colonialism (Biriukuva, 2019). Too much emphasis on what the Dutch can do may even backfire (Corder, 2017; Chu, 2013), as for instance happened when the slogan “Bring in the Dutch” was paraphrased as “Ditching the Dutch” (Van Dijk, 2014).

Our own concern about the promotional storyline of the Netherlands as a source of advanced water and climate adaptation expertise resonates with these critical assessments, but is also different. We first of all take issue with how this storyline crucially misrepresents what happens when (policy) knowledge travels from the Netherlands to elsewhere (see for example, Hasan et al., 2020). At best it is a partial account of what happens during policy transfer processes. Unlike what also many of the mentioned critiques assume, Dutch involvements with climate adaptation and delta planning efforts elsewhere are not about ‘exporting’ a more or less bounded and known policy object. While useful in promoting Dutch expertise (or in critiquing this, for that matter), foregrounding of the expertise and actions of the ‘sender’ in telling the story of policy transfer is likewise inaccurate. Secondly, we are worried about the storyline’s adherence to a metaphor of diffusion, as this makes it

difficult to make use of policy transfer processes as sources of mutual learning, inspiration and co-creation. This second worry partly stems from the realisation that climate adaptation, or more broadly dealing with climate change, entails revisiting and re-thinking taken-for-granted assumptions about the meaning of progress or development, as well as about the science and technologies supporting these. Climate change also reinforces the importance of understanding how what happens, or what people do, in one place is connected to (affects, impacts) what happens in others places, or what others (can) do. In this sense, it serves as a strong reminder that delta problems such as sea-level rise, land subsidence, saltwater intrusion and extreme weather events are not isolated or local events, but are related to rapid forms of urbanisation and new global mobilities that involve and concern places and people elsewhere. Addressing and dealing with climate change, therefore, needs and depends on the mobilization of many knowledges and knowers, and requires the active nurturing of old and the creation of new relations of solidarity between individuals, communities and countries. A storyline of policy transfer as diffusion makes it difficult to articulate and do this.

When studying what happens when the Dutch Delta Approach travels to Vietnam and Bangladesh, and through the many interactions and discussions with the many people involved, we became inspired by the positive energy and idealism of many of them. Almost irrespective of nationality, political preference or professional discipline, and in spite of power differences and hierarchies, there was a great desire to work together and learn from each other about possible ways to understand and deal with the effects of climate change. Especially (but not just) the researchers, scholars and students in the studied delta networks engaged in joyful and mutually inspiring joint reflections and collaborations. Appreciating this positive energy requires mobilizing a language for policy transfer that does not rely on positing some knowledges (those of the ‘sender’) as more advanced than others. This then is another important reason to be critical of ‘transfer as diffusion’ stories: they fail to capture and do justice to the creativity and hope of many of those involved.

We use the rest of the paper to articulate these reflections in more detail. We then propose the metaphor of “symmetrical conversation” as an alternative way to talk about and do policy transfer in the context of climate change. This metaphor is useful because it allows appreciating that policy transfer entails dialogue, negotiations and work of all involved parties, thereby usefully decentering the expertise and actions of the ‘senders’. The metaphor, we suggest, can also be used more normatively to help improve the potential of policy transfer processes to become sources of mutual inspiration and joint learning. Mobilizing this metaphor, we contend, thereby helps create much needed room for opening up the discussion about what ‘good’ policies (or policy knowledges) are in the context of climate change, as well as for re-thinking how different knowledges and knowers relate and should relate to each other.

The argument of and reflections in this paper build on and mobilize insights and information collected during more than four years of active engagement in Dutch initiated delta networks as researchers, teachers and trainers. The first author (who is from Bangladesh and studies

in the Netherlands) spent time in Vietnam, Bangladesh and the Netherlands to re-construct the development of the Mekong Delta Plan (MDP) and the Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100 (BDP 2100) based on interviews with involved actors; by attending various delta development workshops and by analysing policy documents. Together with the second and third authors, she organized a series of discussions and joint reflections about the research findings with eleven Dutch and Bangladeshi government officials and consultants. These also formed an important inspiration for this essay. In addition, all authors were involved in organizing a day-long session about Dutch delta interventions in other countries at the Conference “Critical perspectives on governance by Sustainable Development Goals: Water Food and Climate”, which took place on 26 June 2018 at the University of Amsterdam. The session, called “Delta Dynamics: Dutch masterplans and SDGs” brought together Dutch consultants with activists and researchers (see Hasan, 2018 and Zwartveen et al., 2018 for reflections on this session). Workshops organized in the context of the Dutch Research Council (NWO) funded projects ‘Strengthening strategic delta planning processes in Bangladesh, the Netherlands, Vietnam and beyond’ and ‘Deltas dealing with uncertainty’ likewise provided occasions for sharing and discussing research findings with other researchers as well as with those ‘doing’ delta planning. These meetings, interactions and debates served as an important source of inspiration for this paper.

5.2 Conversation instead of diffusion

Scholars use terms such as policy mobility (Cook and Ward, 2012) or knowledge transfer (Zevenbergen et al., 2013) to denote how policy ideas travel from one place to another. These terms have in common that they conceptualize policy transfer as a process of diffusion, with analyses typically using the (lack of) speed which with transfer happens as a main indicator of its effectiveness or success (see Hasan et al., 2019). The policy in question tends to remain relatively marginal to the explanation, as its content and quality is taken for granted. Important for our argument in this paper is that this policy is also assumed to be a relatively stable entity (Zegwaard et al., 2019). Our analyses of the transfer of the Dutch Delta Approach to Vietnam and Bangladesh show that this is an erroneous assumption (Hasan et al, 2020 and Hasan et al., 2019). The Dutch Delta Approach is far from a clearly bounded or fixed object of transfer, but comes in different versions. Its content and shape change depending on when, where – in which context – and by whom it is talked about, referred to or indeed enacted (see Zegwaard et al., 2019). Indeed, the meaning of delta planning changes almost beyond recognition once the Dutch Delta Approach ‘lands’ in a new destination. In Vietnam, the Delta Plan became a provocative agro-business industrialization strategy (Hasan et al., 2019), whereas in Bangladesh it turned into a macroeconomic development plan that exceeded the boundaries of its hydro-geographical delta (Hasan et al., 2020).

We have shown how a more precise definition of the Dutch Delta Approach (in terms of building blocks) came into being partly because of a desire to make it exportable: its

mobility therefore did not stem from its generic applicability or follow from its quality, but was purposively invented because of a desire to make it more generic and mobile (Zegwaard et al., 2019; Minkman and van Buuren, 2019). Our conclusion, therefore, is that the Delta Approach is a fuzzy and malleable ‘thing’. A thing or instrument that those engaging with it - whether from Bangladesh, Vietnam or the Netherlands – accommodate, change, negotiate and shift to make it fit their ideas, knowledge, interests; adapt it to institutional, cultural and political realities; and align it with the futures they desire for their respective deltas (Hasan et al., 2020; Hasan et al., 2019). Rather than as a strictly defined policy package of Dutch origin, in our analyses the Dutch Delta Approach emerges as a broad umbrella term to denote a wide range of situated climate adaptation projects, plans and initiatives

Another way of saying this is that much of what happens under the formal label of transferring the Dutch Delta Approach consists of wide-ranging dialogues and negotiations about how to best deal with and adapt to the effects of climate change in deltas. Technical discussions of climate change and of how it interferes with deltaic land-water dynamics are part of this, with ways of knowing and modelling sometimes itself being debated. Yet, conversation are about much more than technicalities: they are also about what development is or should be about, and entail fundamental questions of how and whether future wellbeing, safety and peace for all can be achieved without further damage to ecosystems or loss of biodiversity. And, as one of our Bangladeshi interviewees emphasized, these collaborative projects are “not merely about (...) Dutch knowledge”, but also about opportunities to build and maintain (diplomatic) “relations and trust” between the two countries. When discussing this with them, some of the Dutch experts and government officials active in promoting Dutch delta planning expertise admitted having a preference for a looser and more process-kind of definition of delta planning. Rather than pre-determining the main themes of the development collaboration projects that take place under the umbrella of delta planning – water, land use, agriculture, climate change - they were in favor of a more open-ended and flexible approach. They made a plea for having enough time to organize dialogues and interactions with colleagues and partners in the countries where projects happen. They felt this would be useful not just to build trust, but also to allow to learn from each other’s experiences. As one of them observed, to organize this well would require letting go of time-bound project-cycles, as these are difficult to reconcile with the intrinsically long-winded and difficult “political processes that require participation and public debate” that such dialogues and interactions entail. Rather than expecting quick returns from the invested Dutch aid in the form of business opportunities for Dutch water sector organizations, the Dutch official was in favour of mobilizing the potential of Dutch delta planning projects elsewhere to create a wider political process of awareness raising and joint reflection needed to spark off transformations to become more sustainable and climate-resilient.

A further challenge to the idea that the transfer of the Delta Approach involved something bounded and distinctly Dutch traveling to elsewhere arises when more closely looking at

the Dutch actors involved: many (perhaps most) of them have little to no direct experience with Dutch forms of delta management or planning. Instead, many of the Dutch experts that helped negotiate and develop the Delta Plans in Vietnam or Bangladesh are trained as ‘international experts’. They obtained most of their experience outside of the Netherlands, through working in development cooperation projects as researchers, experts or consultants. The assumption that the experts involved in the transfer processes are bearers of Dutch water knowledge – either because they have the Dutch nationality, or because they work for a Dutch firm or university or represent the Dutch government – is therefore wrong. In our conversations with involved experts, many insisted that intimate knowledge of the ‘destination country’ (Vietnam or Bangladesh) was as or more important in developing a suitable delta plan than prior experience with Dutch delta planning. This was precisely why a prominent Bangladeshi government official we talked to insisted that the Dutch experts selected to work on the BDP 2100 should be “adept at water and delta technicalities, diplomacy, cultural political economy, governance, politics and planning linguistics in Bangladesh”. He explained that “the Netherlands and Bangladesh are very different in terms of almost everything”, including biophysical – such as the volumes of water that flow through the country - as well socioeconomic conditions. Just like some of the other Bangladeshi actors involved in the development of the BDP 2100, he was somewhat dismayed by how the Netherlands had sent some rather young consultants to work with them on the development of a BDP 2100. These consultants neither had work experience in the Dutch Delta Programme, nor knew much about Bangladesh. In his opinion, the development of a climate adaptation or delta plan in another country is “not an appropriate field for capacity development of fresh graduates or new consultants”. To allow for a more serious engagement and exchange, he proposed for the Dutch government to abandon its practice of selecting experts and awarding contracts on the basis of tender procedures, to instead select “technical diplomats” on the basis of a head-hunting process – similar to what some UN organizations do. Some of the Dutch government officials involved similarly suggested that the Dutch government should not focus so much on promoting their own experiences of managing deltas, but instead invest more in capturing “the lessons the Dutch have learned from their transfer experiences in other countries”.

Rather than as attempts to replicate or follow a Dutch example, the development of the MDP and the BDP 2100 are, therefore, better described and understood as processes of joint learning and negotiation in which a range of experts collaborate, and different knowledges and experiences come together. This characterization is not meant to ignore or hide the many disagreements and conflicts that occurred. The testimonies that we collected show that interactions between those involved were importantly marked by conflicts of interest as well by struggles for reputations and markets. In both studied cases, it was also clear that the process was far from inclusive, in spite of claims to the contrary. Yet, we think that recognition of how processes of policy transfer are colored by differences in political and economic power should not and does not have to draw the attention away from the enthusiasm and positive energy of many of those involved. The shared ambition to better

understand and deal with the effects of climate change animated joint reflections that many considered – at least in hindsight – to be joyful. Often longstanding relations of trust, friendship and collegiality were important in allowing these joint reflections to happen.

5.3 Symmetry instead of hierarchy

Transfer-as-diffusion stories such as those informing the promotional narratives of the Dutch Delta Approach assume and confirm hierarchies in knowledge and knowing – in this case about delta planning or climate adaptation – between the country of origin and the country of destination. For one, they prioritize the Dutch side of the policy transfer story by making it appear as importantly steered by the Dutch initiators (Hasan et al., 2019). Also, promotional narratives reproduce the idea that Dutch expertise is more advanced or even superior to that of less prosperous water countries (Netherlands National Water Plan 2009-2015, p. 243; see also Büscher, 2019). Hinging on a notion of ‘development as evolutionary progress’, this is associated with the Netherlands’ higher rank on ladders of development, often expressed in terms of GDP (Mosse and Lewis, 2006). This notion has always been problematic, most importantly because it conveniently conceals how ‘development’ and wealth for some people and in some places was and is achieved at the cost of mal- and underdevelopment elsewhere and for others. Wealth and poverty are connected by unequal terms of trade and divisions of labour that are maintained through economic, political and military powers. Contemporary challenges of biodiversity loss and climate change only increase the need to revisit and rethink what progress – change, modernity, and development – is and should be about. In sum, unequivocally positioning the Netherlands – and its water and delta expertise – as ‘more advanced’ or as an example to be followed by others is indefensible.

In the previous section we already shared some insights from our analyses of Dutch involvements in Vietnam and Bangladesh to show that the development of the MDP as well as that of the BDP 2100 required work of both the ‘receivers’ as of the ‘senders’. Interactions between the different parties and actors were much more reciprocal and dialogical than promotional policy-transfer-as-diffusion stories allow for. Indeed, in both countries the process was importantly steered by Vietnamese and Bangladeshi experts and officials, who also had a big say in the final outcome. Hence, in our joint reflections with three Bangladeshi expert officials who had been involved in the development of the BDP 2100 (all three are influential in the water and development sector and trusted allies of the Dutch in Bangladesh), they emphasized their influence in re-shaping the plans by actively sharing their ideas and opinions with residing and visiting Dutch government officials. This often happened as part of more informal discussions or meet-ups in the evening hours, for instance at private dinners at residences of influential Bangladeshi officials and businessmen or the Dutch ambassador, and in the Dutch Club in Dhaka. Better recognition that the development of the BDP 2100 was a truly collective effort, according to one of the experts from Bangladesh, would help “create wider stakeholder support, ownership as well as political

commitment” for the plan. More importantly, he said, more explicit “appreciation” of those who the Dutch government aims to support (by developing of a Delta Plan) would also pave the way for re-imagining the Dutch as a “friend, not as a foreigner”.

When discussing our critical reflections on the transfer-as-diffusion story with some of the Dutch involved in promoting Dutch delta knowledge, some thought we were critiquing or challenging their work or expertise. Yet, many also enthusiastically engaged with our invitation to re-think what Dutch water experts and diplomats are doing when working in other countries. A Dutch government official who had been prominently involved in the development of the BDP 2100 for instance reflected on how inappropriate it is to try to export Dutch understandings of uncertain climate futures to Bangladesh. He noted that an important concern in the Netherlands seems to be to maintain current levels of safety and protect contemporary levels of wealth and prosperity from the future effects of climate change. In contrast, “in Bangladesh it is first and foremost about making sure that lives and livelihoods are safe from erosion, flooding and cyclone storms. Bangladesh is not a water-safe country as it is”, irrespective of climate change. He understood why some of the people in Bangladesh he interacted with in workshops designed for the purpose of developing a BDP 2100 were somewhat bewildered with the Dutch’ emphasis on a long-term – 100 year – time horizon, when there are so many immediate problems that require attention. Reflecting on the lessons learned in Vietnam and Bangladesh, he said: “we know that it is not just a matter of projecting Dutch experiences, or Bangladesh or Vietnam experiences to other countries.”

Foregrounding or prioritizing Dutch knowledge in the development of climate adaptation plans is problematic as it draws attention away from the expertise and experience that ‘destination’ countries have. After all, also countries like Vietnam and Bangladesh have a long history of living with water and dealing with water problems. One of the Bangladeshi officials that we spoke to noted that “water is in the genes of many Bangladeshis”, just like Henk Ovink, the Dutch government’s special water envoy – and embodiment of the transfer of the Dutch water knowledge – likes stating that water is in the genes of the Dutch (Kimmelman, 2017). The official added that although Bangladeshi expertise is perhaps not as “scientifically proven or not as internationally recognized”, Bangladesh is a potentially important source of wisdom and insights about ways to deal with delta challenges. His reflection resonates nicely with an important insight from Science and Technology Studies, which is that all knowledges are ‘local’ and ‘specific’ in the sense that they come from somewhere: they have specific histories, are informed by specific experiences and are tied to specific projects of development or imaginaries of the future. Why some knowledges travel more widely or gain greater prominence cannot (just) be explained by their scientific superiority, but is also linked to how they better align with geo-political and economic interests and powers (see Zwarteveen et al., 2017; Zwarteveen, 2015).

Based on these insights, we contend that it is important to conceptualize policy transfer in a way that recognizes and is open to the agency and influence of all parties involved and that allows acknowledgement of and reflection about the many interactions that occur between

them. One promising way of doing this is to build on the notion of symmetry as proposed by Latour (Latour, 2005 and 1999). Latour makes a plea to not assume knowledge of how human and more-than-human actors, words and much else (technologies, policies) are related or structured prior to the analysis (or intervention) by processes that are somehow ‘higher’ or ‘beyond’ them. In parallel, he posits that researchers, analysts or ‘interventionists’ are not (and should not consider themselves to be) outside of the networks they study or intend to change (Latour, 1999). Instead, Latour and his Actor-Network Theory colleagues propose that researchers start their investigations with how people themselves make sense of and connect the phenomena or policies studied to other actors and other knowledges (Callon, 2017; Law and Mol, 2001). Following this proposal implies not starting (the analysis of) policy transfer as if that what is transferred is bounded and known, or as if the outcome of transfer processes is known beforehand. Instead, it implies accepting that the object of transfer changes depending on the network in which it is: it is not transferred, but translated (or performed) differently in different places. Research or intervention attention then goes to the actors doing transfer, and to the networks in and through which it happens, perhaps more than to where the transferred object came from (Stone et al., 2020).

5.4 Policy transfer as a symmetrical conversation

We propose the term – or metaphor – of ‘symmetrical conversation’ as a useful one for re-thinking and doing delta planning or climate adaptation in the context of development cooperation. The idea of a symmetrical conversation is based on the acknowledgment that there is no ultimate truth, or one best account, of delta (or climate change) realities and dynamics. Delta and climate change processes are complex and dynamic, and can be (re-)presented and engaged with in many different ways. These will not always be easily compatible: there may be frictions between them. Symmetrical conversations between different knowledges and knowers therefore importantly hinge on developing the ability to deal with such frictions. Beyond its explanatory potential and its ability to recognize the learning that happens as part of policy transfer processes, we propose the term also as a more normative guiding principle for planning and doing policy transfer. Adopting and adhering to this principle implies a willingness to celebrate plurality and difference in engaging with or knowing deltas. Our hope is that the term helps articulate, capture and mobilize the positive ideals, energies and ambitions that we encountered across many of the people involved in delta planning projects outside of the Netherlands.

With the term conversation we highlight the merit of decentering Dutch knowledge. The term does this by not taking Dutch expertise as both the starting- and end point of policy transfer, but instead emphasizing how it changes when entering in dialogue – in conversation – with other knowledges, (non)human actors and ways of sense making to create or perform something different each time. The word conversation necessarily implies that there are multiple protagonists who each are serious about their own contribution, and

keen to listen to and learn from others. As compared to the term debate, the word conversation focuses less on confrontation and competition, but instead draws attention to ideals of empathy and the ability to listen and taken each other seriously. The ideal conversation is one in which people are considerate, feel safe to express their vantage points, and are curious about those of others. Unlike chats or more casual talks, conversations are meaningful encounters inspired by a joint desire to reach a new level of understanding. The term conversation thus emphasizes reciprocity, and invites the explicit nurturing of those attitudinal and interactive skills needed to reach out to and appreciate others' experiences (cf. Mendes-Flohr, 2015). In this way, the term provides a positive and fruitful basis for joint reflections and co-learning.

With the term symmetry we hope to draw attention to the importance of explicitly recognizing and dealing with difference – such as those based on ethnicity, education, gender, age, professional status, wealth, and authority (among others) – in analytically non-hierarchical terms. In this sense, symmetry also implies nurturing critical consciousness of how real differences (in power, wealth, authority) may make some knowers and knowledges seem superior. As a normative principle, symmetry implies the active rejection of assessments of the 'superiority' or 'advanced-ness' of expertise on the basis of the GDP or assumed scientific prowess of the country in which it originates. Instead, it highlights the importance of consciously maintaining and nurturing relations of friendship, collegiality and trust in which all parties learn. The effectiveness of 'policy transfer' is no longer measured in terms of how well on original idea is replicated, but expressed in the quality of relations and the degree of mutual learning. Symmetry thus intends to help challenge knowledge hierarchies, creating space for reverse feedback loops and 'return learning' between so-called 'senders' and 'receivers'. Symmetry also invites reflection about the geo-political and economic contexts in which policy transfers happen, to learn to recognize and navigate power relations and political agendas. After all, there are profits and reputations at stake. Off-stage diplomacy, struggles, disappointments and sometimes dirty manoeuvres are and will continue to be an integral part of interactions between differently positioned delta knowers. Beyond merely exposing these, symmetry entails learning from and dealing with the intrinsically messy and political nature of policy transfers.

We imagine and propose the term symmetrical conversation to denote a joint and collective effort by the different people who act as spokespersons for delta realities. The term captures and allows reflection about their aspiration to jointly reflect, plan and design climate-resilient futures that are sustainable, safe and equitable. A successful symmetrical conversation hinges as much on technical knowledges, as on relational and political skills. Symmetrical conversations require diplomacy, the ability to navigate political and cultural differences, the willingness to listen and the capacity to (un-)learn. Talking about and doing climate adaptation and delta planning projects in the context of development cooperation in terms of symmetrical conversations, we hope, will also open the door for renewed attention to and investment in relations of solidarity between people, communities and countries. This hope rests on the potential of the term to more explicitly articulate and reflect on climate

adaptation as a joint networked project in which all experiences count, and in which all can and should learn from each other. Sharing and exchanging climate adaptation and delta planning knowledge and expertise between knowers should not need to depend on bilateral relations between the Dutch and their partners in other countries.

5.5 Conclusion

This paper builds on our conceptualization of the transfer of the Dutch Delta Approach to other countries as a process of policy translation. It is importantly inspired by the many exchanges we had with delta and water professionals in Bangladesh, Vietnam, and the Netherlands (among others). In that sense it is itself testimony and product of many symmetrical conversations. Our argument is that promotional as well as critical narratives of policy transfer as a process of diffusion misrepresent what happens in practice, and are difficult to reconcile with how those involved in transfer processes talk about what they do. Many (indeed most) of these ‘policy transfer actors’ do for instance not consider Dutch knowledge as superior to other delta knowledges. We learned that processes of policy transfer are characterized by collegiality and mutual learning. They consist of interactions in which different knowers are not so much guided by ideas about which or whose knowledge is best or superior, but by their shared interest in the sustainable development of deltas and by their shared ambition to contribute to the well-being of delta inhabitants and ecosystems. The symmetrical conversation that we propose as a metaphor to capture, think and do policy transfer is therefore very close to how many involved already make sense of and do it.

Closely listening to and documenting how people involved in policy transfer processes talk about what they do, therefore, provided the inspiration for our attempt to imagine policy transfer in less hierarchical terms. A symmetrical conversation does not attribute privileged agency to the experts and expertise of the country of origin, which is how the term creates room for acknowledging how knowers (can) learn from each other, even when the grounds on which they meet are not always level. Viewing policy transfers in terms of symmetrical conversations also means not a priori assuming that that what is transferred is intrinsically good. Instead it entails an invitation to open up the discussion about what good policies are and do. As a guiding principle, the term symmetrical conversation aims to stimulate seeing and doing policy transfer as processes of learning between different knowers, inspiring them to co-shape the object of learning together.

Our proposal to imagine policy transfer as a symmetrical conversation is pragmatic as well as idealistic. It is pragmatic because it is based on how we explain ‘what works’ in policy transfer, based on the findings of our research. We saw Dutch, Bangladeshi and Vietnamese delta knowers co-developing inspiring delta plans in their mutual desire to create a better delta future. Our proposal is idealistic in that it expresses our desire to contribute to creating a more level playing field for different knowers and knowledges to meet and inspire each other. We hope that the term ‘symmetrical conversation’ helps the Dutch government

become more modest about their own delta knowledge and expertise. Rather than talking about other deltas in the world as ‘less prosperous and less knowledgeable’, it is an invitation to explicitly recognize, appreciate and learn from the experiences and wisdom that other countries have accumulated through generations of living with and in deltaic regions.

Our re-imagining of policy transfer processes is not meant to replace the many critical analyses that we started the paper with. Policy transfer processes, especially when happening in the context of development cooperation, are riddled with power and politics. They are often far from inclusive or transparent, with those involved often belonging to an elite group of experts and diplomats who do and cannot speak for all those who experience the effects of either climate change, or the plans to adapt to it. Critical analyses therefore remain very much needed. Rather than providing an alternative to such analyses, our plea in this paper is to improve them by making them more empirically accurate. It is also a plea to complement them by more positive engagements with the opportunities provided by their inconsistencies and messiness. We think that there is merit in dedicating more active efforts to mobilize the seeds of positive and transformational energy that are present within the networks of involved actors in policy transfer networks, thereby broadening the possible roles the Dutch can play beyond those of the salesman or priest.

Our hope is that imagining policy transfers as symmetrical conversations will draw attention and efforts towards forging partnerships that are less hierarchical. Such efforts will necessarily need to be inserted in wider acknowledgment and pragmatic navigations of international geopolitics, and remain reflexively aware of the reputations and interests involved in international cooperation and trade. Foregrounding the friendships, collegiality as well as the curiosity and openness to other ways of knowing already present in policy transfer processes, we expect, will generate more explicit reflection about how to nurture and maintain the trust needed for knowledge sharing and mutual learning. More explicit attention to process and relations will also help in articulating the importance of inclusiveness and transparency of plan development processes. Of particular importance here is the question of how to make those responsible for developing long-term delta or climate adaptation plans more accountable to those who will experience the effects of the implementation of these plans. In all, our hope is that a symmetrical conversation narrative will help better recognize, appreciate and engage with a range of differences and diversities – in delta expertise and knowledges, cultures and languages. This in turn provides a good basis for pluralizing delta knowledge and expertise, not limiting it to what the Dutch do and know.