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### Making waves

*Reimagining policy transfer in the context of development cooperation*

Hasan, S.

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# 6

## CONCLUSION

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### 6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I synthesize this thesis while also reflecting on the conclusions of my empirical findings as discussed in the previous chapters. I also use the chapter for a contemplation on the experience of doing a PhD research, to say something about how my understanding of policy transfer in an international cooperation context has changed in the process. With this synthesis I come back to my overall research objective that guided this PhD thesis, which was to rather agnostically document and analyse how policy models emerge and obtain relevance outside of their place of origin. I was particularly interested in exploring ways of understanding policy transfer in ways that recognize the agency and influence of all involved parties.

### 6.2 Understanding policy transfer in less hierarchical terms

In this thesis I conceptualized policy transfer as a process of translation, as I hoped that this conceptualization would allow me to think of and discuss policy transfers in international cooperation contexts in more symmetrical terms. In chapters 2 and 3 I showed that the diffusion narrative of policy transfer - which posits that transfers follow demand from the recipient country, a demand that is often the result of the successful branding of the transfer object by the sending country - misrepresents what happens during transfer. It is also the narrative that is cherished by those who initiate the transfer, as it positively foregrounds their efforts and expertise. A key finding of my reconstruction of how policy transfers happen - based on a semi-ethnographic documentation of the travels of the Dutch Delta Approach to Vietnam and Bangladesh - is that making a policy model travel requires effort from all those involved. Rather than following a neat linear trajectory in which speed is the main indicator of success, a conceptualization of transfer-as-translation allows recognizing that policy transfer evolve through processes of trial and error. I mobilized the metaphor of

waves to capture this, comparing what happens in the process of transfer to a series of waves that do not propagate themselves but are consciously created and require continuous energy to keep spreading. Some waves may decline or die altogether, while others amplify in sometimes unexpected ways.

As part of the work involved in creating and propagating these waves, different actors change, learn from and influence each other. In the process, the nature of the waves often changes. That is, the problems that the transferred policy set out to help solve may be reformulated and the proposed solution changes, while also the policy model itself becomes something else. The actors involved creatively shape and re-shape the transfer object as part of efforts to realize their own ambitions, without unduly frustrating those of others (as shown in the development of the BDP 2100 in chapter 3). Foregrounding the actions and efforts of all involved in the analysis of policy transfer processes, thereby, also brings the malleability and fluidity of the transfer object into sharp focus. The policy I studied, the Dutch Delta Approach, emerged as particularly adaptable: it proved to be broad enough to fit a wide range of interests and accommodate different storylines or development visions. More than creating willingness to adopt a more or less bounded and known policy object at the destination sites, the transfer process of the Dutch Delta Approach resembles a series of collaborations and interactions in which both the involved actors and that what is transferred change.

Although expressing it in different terms, most theories about policy transfer agree that transfer only occurs when there is enough resonance between the ‘senders’ and the ‘receivers’. When theorizing starts from an identification with the senders, creating this resonance is often seen as consisting of creating ‘receptivity’ among those targeted. My own theorization and analysis did not a priori identify with the sender – or assume the ‘goodness’ of transfer, for that matter. This allowed me to recognize that more than about creating receptivity for a fixed idea, policy transfer is about creating resonance between people, ideas, interests and rationalities. Creating resonance is indeed like making waves. The occurrence of a wave signifies that the work of those operating as spokespersons for the transfer has resulted in creating enough interest in, and support for the transferred policy object. More than technical knowledge of the policy object – in my case expertise about delta planning - creating resonance and making waves importantly consists of creating alliances and political buy-in, often by mobilizing or building on existing relations. It also entails the cautious navigation of cultural and power differences. The process involves negotiation, persuasion and contestations, with that what is transferred changing in and through the process. Making waves and helping them spread thus is a process of trial and error, and is shaped by disappointments and contingencies - dissonances - that are difficult to predict or foresee.

This conceptualization of policy transfer as translation is also useful as it allows explicitly appreciating and reflecting on how social relations – of diplomacy, friendship, and collegiality – provide the necessary conduits to make transfer possible. Perhaps particularly in the context of development cooperation, such relations are riddled with cultural and

power differences. Navigating such differences is therefore an important dimension of doing transfer, with prevailing geo-political and economic hierarchies co-shaping how transfer happens as well as its outcomes (as discussed in chapter 2, 3 and 4). Yet, too much emphasis on such hierarchies may make it difficult to acknowledge the enormous influence actors on the so-called recipient side have on the transfer process and outcome. My accounts of what happened in Vietnam and perhaps even more in Bangladesh show how the involved experts and officials in both countries creatively moulded and steered the process to make it suit their interests and contexts. In transfer-as-diffusion stories, this influence may appear as obstruction or resistance. It can be negatively qualified as slowing down the pace of transfer. In my transfer-as-translation conceptualization, it instead appears as intrinsic to the process of transfer. Accepting that transfer is negotiated and that the transfer object changes in the process usefully decentres the power and influence of the initiators in shaping what happens to instead create room for appreciating the roles and agency of all the involved actors and their efforts, recognizing how they navigate interests and politics to arrive at something that is satisfactory to all.

By telling the story of the transfer of the Dutch Delta Approach to Vietnam and Bangladesh as a story of translation, I was able to draw attention to the deeply dialogic, relational and mutual learning character of policy transfer in the context of development cooperation. As shown in chapter 4, continuous investments in relations of collegiality, friendship and mutual trust are an important part of transfer processes, with transfer appearing to be easier when build on longstanding relations of collaboration. For the case of the delta planning at least the stability of the transfer object seemed less important than maintaining relations of diplomacy and trade between the involved countries. Acknowledging this 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 of the quality of their policy expertise – that is referred to in more conventional explanations of policy transfer becomes less meaningful in explaining transfer processes. Rather than using resemblance to the original as a measure of the success of policy transfer, my analysis suggests that it is more useful to focus on how agreements reached and relations maintained or strengthened as indicators of success or effectiveness. Doing this hinges on and contributes to the much-needed troubling of simplistic notions of development as a unilateral process of modernization, civilization or advancement that continue to implicitly inform asymmetrical accounts of policy transfer.

My overall conclusion is that there is merit in seeing the process of policy transfer as one of mutual learning and of continuous adjustments, in which those at the receiving end have quite some power and influence. In my analysis, the relation between the senders and recipients emerges as much more symmetrical (as captured in the chapter 2, 3, and 4) than both conventional and more critical accounts have it. All involved in a transfer process learn from each other, with the quality of learning importantly hinging on the overall quality of the relations between them. Acknowledging this usefully offers the possibility to imagine

and design policy transfer in less hierarchical terms, not a priori positioning those originating the transfer (and their knowledge) as superior to the ‘receivers’ (as discussed in chapter 5). It makes it difficult to characterize the relations between ‘receivers’ and the ‘senders’ in terms of an expertise hierarchy, but instead invites appreciating them as in terms of collegiality, partnership and friendship. By not attributing privileged agency to the experts and expertise of the country of origin, the idea of translation creates much-needed room for better acknowledging how knowledge and knowers learn from each other even when the grounds on which they meet are not always level.

Applying this less hierarchical and more symmetrical conceptualization of policy transfer to the transfer of the Dutch Delta Approach entails taking some distance from the vantage point of the Dutch to instead create room for the perspectives of Vietnam and Bangladesh. From a vantage point of Vietnam or Bangladesh as discussed in chapters 2, 3 and 4, the Netherlands as a country no longer remains the most important and advanced in managing water and delta management (as the Dutch promotional narrative has it); nor does Dutch knowledge and expertise appear as the essential for the development of the deltas in Vietnam and Bangladesh. Rather, the Netherlands appears as one of many knowers of water and deltas. Dutch delta interventions often happen simultaneously to interventions by other countries like Germany, Japan and international development agencies like the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank (among others). Most of those interventions are anchored in specific conceptualizations and understandings of water and deltas, and are tied to specific development projects or imaginaries of the future that may resonate with but are also sometimes rather different than those of the Dutch. Similar to the Dutch government, the promoters or initiators of those interventions advocate for, legitimate or contest for their own interests and certain visions of a future in the concerned deltas (Ohno, 2019).

While not the focus of my analysis, in both Vietnam and Bangladesh I documented how the Dutch government also tries increasing the popularity of its own Delta Approach visible by actively mobilizing support and funds for it with other development actors including the World Bank, the UNDP, or the development cooperation agencies of Germany and Japan (among others). Also here, rather than as a bounded policy object the Delta Approach emerges as a broad umbrella term that allows bringing together a range of projects and problems. The alliances between the Dutch and other development donors and actors in Vietnam and Bangladesh are not static, but continuously evolve as those aligned re-invent their expertise in lines with wider ambitions to maintain or expand trade and geo-political relations. The alliances, therefore, evolve with shifts in (geo-)politics and power that influence who gets to decide on what development should be, and also with the changing (upward) position of Vietnam or Bangladesh in the global development index. From a vantage point of Vietnam or Bangladesh the Dutch Delta Approach is thus one possible option to learn from on how to manage deltas, which possibly would become something else when new political development happens in these countries; when the Dutch government re-invents their development cooperation policy; or when the parties mutually agree to change direction of their bilateral relations.

On the basis of this thesis, I contend that it is important to recognize Vietnam and Bangladesh as important sources of delta knowledge. After all, Bangladeshi and Vietnamese knowledge and expertise were merged with that of the Dutch to develop the country's respective delta plans. It is in the deltas in Vietnam and Bangladesh that actors from bilateral and international development organizations, NGOs and the private sector interact, contest for and learn from each other about specific imaginaries of futures in deltas. In their interactions, different conceptualizations, technological and policy interventions for water and delta meet and sometimes clash to produce new insights. Acknowledging this entails an invitation to actively re-think how and where policy knowledge is produced. This is important also because it is dangerous to unequivocally position the Global North – the so-called developed world – as the dominant source of knowledge and expertise. Creating room to recognize the wisdom that comes from less usual places helps re-think conventional assumptions that continue to guide North-South knowledge transfer in development cooperation, while also underscoring the importance of creating new circuits – such as South-South - for expertise to travel. This thesis shows that there is merit in investing more in reversing the direction of knowledge transfer, making it travel from South to North.

My research findings (for example in chapter 4 and 5) also suggest that understanding and discussing delta planning and management from the vantage point of Vietnam and Bangladesh may not be as much concerned with climate change as the Dutch government tends to do in its promotional accounts of the Delta Approach. Much of the conversation on deltas in Vietnam and Bangladesh focused on other pressing preoccupations, having to do with ensuring wellbeing and development for all now as well as in the future. By not identifying with the Dutch problematization of delta planning as being primarily about climate change, Vietnam and Bangladesh emphasized that problems ranging from poverty alleviation, health, education, infrastructure development to transboundary water sharing (among others) are as or more important for them. This should serve to make the Dutch government more cautious in all too quickly assuming that Dutch understandings of managing deltas are comparable to those outside of the Netherlands.

The discussions that occurred as part of the transfer of the Dutch Delta Approach about managing deltas in fact demonstrated that policy transfer is not about replicating specific knowledge and expertise to make it useful in another contexts. Stories of policy transfer in which the Netherlands remains as the dominant source of knowledge are unlikely to support the deltaic destination countries to achieve desired development goals. Managing deltas is rather a broader question of how people, cities, countries can better deal with development challenges including the challenges related to climate change. What is needed is a new way to converse and cooperate about the development of deltas: one that recognizes many knowledges and sources of expertise and in which the dominance of just one way of knowing or doing is actively resisted (as discussed in chapter 5). When the engaged actors (initiators and recipients alike) recognize the influence, expertise and agency of all involved parties, ways of knowing deltas diversify and pluralize. This requires deltaic countries to come together to manage deltas in international cooperation with empathy and curiosity to

learn from and support each other and without aiming for a best or one-size-fits-all approach.

By better realizing the mutual learning potential of policy transfer projects in the context of development cooperation, this thesis calls for active efforts to diversify the conventional conceptual languages to think and talk about them. Doing this helps nurture respect for the expertise and ideas that are present in places and people considered as not (yet) modern and developed. I make a plea, in other words, 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 facing challenges in planning and managing deltas to support a sustainable future. This thesis proposes (in chapter 5) the term “*symmetrical conversation*” for doing this: a conversation in which many knowers are dialoguing and learning to co-develop policies inspired by the lessons learned and experiences of others. Viewing policy transfers as symmetrical conversations shifts the attention away from the intrinsic qualities of transferred policies to exploring in dialogue what makes policies ‘good’. Symmetrical conversation stimulates the organization of processes of learning around different knowledge between different knowers, to get engaged, to be inspired and to co-shape the object of learning together. In symmetrical conversations, the delta knowers are not guided by any specific knowledge order but by their shared interest in the sustainable development of deltas and the well-being of its peoples and ecosystems. Policy transfer as a symmetrical conversation is thus guided by appreciation of different delta knowers and knowledges: a process in which various delta knowers co-learn and re-imagine the sustainable future of deltas and to inspire others to achieve such.

This thesis concludes that engaging in policy transfers as symmetrical conversations enables accounts of equal partnership and joint efforts that do merit to what the thesis shows as working practice. The accounts that do not shy away from how international politics work, and that explicitly discuss how to navigate political and commercial interests. It makes the practices of maintaining friendship, mutual learning and negotiation explicit and prominent features of policy transfer. It allows to recognize and appreciate diversities - existing forms of expertise, practices, cultures and languages - in development cooperation. This way of recognizing policy transfer processes in international cooperation also creates much-needed room for re-thinking how different knowledges and knowers relate to each other and can come together for development.

### **6.3 Doing this PhD research: a final contemplation**

In the course of tracing and analysing the work, interest and agency of involved parties in the transfer of the Dutch Delta Approach, I also experienced and learned about what it takes to study policy transfer. A particularly insightful learning moment was when a few Dutch diplomats and some of their close aides in Bangladesh and the Netherlands exerted behind-the screens influence to question my findings and research, and make it difficult for me to

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continue what I was doing.<sup>1</sup> Their interpretation of my study was that I ‘portrayed a negative image of Dutch water expertise and of the BDP 2100’ and thereby, challenging their reputations and expertise. This experience forcefully reminded me of how ways of understanding and analysing processes and events – in my case the transfer of the Dutch Delta Approach – are themselves part of that what is happening. Indeed, there is much at stake in maintaining the ‘transfer-as-diffusion’ storyline. A purposive effort to not go along with this storyline, therefore, may be seen as threatening and dangerous to the status-quo. I learnt that doing this kind of research is not innocent, and entails navigating interests and egos.

While doing this PhD thesis, I also came to learn that my agnostic approach to studying policy transfer in development cooperation contexts not just entails navigating such reputational politics, but also requires, and helps build relations of collegiality and trust with people involved in transfer. The relevant skills for doing this are seldom explicitly mentioned as a requirements for a research position, nor are they widely acknowledged as being part of scientific research methods. I learned these skills while doing the research. I also discovered that I enjoy this way of engaging with people, and like to assume the role of a critical-yet-empathetic documenter and discussant. Being and becoming so intensively involved in that what is studied is thoroughly fun, even though it also comes with its challenges.

In understanding policy transfer in less hierarchical terms, I observed that the way research is funded, rewarded and organised itself may favour those who promote or initiate transfers. This is closely related to how much funding for studying the transfer of Dutch Delta knowledge comes from the Netherlands, something that itself is part of efforts of the Dutch government to become a globally recognized source of water and delta expertise. My own research is done from three places – the Netherlands, Vietnam and Bangladesh, and I have a Bangladeshi nationality. But my affiliation with a Dutch institute qualifies me and my publications as ‘Dutch’. When submitting article manuscripts to journals, I for instance noticed that they ask where – in which country – the research was originated. I tried giving more than one country as the answer, but this proved impossible. The qualification of my research as ‘Dutch’ makes it also difficult to appreciate how my findings and analysis were themselves the product of a joint learning process: it is through the many discussions and conversations with all those involved in and studying policy transfer that I was able to patch

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<sup>1</sup> A journalist drew on some excerpts from one my scientific blogs (Hasan, 2018) for her article on the transfer of Dutch delta expertise in a special issue on water of the Dutch magazine *Vice Versa* (Stravens, 2018, p. 58). After the publication of the article, some diplomats approached my host institution – IHE Delft, a reputed institution that promotes Dutch water knowledge – to clarify the ‘critical perspective of one of its PhD Fellows on Dutch expertise’, hinting that such critiques would endanger future collaborations. Even though the article also quotes to two Dutch researchers, the diplomats and their close aides in Bangladesh widely referred to it as ‘Shahnoor Hasan’s article’ and tried discrediting it.

In another incident in 2019, the diplomats tried to influence their Bangladeshi BDP 2100 partner organization to not extend support to my research fieldwork. This happened when the Bangladeshi government officials accepted my request to observe their high level intergovernmental BDP 2100 meetings with officials from the Dutch ministries of Foreign Affairs and of Infrastructure and Water Management in the Netherlands.



together my account. I conclude that funding realities and authorship customs in scientific research make it difficult to acknowledge multiple affiliations and collaborations. In this way, they themselves perpetuate an image of ‘the North’ (or in this case the Netherlands) as an important source of water or delta planning wisdom, and make it difficult to acknowledge contributions of ‘others’. Realizing this only increases my interest in understanding ‘what makes knowledge (in)visible’ and ‘whose knowledge counts and why’. Indeed, doing this PhD thesis inspired me to envision an education and research environment that encourages one to continuously question and discuss how prevailing ways of knowing nature-society relations come about, where they originate and what impacts they have.