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## Making waves in the Mekong Delta: recognizing the work and the actors behind the transfer of Dutch delta planning expertise

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The government of the Netherlands actively promotes Dutch delta planning to other deltaic countries. This paper describes and analyzes the Dutch–Vietnamese interactions and relationships around the development of the Mekong Delta Plan as a case of policy transfer. The paper uses an approach that regards policy transfers as processes of translation. It draws attention to the work that goes into making Dutch delta expertise and knowledge useful elsewhere. The paper shows that the financial and political support for Dutch Delta Planning expertise in Vietnam needed to be actively and continuously wielded to keep the process going. We conclude that there is merit in understanding policy transfer as a process of translation between many actors, all of whom change, learn, and influence not just each other but also what is transferred. Such an understanding allows better acknowledgement of the deeply dialogic and relational character of policy transfer processes.

**Keywords:** delta planning; policy transfer; knowledge transfer; policy diffusion; policy translation

### 1. Introduction

The government of the Netherlands presents its country as *a safe and liveable delta* (Netherlands National Water Plan (NNWP) 2016–2021; International Water Ambition, Delta Programme 2016; NNWP 2009–2015 (Chapters 2 and 6); Bosma, Boomsma, and Geluk 2017; Van Alphen 2014). Framing the country as a delta highlights its vulnerability to climate change, while simultaneously serving the purpose of making this vulnerability comparable to that of other deltaic places, such as California, Vietnam, Bangladesh or Egypt. Use of the adjectives *safe* and *liveable* calls attention to the country's confidence in its resilience to all climate change scenarios. A long history of living with and protecting itself against water – of building dams and dikes, constructing polders and effectively organizing complex decision making processes around contested water questions – forms the basis of this confidence.

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This portrayal of the Netherlands as a safe and liveable delta is clearly linked to the purpose of promoting the *export*<sup>1</sup> of Dutch delta planning, knowledge and expertise to other deltaic countries. Through phrases such as: “The Netherlands is a world leader in managing water” or “Dutch water expertise is among the best in the world” (RVO, n.d.), the Dutch government actively brands its water knowledge and professionalism. The claim is that Dutch water knowledge is useful for other delta areas in the world, because it can support these to achieve levels of resilience and safety comparable to those of the Netherlands (MFA 2011, 2012). A brochure that clearly articulates this vision of the Dutch government is *The Delta Approach. Preconditions for sustainable delta management*. It characterizes the Dutch Delta Approach by listing its 12 building blocks, and explicitly states that the approach can “also be applied in other delta countries regions/cities to further delta planning processes” (Netherlands Water Partnership 2014, 10).

The promotional texts about Dutch delta planning expertise create the distinct suggestion that this expertise can travel more or less by and of itself. They implicitly adhere to what we in this article call a *diffusion model* of policy transfer, one that seems loosely based on the innovation theory of Rogers (1962). This model explains the mobility of a policy model by referring to its intrinsic qualities, often using some reference to the advanced state of development of its place of origin as an indicator of its superiority. Policy models thus travel from economically, technologically or institutionally more advanced countries or places (sometimes referred to as “pioneers”, “champions” or “front-runners”) to places that are less well endowed (the adopters) (see Rogers 1962; Walker 1969; Gray 1973; Savage 1985; Berry and Berry 1999). Indeed, the narrative used by the Government of the Netherlands (see for example Kimmelman, 2017; Netherlands Water Partnership, 2014; MFA 2012; RVO, n.d.) clearly bears the marks of this model: implicitly, it correlates the Netherlands’ advanced state of economic development with its advanced delta planning knowledge.

Our discomfort with this model of policy transfer forms the starting point for this paper, and for the larger research project of which it forms part. In particular, we are concerned by how the diffusion narrative intrinsically implies and posits a hierarchy between the origin and destination of the transferred policy, evoking an image of a rather unilateral evolutionary process that is importantly steered by its initiators. Is it possible to conceptualize, think of and discuss policy transfer in more symmetrical and less hierarchical terms? How to represent policy transfer in ways that recognize the agency and influence of *all* involved parties and that allow acknowledgement and reflection on the mutual learning and influencing that take place between them?

Our effort to answer these questions starts with the empirical identification of the actors behind the transfer of Dutch delta planning knowledge. We use a systematic documentation of their work to create the empirical basis for recognizing policy or knowledge transfer as a process that requires active efforts. This allows us to show that Vietnamese demand for Dutch delta expertise did not happen spontaneously. Rather, it was the effect of deliberate efforts to negotiate and maintain diplomatic and trade relations between the two countries, efforts that happened as part of a new Dutch development cooperation agenda. In the process, what was transferred – in our case Dutch delta planning expertise – was not fixed, but changed. In our account, policy transfer emerges as consisting of a series of interactions between Dutch actors, from a variety of backgrounds, with Vietnamese partners. What happened in and through these interactions was the emergence of something altogether new, something that kept

and keeps changing depending on the people involved and their respective projects, and on the imaginaries mobilized.

Our empirical analysis builds on, and contributes to, an understanding of policy transfer as a process of translation, the final outcome of which is not known beforehand; it is negotiated and often contingent. In addition to appreciating the tremendous effort and work that goes into processes of transferring policies from one place to another, our analysis reveals that much of this work is, at best, remotely related to the contents of Dutch delta planning expertise. Rather than describing knowledge transfer processes from the vantage point of those who have invested in their eventual success (akin to impact assessments), our more agnostic analysis also helps to recognize how the appreciation of success or failure may radically change as a function of who does the assessment. In addition, by not taking the contents of what is transferred for granted, our description and analysis provide a useful entry point for re-considering the nature of policy or planning expertise.

In the following section, we explain the theoretical inspirations for this conceptualization of policy transfer as consisting of acts of translation (Callon 1986). We operationalize this by introducing the analogy of making waves. In Section 3, we explain our methodology, to continue in Section 4 with describing the “from aid to trade” context in which the transfer of Dutch delta planning has to be understood. We go further in Section 5 by documenting three episodes of “wave-making”. In the final section of this paper, we discuss the implications and conclusions of our research.

## 2. Delta planning in the Mekong Delta as an active process of making waves

To make our argument, we anchor the analysis of this paper in a heuristic distinction between two models of policy transfer that we owe to Science and Technology scholars (most notably Latour 1986; Akrich *et al.* 2002a,b): the model of *diffusion* and the model of *translation*. As noted, we categorize promotional texts accompanying the transfer of Dutch delta planning as adhering to a *diffusion* model of policy. In this model, the policy transferred is endowed with intrinsic qualities; these are what provide the policy with the force to move from one place to another. In this model, therefore, the fact that a policy (or technology) is mobile does not have to be explained. The only thing that needs to be explained is the relative speed with which it spreads: the metaphor implicitly relied upon is one of the passage of an unchanged object that experiences more or less obstacles – for instance poor communication, opposition or ill will. Analyses thus typically focus on identifying factors that enable or impede the success or speed of the transfer, sometimes using this for a categorization of the transfer process in stages (for examples, see Hill and Klamer 2002; Grossback, Nicholson-Crotty, and Peterson 2004; Zevenbergen *et al.* 2013). Where the traveling policy undergoes changes while traveling, this tends to be attributed to friction or resistance which deflected or slowed down the travel. The diffusion model explains policy transfer by the initial ingenuity or cleverness of the policy transferred, and by pointing to the resisting ‘medium’: when transfer was successful it simply confirms the quality of the policy; when it was not, it is because it met with a lot of resistance. The policy in question is relatively marginal to this explanation (as its quality is assumed or taken for granted), while the actors involved in making the transfer happen remain rather invisible (they tend to figure as mere instruments) (see Newmark 2005; Dussauge-Laguna 2013; Mukhtarov 2014 for extensive reviews of the literature on policy transfer).

In contrast to the *diffusion* model, the *translation* model conceives the spread of a policy model in space and time to be in the hands of people, each of whom may act in many different ways to modify, deflect, betray, add on to or appropriate it (cf. Latour 1986, 267). The faithful transmission of a policy idea from a place of origin to a destination is a rarity in this model, and if it happens it needs to be explained. The translation model does not assume that what is transferred has intrinsic merits that help explain its mobility. Rather, policy ideas move because of the actions of all those involved in making it happen. The term translation comes from the theory of innovation proposed by Akrich *et al.* (2002a,b), which maintains that the success of transfer depends on the ability of the spokespersons for a technology (or policy idea) to interest enough actors for it to spread; something that is called “*interessement*” (Akrich *et al.* 2002a, 203). The translation theory was originally developed as a framework to show how the truth of scientific facts is the result of the stability with which they are aligned to larger networks (of other facts, artefacts and people). When applied to the transfer of policy models, the theory draws attention to the actions and behaviours of all involved actors, who re-shape the policy in question according to their different projects. This is why Callon (with, among others, Latour 1987) replaced the metaphor of *transfer* with that of *translation*: the term describes the travel of a fact, technology or policy model as a specific kind of mediation that simultaneously transmits and distorts a signal.

For their studies of the workings of development cooperation programmes – of which the transfer of knowledge, technologies or policy models is often a central element – Li (2007) and Mosse (2004) (building, among others, on the seminal works of Ferguson 1994; Mitchell 2002) have used similar conceptualizations to express that the success of the transfer of a technology or policy model is not inherent or given at the outset, but arises from the ability to continue recruiting support. Hence, successful policy transfer means that enough policy actors are aligned to the particular interpretation of the problem that the policy proposes to address (cf. Mosse 2004, 646). Hence, much like Callon (1986), Li emphasizes that the transfer of a policy hinges on creating acceptance of a particular framing of the problem (or set of problems) for which the policy in question is proposed as a solution (Li 2007, 7). The articulation of this solution implies a hierarchical relationship between the origin and the destination of the policy, as it “confirms expertise and constitutes the boundary between those who are positioned as trustees, with the capacity to diagnose deficiencies in others, and those who are subject to expert direction.” (Li 2007, 7). Li explains that trustees, the designated development experts or consultants, have the difficult task of juggling and combining a range of objectives, ranging from entrepreneurial profit to maintaining peace, to different forms of improvement or development (Li 2007, 9). This process of what Li calls “rendering technical” is always a project, and never an accomplishment (Li 2007, 10).

In this article, we draw on these *translation* theories of policy and knowledge transfer for guiding data collection and analysis. These theories allow an agnostic examination of what happens when expertise or a policy model travels from its place of origin to somewhere else, thereby providing the opportunity to acknowledge the importance of the actions of *all* involved actors. Doing this, we hope, will contribute to ways of understanding what happens when a policy model is transferred that do not prioritize or privilege the work and expertise of those initiating the transfer. Taking inspiration from Callon’s (1986) identification of four stages in the travel of an

innovation: problematization, interessement, enrolment and mobilization, we mobilize the metaphor of *making waves* to express what happened when Dutch delta planning knowledge was transferred from the Netherlands to Vietnam. We identify how different Dutch actors working in Vietnam have tried to create enough resonance<sup>2</sup> to bring waves into being: resonance between people, ideas, interests and rationalities, around a particular problematization of Vietnam as a delta that needs Dutch planning expertise to be better protected against climate change. The waves consist of the political and financial clout needed to make Dutch delta planning expertise useful for Vietnam. In the analogy, a wave thus signifies that the work of those operating as spokespersons for Dutch delta planning knowledge has resulted in creating enough interest in, and support for, Dutch delta planning knowledge.

To tell our story of Dutch involvement in the making of the Mekong Delta Plan, we distinguish between three episodes of wave-making. The first one involves a range of efforts by Dutch actors to create enthusiasm and support for Dutch delta planning expertise among the Vietnamese partners with whom they had chosen to work. They were only moderately successful. Because of their disappointing results, in a second episode, the Dutch changed both their partners and their problematization. We show how in this renewed wave-making effort, expectations were adjusted and institutional difficulties navigated. In a third period of wave-making efforts, a coalition of Dutch and Vietnamese actors worked hard to amplify the second wave by aligning the Mekong Delta Plan with the ideas and agendas of a selection of international development funding agencies.

### 3. Methodology

The empirical information for this paper was collected through in-depth interviews (18) that the first author conducted with a range of key actors involved in the transfer of Dutch delta planning in Vietnam. These included, amongst others: Dutch senior government officials involved in the promotion and transfer of the planning approach, Dutch consultants and advisors involved in the development of the Mekong Delta Plan, their Vietnamese partners (focal group) and associates from the international development agencies operating in Vietnam.

We used snowball sampling to identify these interviewees. Our first two interviews were with the Dutch consultants who co-authored the Mekong Delta Plan. From these two interviews, we built contacts with other interviewees. We conducted the interviews in a semi-structured way, following a general interview guide and thematic questions. We focused on the interviewees' efforts to create interest in, and support for, Dutch delta planning ideas and expertise. We deduced from their own interpretations how successful these efforts were. The interview data were supplemented with a desk study of available written documents: policy documents, scientific articles (mostly case study work) and (online) news clippings.

The narrative of Dutch involvement with the Mekong Delta Planning process that we constructed and literally patched together on the basis of these interviews and other sources of information is necessarily incomplete, and sometimes sketchy. Other versions of the same story can, and should be, told. In our reconstruction here, we have foregrounded those anecdotes that help tell the process of transfer of Dutch delta planning knowledge to Vietnam as one of translation: one that involved many actors who each changed and transformed what was transferred.

Because of the request for anonymity from many of our interviewees, we have chosen to use more or less generic categories to refer to them in the text. For the members of the Dutch consortium who co-authored the plan and who were involved in developing the scenarios, we use the term ‘Dutch consultants’. We refer to the other Dutch actors (the chief technical advisor, the strategic advisors, the senior officials of the Dutch embassy in Vietnam) as ‘Dutch consortium members’. We use the term ‘Dutch experts’ when we address the consultants and consortium members together. All the Vietnamese people we interviewed (except a government official from the national water planning organization) belonged to the group of well-connected Vietnamese academics and retired senior government officials that the Dutch experts brought together as a support group.

#### **4. A changing context: from aid to trade**

Dutch delta planning interventions in Vietnam need to be understood in the context of the Dutch development cooperation agenda. In the course of 2008, development cooperation policy underwent substantive ‘modernization’<sup>3</sup> in response to national political priorities, changing global political power relationships and the emergence of new global development actors (MFA 2011, 2013). This resulted in a new ‘hybrid form of development cooperation’ (MFA 2010) entitled “Aid and Trade”, in which the Dutch government more openly linked social objectives (aid) with economic ones (trade), making the active promotion of Dutch business interests an explicit co-objective of aid activities. This explains why an assessment of the future potential for generating Dutch profits became one important criterion for selecting which countries would be eligible for Dutch development cooperation support. Hence, next to a country’s level of income, its place on UNDP’s Human Development Index and activities of non-Dutch donors, an assessment of Dutch business potential and of possibilities to apply Dutch expertise also started figuring prominently in the selection of partner countries (MFA 2013).

The operationalization of this hybrid agenda importantly happened through the prioritization of four themes, partly chosen for their suitability to combine the promotion of Dutch business interests with objectives of development cooperation: security and the legal order; water; food security; and sexual and reproductive health and rights. In particular, the themes of water and food security were identified because of how they *dovetail with the economic sectors in which the Netherlands excels* (MFA 2010). In water, the strategy was to build on the existing reputation of the Netherlands as a global water leader (Haasnoot and Middelkoop 2012; Chapter 6 in the NNWP 2009–2015). The Dutch government identified scope for further promoting Dutch watery business interests, particularly in the areas of safe drinking water and sanitation, water productivity in agriculture, and improved river basin management and safe deltas. Its strategy highlights the importance of involving Dutch knowledge institutions in water projects elsewhere. The Netherlands Water Partnership<sup>4</sup>, which is the organization set up to bring different Dutch water parties together, was to play a key role in identifying opportunities and brokering partnerships and projects.

It is as part of this agenda and in this context that the tag “safe deltas” came to serve as a useful one to bring together both climate change, water and food security as well as drawing positive attention to the Netherlands as a source of advanced expertise on these matters (see for example, MFA 2013; NNWP 2009–2015). The term deltas

was used to denote rapidly urbanizing and economically flourishing hotspots that are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change (mainly because of floods). A longer-term protection of these deltaic places against the risks of climate change required a distinct type of long-term vision and planning (MFA 2013), similar to the delta plan that the Dutch so successfully developed for their own country (Van Alphen 2013). The terms delta and delta planning thus served a specific *problematization* of deltas as particularly vulnerable to climate change, one that makes deltas amenable to a range of Dutch solutions. The Netherlands Water Partnership produced a colorful brochure in which it explained and promoted this “Dutch Delta Approach”, neatly capturing it in twelve building blocks (Netherlands Water Partnership 2014).

Thus portraying Dutch delta planning activities suggests that they have a coherence and stability that those involved in them may find difficult to recognize. As we are showing elsewhere, in the Netherlands itself, ideas about what constitutes the best approach for living in, and dealing with, a delta are continuously changing and subject to debate (Van Buuren, Ellen, and Warner 2016; Zwarteveen *et al.* 2017; Zegwaard *et al.*, 2019). The presentation of the Dutch Delta Approach as a tested solution for helping to achieve resilient and prosperous deltas is, therefore, clearly also a construction specifically invented to help create enthusiasm for Dutch water expertise in other parts of the world.

## 5. Three episodes of wave-making

In this section, we describe the wave-making efforts we observed in the transfer of Dutch delta planning to Vietnam, categorizing them in three consecutive episodes. In the first episode, we document the work of a number of people trying to create resonance for Dutch delta planning ideas within the Vietnamese government, enticing them to cooperate with the Dutch in developing a Mekong Delta Plan. This was only moderately successful, which is why, in a second episode some members of the Dutch consortium identified a new entry-point for creating interest in Dutch delta planning in Vietnam. They approached a group of influential retired Vietnamese water experts, hoping that these experts would provide a way into the Vietnamese government. In a third episode, the Dutch consortium attempted to amplify the resonance created in the second episode by enrolling international donor organizations in the Mekong Delta Plan. The promise of future funding helped further spark the interest of the Vietnamese government in the plan.

### 5.1. First efforts to create resonance for Dutch Delta ideas in Vietnam

The choice for Vietnam and the Mekong delta as the destination of Dutch support and expertise happened, among others, because of the outcomes of a survey<sup>5</sup> that the Dutch government asked the Netherlands Water Partnership to undertake among Dutch water sector organizations (the Netherlands Water Partnership members). The survey aimed to identify those countries in which opportunities for strengthening economic relations could best, or most easily, be supported and intensified by targeted development cooperation activities, and where chances of aid (Official Development Assistance) gradually phasing out to be replaced with trade were highest. The selection of Mekong in Vietnam also fitted the policy principles outlined in the international chapter (Chapter 6) of the National Water Plan 2009–2015.

The Dutch Embassy in Vietnam was pleased that Vietnam figured among the countries targeted for Dutch delta planning support<sup>6</sup>. For some time already, they had been lobbying for a reinvigoration of relations of bilateral cooperation between the two countries, as they were concerned that the planned phasing out of ODA to Vietnam in 2012 would render the Netherlands less visible among international development agencies in the Mekong delta. The Dutch embassy suggested a new Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), as the existing MoU (which focused primarily on coastal management) had never been implemented. In 2009, Dutch and Vietnamese governments signed this new MoU, thereby consolidating, as well as broadening, their longstanding bilateral cooperation on integrated river basin and coastal zone management for another five years (until 2015). This new agreement formed a good basis and starting point for creating further interest in, and support for, Dutch water expertise in Vietnam.

To convince Vietnamese partners of the usefulness and effectiveness of Dutch water and delta planning expertise, a high-level delegation of Vietnamese government representatives was invited to the Netherlands during the first quarter of 2010. Among others, they were shown the Dutch Delta Works – the large hydraulic engineering structures that have come to figure as the iconic manifestation of the Netherlands' advanced ability to deal with complex water problems. After the visit, the Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister proposed to extend the new MoU with a strategic partnership arrangement, in which the scope for collaboration in terms of business and education between the countries was further specified.

These initial efforts formed the start of a long-winded strategy of mobilizing Vietnamese interest in, and support for, Dutch delta planning expertise. In October 2010, the strategic partnership for a Mekong Delta Plan between the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment, and the Vietnamese Ministries of Natural Resources and Environment (MoNRE) and Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) was signed, marking Vietnam as the first destination of Dutch delta planning expertise.

An analytical report (Marchand and Bucx 2011) that Deltares – a key Dutch research institute active in producing water knowledge, with a tagline of 'Enabling Delta Life' – was asked to produce for the Dutch and Vietnamese ministries<sup>7</sup> played a key role in rendering the Mekong delta technical and amenable to Dutch expertise and solutions. In this sense, the report is a visible manifestation of what both Callon (1986) and Li (2007) refer to as *problematization*. The report presents estimates of the socioeconomic losses that Vietnam would incur if sea levels were to rise by 65, 75 and 100 cm in 2100 in correspondence to low, average and high emission scenarios respectively. The report predicted that the inundations of the coastal plain caused by these rising waters would become both more permanent and more frequent (from 12.8 to 37.8%). River floods would, in their turn, make triple rice production in the delta more difficult, thereby significantly endangering Vietnam's global position as the second rice exporter (Anthony *et al.* 2015), as well as risking lowering its GDP. The report also included an assessment of existing water management policies in Vietnam, including the Mekong Delta Master Plan, developed with Dutch assistance in 1993 (NEDECO 1993). The conclusion was that these policies would not be effective in addressing the identified climate challenges. What would be needed, according to the report, is integrated long term planning and good governance. The report suggested that the Dutch delta planning approach could serve as a good example to achieve this. The report thus bounded and characterized the Mekong delta as a specific "intelligible field", in the process, making it appropriate for the kinds of interventions that the

Dutch had to offer. To use our metaphor, the report was instrumental in starting to create resonance in Vietnam for Dutch delta expertise. But did it?

To provide technical support to the development of the plan, the Dutch government appointed a consortium of Dutch consultants and academics. A former senior government official was hired as the Chief Technical Advisor and tasked with the overall coordination and monitoring of the planning process. He was actively supported by a group of strategic advisors (all Dutch), who worked together with the Dutch embassy officials in Vietnam. In the strategic partnership, the two governments had agreed to co-fund the planning process. The idea was that a Vietnamese expert working group would draft the plan, while technical assistance and supervision would be provided by the appointed Dutch consultants. The Vietnamese ministry MoNRE was to facilitate this process. MoNRE was asked to collaborate with MARD to form a working group with other Vietnamese partners.

Yet, the two Vietnamese ministries involved made little progress in forming an effective working group, and overall displayed little enthusiasm for the process. A long-time conflict between them partly explains this, a conflict that originates in the difficulty of MoNRE to have MARD comply with its environmental regulations when constructing large infrastructural projects. Some of the interviewees mentioned the fact that there was no earmarked funding for participation by Vietnamese experts as a possible cause for their lack of interest and commitment. This was in spite of the initial strategic agreement on co-funding the planning process. The insistence of the Dutch on co-funding was itself a direct outcome of the new Aid and Trade policy, as the willingness of the partner country to financially invest in the process was taken as an indication of real demand and interest. Yet, the Vietnamese government did not mobilize the promised funds to sponsor the participation of Vietnamese experts in the development of the Mekong Delta Plan.

Most of the Dutch experts whom we interviewed said they had been aware of the persistent animosity between MoNRE and MARD. Many also displayed sympathy for the difficulties the Vietnamese partners faced in mobilizing funds for participation in the process. Nonetheless, many also confessed that they had hoped and expected that their promise of helping to realize a safe and prosperous delta with Dutch assistance would, by itself, be attractive enough to entice the Vietnamese ministries to collaborate with each other, while also convincing the Vietnamese government to set aside funds for the purpose.

The difficulty in mobilizing enthusiasm, interest and funding severely slowed down the process of developing the Mekong Delta Plan, even risking stopping it altogether. This brought the Dutch actors involved into a precarious situation: they were under high pressure from the Dutch government to come home with an optimistic plan for expanding future Dutch business in Vietnam. This pressure was also importantly motivated by the fear that a lack of visible success in Vietnam would hamper the export of Dutch delta planning expertise to other deltas. After all, Vietnam was the first country to receive Dutch delta planning assistance; in this sense it was a first experiment in exporting delta planning expertise. At the same time, the Dutch experts had to deal with the expectations created on the Vietnamese side; expectations of future grants, loans and assistance from the Netherlands. Recalling this episode, a Dutch consultant recalled: "We were in the middle, trying to please everyone. In the end, we needed to deliver something to make everyone happy. That was quite a task. So, we had to succeed. Failure was not an option."<sup>8</sup>

Faced with the difficulty of dealing with the expectations and pressures from Dutch ministries and water sector organizations, some of the Dutch actors involved in the process felt tempted to use the unwillingness of the Vietnamese as a reason to withdraw from the project altogether. Yet many, if not all, in the end agreed to go ahead. Two Dutch consultants decided to no longer wait for the Vietnamese to take the initiative, but decided to themselves lead in drafting a plan. They felt this was the only way to avoid “losing face in the water world”<sup>9</sup>, while the development of a (draft) was also felt to be crucial for protecting the longer term bilateral relationship between the Netherlands and Vietnam.

### ***5.2. Second efforts: new allies and a re-problematization***

The two Dutch consultants who played a key role in drafting the plan realized that it could not be a simple copy of the Dutch Delta Plan. One of them observed: “The way the project was designed, if you look at the ToR, it was too much of a copy-paste of the Dutch principles (...) with no regard for the political process in Vietnam”. In a renewed attempt to get the process started and create interest and support among Vietnamese officials for the draft plan, the Dutch experts realized that they needed to find strategic entry-points into the Vietnamese political arena. To do this, they brought together some carefully chosen highly-reputed, respected and politically well-connected Vietnamese academics and retired senior government officials into what they called a focal group. A few consortium members worked hard to convince the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment to dedicate some additional funds to sponsor this group.

This strategy proved successful. Once enrolled by the Dutch experts, the designated focal group members began to approvingly refer to the draft plan of the Dutch consultants at high level meetings of Vietnamese national development committees, on which many of them held positions as advisors. They also started mentioning the plan in conversations with top government and prominent Communist Party<sup>10</sup> leaders (e.g. vice ministers, ministers, deputy Prime Ministers, provincial party leaders). Looking back, a Dutch consortium member fondly referred to the focal group members as “retired reformists”: they were both close enough to the ruling elite and still powerful enough to have an influence in the Vietnamese political domain, while also having enough distance to propose and leverage change. While the focal group members did have a chance to give some feedback on the drafted plan to the Dutch consultants, they knew that their inputs in the formulation of the plan had been minimal. The words of a retired reformist: “We came very late when everything seemed to be already set up”<sup>11</sup>, shows that more than for ideas, the Dutch consortium was looking for support.

In our analogy, the Dutch consortium succeeded in creating resonance for their plans among a strategically chosen group of actors, who in turn had the power and willingness to propagate this resonance within the Vietnamese government to create the beginning of a wave.

The further propagation of this resonance into a growing wave, especially among MARD officials, was helped by the existing (working) alliance between some Dutch consortium members, a focal group member and the then Vice Minister of MARD. Dutch experts approached a policy research institute from Hanoi, well-connected to a Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister who happened to also be the Chairman of the Southwest Steering Committee (SWSC). In Vietnam, the SWSC is an organizational

wing of the Community Party, whose leaders often have more political influence than Vice-Ministers in the government. The SWSC leaders invited the Dutch consultants to present the draft plan at the annual conference of the Mekong Delta Economic Cooperation forum in 2012. Some Dutch experts perceived the invitation to the forum as an indication that the plan had been well received, and thus of the success of their efforts to promote it. Others instead saw it as sheer luck. During the course of this reconciliation between the Dutch plan and MARD, high officials of MoNRE gradually began to feel obliged to also extend cooperation and become more involved.

The plan that the Dutch consultants had drafted consisted of a proposal for the development of long-term visions and strategic measures for the Mekong delta, similar to the four scenarios that characterized the Dutch Delta Plan. In the Netherlands, these scenarios articulated those future transformations that were likely to happen because of external processes (e.g. climate change, macro-economic development), and that would therefore be difficult to influence. Indeed, building and reinforcing the ability of planners and planning institutions to effectively anticipate, deal with and respond to such changes is what, according to many involved, forms the heart and essence of the Dutch delta planning approach.

Yet, while discussing the plan with Vietnamese partners, it gradually became clear to Dutch experts that much of the Mekong delta is an economically poor and marginal part of the country. In spite of its contribution to the national GDP through the production of three rice crops per year, much of the area is inhabited by poor smallholder farmers (Biggs 2010; White 2002). 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). This reality prompted the need to fundamentally change what a delta planning process is about. Rather than identifying scenarios as external changes for which planners need to prepare, a decision was made to instead use the plan to envision socioeconomic development pathways for the Mekong delta. In their assessment, the consultants thought that socioeconomic development would have a more pronounced impact on the future than climate change.

The draft Mekong Delta Plan thus became a very different plan than the Dutch Delta Plan: it was a plan that linked different possible future socioeconomic development trajectories to changes in land and water use. Using the ‘shared socioeconomic pathways’ of the IPCC, the plan laid out four options for economic development in the Mekong delta. The two “business as usual” options were marked as unwanted: food security and corridor industrialization. The other two, agro-business industrialization and dual-node industrialization, appeared as desirable in their ability to combine growth with anticipated changes provoked by climate change. The agro-business industrialization trajectory challenges the triple rice policy, and thus the position of the Mekong delta as a rice bowl, by exposing three rice crops a year as harmful to the country’s economy and environment. It recommends that the delta instead develops into a specialised hub for high-value agricultural products for export and domestic markets. Some “tempting” (Mekong Delta Plan 2013) Dutch examples of flower and vegetable industries, farmers’ cooperatives, and financial arrangements to support the cooperatives were mentioned as possible models in achieving this vision. The dual-node industrialization trajectory envisaged a future delta in which high-value agro-food business prospers next to secondary and tertiary sector activities in designated economic nodes in the two provinces of Ho Chi Minh City and Can Tho.

The Dutch consultants did not want to make a choice for one of the two future trajectories, but approached and presented them as possible futures. Most of the focal

group members, but also the participants of the annual conference of the forum – members of the Vietnamese politburo, regional, provincial and regional, provincial and local party leaders, trade and investment organizations and international development agencies – instead expressed a distinct preference for selecting one of the two preferred trajectories as a guide for planning. A Dutch consultant recollected: “They were adamant on making a choice and because of that we also shifted. Because we understood that they wanted some guidance in how water management, the choices of water management, might influence socioeconomic development for the area.”<sup>12</sup> The Dutch experts gradually realized that a future based on the agro-business industrialization scenario was considered most appealing by the members of the focal group.<sup>13</sup>

The “retired reformists” had long been concerned about the growing socioeconomic disparities and the environmental degradation in the delta. For them, the draft delta plan that the Dutch consultants had developed provided an opportunity to influence the difficult internal political debate about the triple rice policy. They hoped to be able to use the plan to leverage support against the established policy of the communist regime, as it provided legitimate grounds for calling this policy into question. The diverging interests and perspectives of different actors eventually came together in a choice for the agro-business industrialization trajectory, as this was considered to best fit the Mekong delta (Mekong Delta Plan 2013).

In the process of consultation and interactions, the Dutch consultants gradually went along with a changing problematization. Rather than a strategic planning exercise, the plan became one that more resembled, and was easier to align with, Vietnamese planning traditions. Instead of outlining future scenarios in view of anticipating and preparing for the kind of adaptations each would require, with the outlined scenarios representing what might occur irrespective of today’s actions, the Mekong Delta Plan became one that depicted a desirable future and detailed the steps to be taken to realize this future. Hence, the plan recommends ‘priority’ or ‘no-regret’ measures for 2050 and/or 2100 to realize the agro-business industrialization trajectory.

The plan included a recommendation to combine double rice cultivation with flood-based aquaculture (as an innovative outcome) in the upper parts of the Mekong delta, thereby limiting triple rice production to the middle delta only. In working on the details of the plan, the Dutch consultants did continue promoting Dutch solutions, including for instance the need to reduce infrastructural measures for coastal defense and salinity intrusion, to allow saline water to develop into an integrated aquaculture–mangrove coastal estuary.

### **5.3. *Third efforts to amplify the wave: the mobilization of the support of others***

After having secured some political support for the Mekong Delta Plan, the Dutch experts realized that financial support was equally important to make the plan into a success. Funding would, in our conceptual terms, help to amplify resonance for the plan (and thus the demand for Dutch solutions and expertise) by the Vietnamese government. Two Dutch consortium members took an active lead in mobilizing support for the plan among a consortium of international development agencies (IDAs) active in the Mekong delta. The World Bank, Asian Development Bank, IUCN, IFAD and development cooperation agencies of Australia, Finland, Germany and Japan became interested, and issued a joint statement that urged the Vietnamese government to seriously consider the twelve strategic measures proposed in the Mekong Delta Plan for the agro-business industrialization trajectory. The statement further recommended that

the Vietnamese government should use the plan as an assessment framework not only for structuring and evaluating existing development policies and sectoral and regional masterplans, but also for optimizing and prioritizing future short-term investment decisions. In the statement, the consortium members (especially the World Bank, the most influential of all IDAs in Vietnam) gave assurance of possible funding for the implementation of the Mekong Delta Plan, provided it were to be ratified and adopted.

Issuing this joint statement was an idea of the Dutch experts as a strategy to mobilize support from the development partners in Vietnam for the Dutch problematization and the proposed solutions. They were successful in their approach: in the joint statement, the various national and international development organizations accredited the Dutch for *making an important contribution to the development of a long-term vision, through the development of the Mekong Delta Plan with their considerable experience in delta management, and integrated water resources management.*

Reflecting on their alliance to the consortium of IDAs that the Dutch experts mobilized, a representative of an IDA thought that the Dutch used a smart strategy by not framing the timespan for realizing implementation. By doing so, all actors could agree, nobody would lose face, none of the current systems were immediately threatened by the plan.<sup>14</sup> The representative added: “[the Dutch experts] *enlarged a space for multi-stakeholder advocacy against this rice intensification ... [in Vietnam] one cannot challenge a party resolution. Now, the MDP did it, so others can do.*”<sup>15</sup> These remarks highlight the non-binding element of the plan, which was what greatly improved its acceptability to powerful actors in the Vietnamese system.

The Vietnamese government finally ratified the plan in December 2013, not as a masterplan but as a *reference document for reviewing and revising their socio-economic, spatial and sectoral master planning in future* (Mekong Delta Plan 2013). Unlike a traditional Vietnamese masterplan, the Mekong Delta Plan thus remained without clear implementation objectives, and means for implementation<sup>16</sup>. In the course of the long-winded process of creating interest and alliances, also the contents of the plan changed. From being primarily *water* oriented it became more focused on *agro-business*. The agro-business scenario envisaged by the Dutch consultants – with proposed projects such as aquaculture–mangrove coastal estuaries (for coastal defense and to halt salinity intrusion) or the introduction of double rice and flood-based aquaculture (instead of triple rice cropping) – challenged the vested interests of a well-connected, non-transparent network of politicians, planners, and engineers. This network of what Benedikter (2014) identified as the hydraulic bureaucracy in Vietnam, were, and still are, more interested in attracting funding for large scale infrastructural projects to continue the triple rice policy. This is why the plan could only be accepted if it was seen as non-binding. In the words of a Vietnamese senior government official: *The MDP is a first step to a masterplan.*<sup>17</sup> Yet, for the Dutch experts, the ratification of the plan signified a successful end to the first-ever case of Dutch delta planning abroad. The agreed deliverable of the strategic partnership – that is, a Mekong Delta Plan – was realized, while they also helped assure possible funding and support for future Dutch projects in Vietnam from the other IDAs.

## 6. Discussion and conclusions

Promotional texts portray the transfer of Dutch delta planning knowledge to other parts of the world as a process of *diffusion*, with policies traveling from a more advanced

place (technologically, institutionally or politically) to a less advanced one. These texts make it seem as if Dutch expertise travels almost by itself, because of its intrinsic effectiveness or superiority. Discomfort with the hierarchy this model implies between the source and the destination of the transferred policy, and unease with how it tends to privilege those originating the transfer in explaining what happens, has prompted us in this paper to search for a conceptualization of policy transfer in more symmetrical and dialogic terms. Using the transfer of the Dutch delta planning approach to Vietnam as a case study, we have done this by conceptualizing policy transfer as happening because of the actions of *all* those engaged in it. Policy transfer consists of efforts of creating interest, negotiation, and forging or maintaining network relations. In the process, the different actors not only influence and learn from each other, but also change what is transferred.

Our effort takes inspiration from Science and Technology's model of *interessement* (Akrich *et al.* 2002a, 2002b; Callon 1986; Latour 1986) and from insights from the anthropology of development (Li 2007; Mosse 2004), which propose an understanding of policy transfer as a process of *translation*: a specific kind of mediation that simultaneously transmits and distorts a signal. Seeing policy transfer as acts of translation (problematization, interessement, enrolment, mobilization) allows recognition that it is not the intrinsic quality of the policy that enables its transfer. Rather, transfer happens because of the efforts of people to create interest and forge alignments between different interests and projects.

Our methodology is anchored in the identification of the actors who made the transfer happen, and consisted of a purposive attempt to map and retrace their efforts and work, and the reasons and motivations behind it. We mobilize the metaphors of *creating resonance* and *making waves* to tell the story of the travel of Dutch delta planning expertise to Vietnam. We show how much of the actual work of the Dutch experts in Vietnam consisted of the identification of the right partners; engaging in long-winded negotiations; the creation of strategic alliances and the mobilization of funds.<sup>18</sup> This work is at best remotely related to the contents of what is normally understood as Dutch delta planning expertise. Drawing attention to all this work shows that waves do not propagate by themselves, but are created and require continuous energy to spread.

Our re-construction of the development of the Mekong Delta Plan shows that this creation of waves and helping them spread is a process of trial and error. It is a process that is partly contingent on contextual factors that are difficult to predict or foresee. A clear example is the animosity between the two involved ministries in Vietnam – MoNRE and MARD – that were initially approached as the main partners. Even though there was enough interest to sign a strategic partnership between the two countries, initial attempts to create interest and mobilize political and financial support for Dutch ideas among the Vietnamese were not very successful, partly because of this animosity. Akrich, Callon, and Latour (1988) suggest that the success of the process of *interessement* strongly depends on the choices made regarding the recruitment of representatives and intermediaries who interact and negotiate to shape and transform the innovation (in our case Delta Planning) until it finds its 'market'. These actors have a key role in 'translating' the innovation so that it is adapted and adopted by other actors, who will then become allies. In Vietnam, it was clear that the initial choice of representatives and intermediaries was somewhat unfortunate. It was only after involving the "retired reformists" that enough resonance for the Dutch plan was generated.

The enormous pressure on the Dutch actors to make the efforts into a success, because Vietnam was the first of a range of planned destinations for Dutch delta planning expertise (Bangladesh was soon to follow) also importantly shaped their actions and decisions. The initiative of Dutch consultants to produce something akin to a plan no matter what was clearly prompted by this pressure. In our case, the Dutch consequently used this plan to mobilize further interest among Vietnamese partners for Dutch expertise and support.

An important conclusion of our analysis is that, in the process of creating waves, the particular policy that is transferred is bound to change. Because of how each of the involved actors modify, deflect, betray, add on to or appropriate it, the original policy idea becomes something else altogether. In our case, the strategy to create demand for Dutch water expertise in Vietnam importantly rested on suggesting that the Netherlands and Vietnam are similarly vulnerable to climate change, because both are delta countries. Hence, the problem diagnosis (or *problematization*) with which Dutch experts and consultants entered their conversations with Vietnamese partners was that the Mekong delta was ill-prepared to deal with the possible effects of climate change. The proposed solution to this problem was a strategic delta plan, following the Dutch Delta Plan example. The Dutch could, and were prepared to, help Vietnam to develop this plan. Yet, in the process of eliciting and sustaining enthusiasm, the problematization, as well as the proposed solutions, changed. Rather than a strategic plan that would help Vietnam become more resilient to climate change, the problem became one of planning an economic future for the Mekong delta, one that would take rising waters into account. A new Dutch technical solution (an integrated approach to address water, agriculture, food and climate) emerged in response to this new problematization. From primarily focusing on strategic planning for climate resilience, the plan evolved into one about agro-business and technical interventions to protect Vietnam's coast.

The contents of this delta plan partly contradicted the Vietnamese government's (and the communist party's) continued reliance on its triple rice policy, a reliance that could only be realized by bringing in development funds for new large-scale water infrastructure projects in the delta. In this way, the plan challenged the political and economic interests attached to the existing rice production systems. The government could, therefore, only go along with the plan by considering it as non-binding. Rather than treating it as a strategic plan, they considered it as a reference document that would guide the development of future masterplans. Here, the plan changed meaning: it meant and means something different for the Dutch (who treated and discussed it as a first successful effort of transferring Dutch delta planning knowledge) as compared to what it meant and means for the Vietnamese. For the latter, accepting the plan was part of their efforts to maintain long, historical water relations with their Dutch counterparts, relations that date from before the independence of Vietnam. For some of the Vietnamese partners, going along with the plan was also a strategy to attract future donor investments and projects. The success of this strategy showed when the consortium of international development agencies, led by the World Bank, promised to finance the implementation of the Mekong Delta Plan.

We conclude that instead of removing obstacles to allow the passage of a more or less unaltered policy, there is merit in conceptualizing policy transfer as a process of translation, with the people involved acting as negotiators or knowledge brokers (Akrich *et al.* 2002b). Next to recognizing the work needed to make policy transfer happen, this conceptualization allows recognition of how policy transfers often follow

non-linear trajectories, are characterized by trial and error and shaped by disappointments and contingencies. Creating resonance and making waves sometimes happens in unexpected ways, with alignment between ideas and people happening rather contingently. The very content and meaning of what is transferred changes in the process, and assessments of success change depending on who does the assessment. Perhaps the most important advantage of thinking about policy transfer in terms of translations is that it allows recognition of the intrinsically dialogical character of the processes involved: 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.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### Notes

1. Delta Program Commissioner website (<https://english.deltacommissaris.nl/delta-programme/what-is-the-delta-programme>); Dutch Delta Program 2016 (<https://deltaprogramma2016.deltacommissaris.nl/viewer/paragraph/1/delta-programme-/chapter/hoofdstuk-/paragraph/international-collaboration>); Dutch Water Sector – the delta approach ([www.dutchwatersector.com/uploads/2014/11/140209-01-delta-approach-a4-web-07.pdf](http://www.dutchwatersector.com/uploads/2014/11/140209-01-delta-approach-a4-web-07.pdf)). In the Netherlands, the Dutch Cabinet has established a Second Delta Committee (*Deltacommissie*) for advising on national water policies taking climate change predictions into account. Led by Cees Veerman, a former minister of Agriculture, the committee was tasked with advising how to keep ensuring flood protection levels and freshwater supply in the Netherlands even under worst-case climate change conditions. The Committee's outcomes include the National Water Plan 2009–2015, the establishment of a Delta Commissioner and a rolling Delta Programme.
2. In technical terms for studying physical waves: resonance occurs when a vibrating system or external force drives another system to oscillate with greater amplitude at specific frequencies, resulting in a large vibration in the form of waves, hence our metaphor. The Merriam Webster dictionary defines: resonance (noun); a quality of evoking response.
3. MFA (2011). Foreign Affairs Budget 2011–2012. <https://www.government.nl/ministries/ministry-of-foreign-affairs/policy-and-budget/foreign-affairs-budget-2011-2012>.
4. The umbrella organization of the Dutch water sector. The organization promotes itself as a gateway to the Dutch Water Sector, with Dutch companies, NGOs, knowledge institutes and government agencies coming together in public-private partnerships. Approximately 95% of NWP's income comes from implementation of governmental programmes, mostly from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; between 4 and 5% of its income comes from contributions by members. The Netherlands Water Partnership reported a total income for 2015 and 2016 of respectively €7.7 million and €9.2 million. Sources: [https://www.netherlandswaterpartnership.com/sites/nwp\\_corp/files/2018-11/NWP-jaarverslag-2016\\_0.pdf](https://www.netherlandswaterpartnership.com/sites/nwp_corp/files/2018-11/NWP-jaarverslag-2016_0.pdf) and <http://jaarverslag2015.nwp.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/NWP-2015-flip.pdf> [retrieved on December 19, 2018]
5. As the outcome of a strategic selection process, five target countries for Dutch delta planning support were identified (Vietnam, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Mozambique, and Colombia).
6. Interview with a Dutch consortium member, October 29, 2016, Vietnam.
7. The Vietnamese Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, Ministry of Rural Agriculture and Development, and Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Innovation.
8. Interview taken on September 06, 2016 in the Netherlands.
9. Interview with a Dutch consortium member, October 29, 2016, Vietnam.

10. In Vietnam, a one-party state, the decision-making powers are held by the Vietnam Communist Party and their state organs. The authoritarianism of the party established in 1930 appears to be in decline because of re-integration and adoption of capitalist principles of economic development within the Vietnamese government system. To date, water resources management in Vietnam is under the control of a strict state regime, where irrigation is a dominant concern (Marr 1994; Gainsborough 2007).
11. Interview taken on October 31, 2016 in Vietnam.
12. Interview taken on August 29, 2016 in the Netherlands.
13. A Dutch consultant remarked. Interview taken on September 6, 2016, the Netherlands.
14. Interview taken on November 4, 2016 in Vietnam.
15. Recent research work in Vietnam (see Tong (2017) and Nguyen, Vo, and Huynh (2015)) shows that forms of agriculture that integrate seasonal flooding, combined crop production or diversified land use generate greater net benefit than intensive triple rice farming with a requirement for higher embankments.
16. In November 2017, the Vietnamese government adopted a resolution that integrates the major recommendations of the Mekong Delta Plan. The vision is to develop the delta 'sustainably, safely and prosperously' by 2100 with an emphasis on high-quality agriculture in combination with services, ecological tourism and industry, especially agro-processing industry. The resolution proposes to develop a(nother) master plan for sustainable development for the delta with the objective to address climate challenges. (<http://vietnamnews.vn/society/417806/resolution-aims-for-sustainable-mekong-deltadevelopment.html#P8JBqZL3CuwpzSRY.97>).
17. Interview taken on October 8, 2016 in Vietnam. The government official is from a national water resource planning organization.
18. According to Seijger et al. (2017) actor coalitions, innovative solutions, and participatory planning tools interact in coming to (negotiated) consent for strategic choices in a delta plan in the Netherlands, Vietnam and Bangladesh and in their implementation.

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