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Time for counteraction

The frequently cited *'Bring in the Dutch!'* symbolises the global success of the Dutch Delta Approach. However, according to three water researchers a critical response is much needed. "We act as though we are asked to solve problems all over the world, but behind the delta plan is a major investment agenda and it is being driven by The Hague."

Author: Manon Stravens

Shahnoor Hasan is happy to stand in front of an audience that includes plenty of women. "After all, delta planning is predominantly conducted by men." The Bangladeshi PhD fellow, associated with IHE Delft, was spea-king at a recent water conference in Amsterdam. And she is highly critical of the way in which the Netherlands promotes and transfers its delta knowledge.

Hasan explains that the Netherlands works hard to create the need for a delta plan in countries like Bangladesh and Vietnam and emphasises its importance. She believes that the deltas are lumped together too soon in this process. Yes, the Netherlands has something to offer in her opinion, which is based on an impressive history of living with water. Nevertheless, Dutch knowledge is not superior and universal and the Bengali and Vietnamese people have also inhabited and shaped their deltas for centuries. However, the teams of delta planners still have more Dutch than local experts.

She is also critical of the terminology used: it portrays Bangladesh as the needy party and the Netherlands as the country that can offer a helping hand, which makes it possible for Bangladesh to tackle its delta issues. According to Shahnoor Hasan, these words do not do justice to the collaboration that has lasted for decades, in which local knowledge and expertise also play a major role.

She is not the only critical voice to be heard. Researchers Arjen Zegwaard (University of Amsterdam) and Chris Seijger (IHE Delft and University of Freiburg) virtually say the same thing. Both state independently from each other that Dutch delta knowledge is based on a specific Dutch situation in a delta that is virtually incomparable with deltas elsewhere in the world.

Moreover, the Netherlands focuses too little on the political game and uses an extensive PR campaign to export this knowledge. Seijger: "In the case of delta issues we always hear "*Bring in the Dutch!*", but a critical response would also be useful occasionally."

In Freiburg Seijger said that the Neth-er- lands definitely has something to offer in designing major plans. "Knowledge and expertise related to river and water management has been built up here for decades. There are good universities here, where we educate many people and devise innovations – like the Sand Motor, an artificially created peninsula to the south of The Hague, which makes the coast wider and safer and provides space for nature and recreation. Or the Fish Migration River, a permanent opening in the Af- sluitdijk, for migratory fish that require fresh and salt water for their life cycle. This is an impressive bank of delta knowledge, more substantial than those of other water know-ledge exporters such as Australia."

However, Zegwaard, who researches deltas and uncertainties, particularly in South-east Asia, explains that it concerns specific knowledge of the Dutch deltas. "The situation in the Netherlands is also characterised by a high degree of engineering, with much technical and infrastructural knowledge. And this is then exported to areas where there is nothing, so to speak."

"We are keen to believe that our approach also works elsewhere, *but this is only partly true"*

What's more, the Netherlands acts as though the delta is a water system, which is a Dutch assumption, according to Zegwaard. "It is also a place where people and animals live, with an economy and a culture."

Seijger: "We manage our deltas in a specific way, based on the recommendation issued by the Veerman Committee in 2008. We are keen to believe that our approach also works elsewhere, but this is only partly true."

The Netherlands has a Delta Act and a Delta Programme, a Delta Fund and a Delta Commissioner. This is a highly institutional basis, which is necessary for implementing complex forms of water management and planning, which other countries do not necessarily have. Furthermore, the deltas in Bangladesh and Vietnam, where Seijger carries out his research, and in Indonesia have their own history, "with institutions and capacities that have developed in their own way".

Zegwaard explains that the Netherlands is highly focused on keeping the sea at bay: "The Netherlands is eager to keep the land and water apart, with a coastal region that is based on fresh water agriculture. However, in the Asian deltas this is barely sustainable, due to the quantity and power of the water." The dikes and polders, which have been constructed in Bangladesh since the sixties were built to protect arable land according to the Dutch model, can hardly cope.

Now that climate change is causing sea levels to rise more quickly and making cyclones more powerful, according to predictions, other strategies are required: fewer barricades, more space for water and controlled flooding. Seijger: "We are searching for ways to use the floods, to farm with water." People are also exploring the possibilities of transforming fresh water into salt water in agricultural and water use.

The Netherlands conducts a solid campaign to promote its delta approach all over the world. This methodology consists of twelve building blocks, including an integral approach, sustainability, cooperation, long-term planning and funding. According to Zegwaard, this suggests a uniformity in the approach that does not exist. Deltas throughout the world are too complex for that.

Seijger also states: "We act as though we are asked to solve problems all over the world, but behind the delta plan is a major investment agenda and it is driven by The Hague." These long-term plans, sometimes spanning fifty or seventy years, are worth billions. Dredging work and building dikes, dams and locks requires considerable investment, funded by other parties such as the Japan International Cooperation Agency or the World Bank."

"A delta plan disguises the fact *that the process is extremely political"*

Zegwaard adds that the delta is put forward as an urgent project that requires our attention: "In fact the delta is a policy item that has been created." While the Mekong has no boundaries and flows from Vietnam to Cambodia, the delta plan stops at the border, like the Dutch delta plan also stops at the Belgian border. "People in the recipient country are subsequently made enthusiastic and water boards are set up, all to reach a general consensus. This is followed by the implementation of a planning process that is presented as apolitical, which it never is: the delta plan disguises the fact that the entire process is extremely political."

Seijger thinks that it is actually necessary to understand and incorporate power relationships and interests. Seijger, like Shanoor Hasan, carries out research on strategic planning processes. "Ministries are often at odds about what is and is not included. When an organisation thinks that it is not involved, it will soon refuse to support it. It's all politics."

The researchers believe that a critical problem analysis of the state of the delta is important. "What are the driving forces of delta development, types of land use, expected sea level rises and the consequences?", Seijger adds. "The investment choices are decisive with regard to the future. When you decide to construct dikes and impolder coastal areas, you commit yourself for a long period of time. There has to be sufficient insight into future developments, which then must be translated into the short term. A long-term vision is difficult, but crucial."

Seijger explains that the Dutch delta is like a rare postage stamp. "We want to cherish it, just like our level of prosperity and current fresh water supply. We are rather conservative and pin ourselves to a strategy consisting of more and higher dikes." However, countries like Vietnam or Bangladesh and their deltas are developing. "The future has not been set in stone in these areas."

After the war, Vietnam focused on growing rice to feed its population. Seijger: "Dikes were constructed so that rice could be harvested on large areas of land three times a year. However, today rice alone can no longer provide the necessary socio-economic prosperity, so Vietnam is looking for alternatives for further development."

The researchers believe that the Netherlands could learn from this. Seijger: "More radical scenarios in which we can actually be innovative, for example a transformation to saline cultivation, is not part of the delta plan. While Dutch fresh water agriculture in the coastal deltas also has a hard time as a result of higher sea levels and dryer growing seasons." The Netherlands itself must also explore strategies that are consistent with a saline future.

According to Seijger, our exported knowledge focuses primarily on more flood defences and fresh water cultivation, but there are also opportunities for a saline economy and other forms of housing. Zegwaard also believes that the Netherlands needs to constantly update its repertoire of exportable knowledge if it wants to continue to be a relevant player in the future.

Another key word to which the researchers give short shrift is participation. "Don't expect too much from participation", Seijger advises. "Field visits are made and discussions are held with delta residents, but not everyone sits around the table when the decisions are made. And critical organisations risk being excluded. So how do you know if the right decision is being taken?" The polder model is effective in the Netherlands, also because people here can "protest very loudly" when they do not agree with a decision. However, this is highly complex in other countries, for example communist Vietnam, as Zegwaard reminds us. "Those in power in Hanoi are not so fond of impoldering." If delta planners want to bring about change, they have to adopt the Vietnamese way of planning, that is to say, top-down. "But in doing so you simply reinforce the status quo. That's also politics."

Seijger explains that there are often conflicting interests, for example between small-scale farmers and major landowners. In Bangladesh the small-scale farmer strives to be self-sufficient and must flood his arable land to achieve this. The sediment in the water accumulates and protects the fields from flooding. "However, this also means that the land remains under water for between three and five years."

This conflicts with the interests of the major landowner, who is eager to keep the polders closed, for example for shrimp farming. Seijger: "And the landowners have political influence and the money to manipu- late power. The small-scale farmer and the environment soon come off worse."

According to Seijger, the process predominantly involves soft implementation. "Not immediately putting a shovel into the ground, but a more subtle process of involving people in the problem analysis, identifying possible alternatives." Or: getting ministries, authorities as well as the international community to agree.

This is water diplomacy on the highest level, in Seijger's opinion: "Using small steps to steer the process in the right direction." The embassies are indispensable in this regard. This is followed by the shovel and dusting off and adjusting proposals, which have sat on the shelf for a very long time.

After all, as Zegwaard knows, just because a plan has been drafted it does not mean that it will be implemented. "Never start celebrating too soon. This is why it is important to establish the plans in laws and regulations, including the funding." Delta planners must also find methods to involve delta residents in the different stages of the process: "The trick is to genuinely listen." Seijger examines which parties support a plan when it is drawn up and implemented, and which parties do not support the plan in question.

What does a process that is so time and energy-consuming achieve? Zegwaard: "The Mekong Delta Plan definitely placed certain issues on the agenda among a number of major parties, including the World Bank, international funders and in Hanoi. This sounds limited, but public tenders have now been issued to fulfil parts of the plan." And delta planning continues to be necessary. Zegwaard: "At the end of the day you want to design the delta area so that it is able to resist the forces of nature in the future."

It is easy to criticise, Seijger adds. "It is admirable how delta planners push and pull, how they try and get bickering ministries, authorities and donors, who each have their own self-interests, into line. They work incredibly hard to achieve compromises and piece together as much data, knowledge and reports as possible. They genuinely want to deliver an effective plan, which will benefit the local delta population."

A little modesty will not do us any harm, according to Seijger. "It is terrible that we think we have the monopoly on wisdom. The white man who knows what's best." The Bengali and Vietnamese people already have so much knowledge and expertise. "This is why we work closely with PhD fellows and researchers from these countries. For example, the Vietnamese partner WACC-VNU is developing a method for assessing the feasibility of innovations, in view of the motivations and capacities of the parties involved. We are also trying to introduce this methodology in Bangladesh, so that the exchange of knowledge is started between the two countries."

According to Seijger, the Netherlands must obtain a better understanding of what works and what does not work, and of our role in this. "In the Netherlands the lines are short and there is much exchange between the organisations. This means that Dutch delta knowledge can be integrated relatively well. At the same time there is a lack of reflection on the applicability of this knowledge abroad. This means that we are losing relevant insights and there is no consideration for the diversity in methods of delta management and delta development."

The Netherlands travels all over the world as a water merchant and preacher, but the question is whether this need for Dutch knowledge and expertise will continue. The researchers have their doubts. Seijger: "We are working tirelessly to maintain our name and reputation. We have no money; our interest is to continue to be an influential, leading and well-known expert", the researcher suspects.

"Dutch water diplomacy is currently doing well", he continues, "but if we do not open up to new developments, we run the risk of being overtaken on all sides by other parties, who may well bring along a bag of money with them." ●

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Chris Seijger studies strategic delta planning processes in the NWO-UDW project Strengthening strategic delta planning processes in Bangladesh, the Netherlands, Vietnam and beyond. He is also part of the Integrated Water Systems and Governance Group. In addition he teaches water management in forestry and agricultural areas at the Albert-Ludwig University of Freiburg.

Arjen Zegwaard is associated with the University of Amsterdam. He studies deltas and uncertainties, particularly in Southeast Asia, focused on decisionmaking processes. In this context he is also involved in the Deltas' Dealings with Uncertainty project, financed by the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, France and Japan, among others.