

Making Water Cultures Globally Mobile

How Knowledge Travels Between The Netherlands and India Through Water Sensitive Urban Design

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MAKING WATER CULTURES GLOBALLY MOBILE: HOW KNOWLEDGE TRAVELS BETWEEN THE NETHERLANDS AND INDIA THROUGH WATER SENSITIVE URBAN DESIGN

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ABSTRACT:

The Netherlands has initiated a process of 'policy boosterism' that attempts to make Dutch urban water culture and its associated imaginary of water sensitivity fit for global export. This strategic shift depends on the collaboration of a mosaic of actors, private and non-private to promote knowledge sharing between countries. As this new dynamic emerges, urban design becomes strategic to create future visions for cities towards more sustainable relationships with water. One such vision stems from Water Sensitive Urban Design, an approach that borrows from ecological urbanism with the objective to restore water ecologies in cities. This article looks at how urban design knowledge from the Netherlands provides concepts to describe, evaluate and promote urban water as an enabler of sustainability globally. It also investigates how networks of actors from the Netherlands interact to make imaginations about Water Sensitive Cities globally mobile. This entails the packaging of a mobile water culture that, ultimately, can re-shape power relations. Considering that cities rely on privileged accesses to global networks to disseminate ideas, port cities are potential sites for 'policy boosterism'. The port city of Rotterdam, for instance, is the model city in the concerted effort to promote Dutch urban water expertise (Goh, 2020) and, in the context of Indo-Dutch partnerships, a port city was chosen for an urban design initiative: Water as Leverage in Chennai. The project acts as mechanisms through which imaginations of urban water is packaged from the Netherlands for global export. Interestingly, the principal way in which this translation happens is through the creation of an imaginary/vision/framework of water sensitivity that is appealing and meets broad societal goals. In this context, design becomes a powerful tool through which these broad visions are made 'fit for purpose' and influence – or not – local ideas of urban landscapes.

KEYWORDS:

Policy Translation, Water Sensitive Urban Design, The Netherlands, India.

Water has played an important – if not central – role to guide where cities are located, how they develop, and the quality of living of their settlers. Under a complex relationship, cities rely on the continual availability of water to develop but are also threatened by the devastating consequences of too much water. To lay the foundation for modern urban living, a technocentric paradigm has been adopted throughout western capitalist societies to manage water and divert its natural flows through a combined set of hard infrastructures. Recently, however, the call for more sensitive and sustainable alternatives has gained force. The main assumption of these propositions surrounds issues of water management that consider the technologies of today's cities to be modelled on large centralized potable supply systems that offer little flexibility for urban communities to meet sustainable development goals and cope with future conditions such as extreme weather events and climate uncertainty (Brown, 2012). Recognizing that water infrastructures shape how cities develop and function, Water Sensitive Urban Design presents itself as potentially assisting cities to achieve a more sustainable transition. This ambitious design approach relies on conceptualizing urban water environments and communities through an imaginary that reconciliates water with urban culture and identity.

As the knowledge field of WSUD attempts to create an international support base to guide infrastructure investments in cities facing the water problems of the 21st century, The Netherlands enters the discussion with a powerful discourse. Given that the Dutch history is inextricably linked with water, the country has gained international reputation in the water sector. To promote its knowledge globally, conferences, trade missions and partnerships connect the country to different urban centers around the World. Internationally, Dutch companies are involved in approximately 10 percent of the world's drinking water supply, own about 40 percent of the hydraulic engineering market (NWP, 2020) and, in 2019 alone, the export value of its water sector was EUR 8.1 billion (WEX, 2020). The increasing relevance of water systems in city planning and architecture has brought an opportunity to boost even further the Dutch water sector by kicking off the transfer of water sensitive urban design initiatives globally.

Considering the recent upsurge of academic interest in travelling urban knowledge, this paper investigates the packaging of a policy idea from the Netherlands through a design competition. By combining conceptualizations from two sets of literature, policy mobility and policy translation, we look at how Dutch water cultures are made globally mobile through the creation of a water sensitive design initiative. Our focus is guided towards a project in India - Water as Leverage in Chennai – to analyze the role of design competitions in the formation of a new assemblage of Global-urban policy transfer for the urban water sector. According to Bell, “the future form of urban relationships to water is now open for renegotiation” and, according to the standing point of this article, this requires the support of analyses of how actors engage in the negotiation process at different scales. Critically assessing what and whose visions are being promoted or not by the WSUD approach while questioning whose voice, authority and expertise counts in this process are urgent.

State of the art

Conventional policy transfer literature has had the tendency to conceptualize knowledge travel as a rational transfer disconnected from the power relations that involve mobility and translation of ideas (McFarlane, 2011). In a different direction, in the context of water related policies from the Nether-

lands, authors have mobilized the lens of policy translation to study the Dutch Delta Approach - DDA (Minkman & van Buuren, 2019 ; Hasan et al., 2020; Laeni et al., 2021; Quee, 2021; Richter, 2020). This literature stems from a social constructivist view that reveals the centrality of transfer agents in re-modeling local policies to make them into a product for global export. These studies show that the DDA has been mobilized as a branding strategy (Minkman & Buuren, 2019) and made generic enough for export (Zegwaard et al., 2019). Existing problems of the DDA, according to translation literature, include the fact that most processes are developed and strategically promoted by Dutch water experts and policy officials whilst generating a lack of local ownership and challenging indigenization of the policy (Laeni et al., 2021). Authors, therefore, suggest that this approach needs to be re-conceptualized in more symmetrical and less hierarchical ways (Hasan et al., 2020). When applied to the analysis of coastal management policies and climate change adaptation, authors argue that translated Dutch policies may work as a key resource for local actors. The argument is that these policies serve as support to reinforce and/or change domestic discourses while creating momentum for action (Kang et al., 2022; Weger, 2019).

Another parallel set of literature coming mainly from critical geography deals with the travel of ideas with a focus on processes in which global ideas are localized. This approach is referred to as policy mobility and has been used to show the contradictory and messy ways that the localization of the DDA happens (Colven, 2020) and the roles of different actors in this process (Maas, 2019). While the policy translation and policy mobility approaches seem to agree on a focus to the relationships and agencies of key actors in the process of making a policy travel, they hold important distinctions. Policy translation, for instance, makes a much more explicit argument that the attributes of a policy play little, if any, role in how likely it is to travel (Mukhtarov, 2014). A separate set of literature focuses much more on the structural aspects of the process. For instance, authors have argued that there are structural impasses when transferring the DDA due to what Stead et al. (2008) called an unequal partnership between the Netherlands and the receiving countries (Minkman et al., 2019). Other research on the policy transfer of Dutch design approaches to urban water have shown that the preconditions of the receiver city strongly dictate the success or failure of the transfer (Yulia & Arlianda, 2020). Clearly, these approaches to policy transfer suggest a linear process as opposed to policy mobility and translation.

A growing number of literature deals with the travel of ideas from The Netherlands to other contexts, especially in what regards ideas about water. Authors are mainly interested in questions pertaining what travels and how this process unfolds. Given that the Dutch have recently embarked on a concerted effort to promote its urban water expertise, this paper focuses its analysis on how policies travel from the Netherlands through design initiatives. The phase of preparing a policy model such as the Dutch Delta Approach for global export seems to have brought significant insight but it does not touch upon the specific characteristics of how coalitions are formed through urban design initiatives. Therefore, we attempt to advance the understanding of how this field provides an imaginary of water sensitivity that entails concepts to describe, evaluate and promote urban water as an enabler of sustainability. In this process, we investigate how global-urban networks are formed through urban design initiatives while attempting to influence how cities respond to problems of water. By interweaving and not opposing the key learnings from political economy and poststructuralist readings of policy mobility and policy translation, we investigate how actors engage in a packaging of a mobile urban water culture from the Netherlands to other urban centers in the World.

Methods

The development of this paper has taken a descriptive case study strategy for its investigation as it asks “how” questions with a focus on contemporary events and does not have or has little control

over the actual behavior of the events it studies (Yin, 2003). Furthermore, a pragmatic approach has been adopted in the way this research was conducted as it is unavoidably influenced by the personal worldview (values and political positioning) of the authors (Morgan, 2007). Drawing from a qualitative methods design, the methods of document analysis and participant observation were selected, combined, and triangulated seeking to answer the research question. This selection was made according to the extent to which the methods best supported answering the research questions (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Document analysis was used as a process of reviewing and evaluating documents in which the analytic procedure entails finding, selecting, appraising (making sense of), and synthesizing data contained in documents (Bowen, 2009). Documents included articles from media resources to provide a background and context to the processes we investigated while supporting us to track changes and developments that happened in between. Other documents retrieved from the internet such as policy documents and website statements have also supplemented our findings. Participant observation is a special mode of observation in which the researcher is not merely a passive observer but may participate in the events being studied with the privilege to perceive reality from the viewpoint of someone “inside” the case study (Yin, 2003). Participant observation is a relatively unstructured method and an inherently interactive experience (Guest et al., 2013) which will be used in two moments of this research to document my interpretation of the observed phenomena. This method served to portray how the social dynamics of policy sharing exercises looks like. This data was retrieved using a personal diary in which the first author narrated her observations and experience as a participant in Water as Leverage.

Case study description

With a seventh of the country’s population living in coastal districts and four of its 10 most populated cities being on or near the coast, India’s urban history is strongly connected to the seaside. Among the cities lying in India’s southern coast, Chennai and Kozhikode represent two distinguished urban centers of opposite magnitudes and geographical position (See Map 1). Chennai has a population of over 8 million that spreads from India’s coastal belt at East, while Kozhikode houses a population of 2 million in the country’s coastal counterpart to the West. As the fourth-most populous urban agglomeration in India (Indian Census, 2011) and the country’s fifth-largest urban economy, Chennai has exerted significant influence in the construction of national urban imaginaries. The city is currently the focus of a Dutch-India water policy exchange initiative funded by the Dutch Government and takes a design orientation to solve problems related to climate and water. The design competition called Water as Leverage (WaL) has been in place since 2018 and selected multi-sectoral proposals to tackle the complex water problems of three cities in Asia, namely Chennai (India), Khulna (Bangladesh) and Semarang (Indonesia). For each city, two multidisciplinary teams were selected and challenged to further develop proposals that would later be connected to external funding opportunities for implementation. In the case of Chennai, the focus city of this study, each of the two groups selected developed a different proposal: *City of 1,000 Tanks* and *Rise Chennai*. The process involved local workshops with stakeholders, regional workshops in Singapore with an advisory board and, finally, the resulting designs offer promising solutions that are currently being analyzed by funding agencies such as the AIB and the FMO.

Results

The results presented here depict the role of Water as Leverage as a Dutch urban design competition in how Asian cities, particularly Chennai in India, are reassembled through a ‘water sensitive’ policy lens. We begin with a section that narrates how the process of mobilizing Dutch water sensitive urban design begins through an initiative of policy boosterism driven by a change in the country’s development agenda. Following that, the next section makes use of how the Water as Leverage

program has been organized to depict how actors engage to translate Dutch urban water policy ideas to the Indian context. Lastly, we present the backlash of creating such an elite global epistemic community to guide a cultural change for urban water India along with an opportunity for future learning.

Boosting policy: mobilizing Dutch water sensitive urban design

In the past, knowledge sharing exercises about water was part of Dutch development aid. In that case, public institutions from the Netherlands took a funding and financing role to support less developed countries to improve living conditions. Since 2008, however, budget cuts from development assistance meant that The Netherlands had to scale down its development aid relationship with several countries. Therefore, the policy answer since then has been to shift towards more intensive trade relations in international collaboration. The replacement of “aid” principles to those of “trade” in the country’s development agenda has turned international cooperation into a tool to promote Dutch commercial interests. This has resulted in a new strategy for international partnerships in the water sector: boosting the export of Dutch water expertise. In 2019, the Dutch International Water Ambition - NIWA was submitted to the House of Representatives with a dual role: to contribute to water security and safety worldwide while increasing the Dutch earning capacity, the country’s potential for profit. Central to this strategic shift is the promotion of the Netherlands as a Centre of Excellence, one of the three pillars of the NIWA’s strategy. In this article we introduce a way in which this is done: through boosting the Dutch water sensitive urban design approach through international design competitions.

Given the high global awareness of problems related to water, presenting the experience of The Netherlands as a successful example emerged as a clever strategy. To supply the international demand, a packaged Dutch approach holds promise to generate business opportunities through collaborations of water expertise. In this emerging scenario, the water sector becomes increasingly central for Dutch entrepreneurial activity and economic diplomacy. In 2015, a new diplomatic position was created: the Special Envoy for International Water Affairs. Through this role, the flood expert Henk Ovink boosts the international market position of Dutch water expertise under the assumption that what has worked in The Netherlands can be useful elsewhere. The Water Ambassador has worked as a senior advisor to the Obama administration after Hurricane Sandy and developed the design competitions Rebuild by Design in New York City and Resilient by Design in San Francisco. The figure of this diplomat is central to initiate a process of *policy boosterism* through the assembling of people and ideas that form a Dutch water culture and its associated imaginary of water sensitivity that is fit for export.

Modeled on the previous experience of Mr.Ovink in the US, the project Water as Leverage was launched in 2018. The WaL initiative follows the tradition of proactive integral design strategies for water management present in The Netherlands’ Delta Programme (Nillesen et al., 2020). The storyline of WaL in Chennai was that water is a global challenge with local opportunities. In the words of Mr.Ovink himself, “*Worldwide, water is the connecting challenge, the number one global risk and an opportunity for transformative and sustainable impact and comprehensive cultural change*”. In what regards cultural changes, the ‘WaL way of working’ wishes to offer a design strategy for water management with a special emphasis on bankability. Therefore, cultural change in the terms of WaL refers to how it forms an enabling environment in which innovative solutions can land (Watergezant, 2021). In the next section we show, guided by the policy translation literature (e.g. Mukhtarov, 2014), how actors engaged via the design competition in morphing and transforming ideas coming from The Netherlands to promote this cultural change in the Indian urban context.

Water as Leverage	
<i>Funder/Executer</i>	Ministry of Foreign Affairs / The Netherlands Enterprise & Development Agency (RVO)
<i>Cities</i>	Chennai, Khulna and Semarang
<i>Coordination</i>	Henk Ovink
<i>Consortium</i>	Chennai Team 1: Deltares, IGCS, IIT Madras, Care Earth Trust, CUDI (Center for Urban Design Innovation, Karlsruhe Institute for Technology, Waggoner & Ball, Benthem Crouwel Architects, Arcadis and VanderSat. Chennai Team 2: OOZE VOF, Madras Terrace, Goethe Institut, Ramakrishnan Venkatesh, Vanessa Peter, IHE Delft, Rain Centre, Care Earth Trust, Paper Man, Pitchandikulam, IIT Madras, TU Delft, HKV.
<i>Role</i>	Design competition
<i>Objective</i>	Stimulate the creation of innovative urban resilience concepts in Asia Build strategic partnerships through result-driven collaboration
<i>Approach</i>	Resilient by Design
<i>Output</i>	Conceptual designs that can be translated into bankable project proposals

The translation: engaging actors in the travels of knowledge

Guided by the Special Envoy and funded by the RVO, the idea behind the project financing is that “it takes millions to invest billions wisely”. Therefore, the project invests these catalytic millions with the aim of developing conceptual designs that will leverage water towards urban climate resilience. The assumption in the creation of WaL is that the generation and finance of innovative urban resilience concepts are hindered by a series of gaps existing in the early stages of project cycles. These include the lack of strategic spatial and financial planning, insufficient involvement of stakeholders early in project cycles and lack of capacity of the policy environment to support the design, implementation, and operation of the proposed solutions (WaL,). To overcome this, WaL prides itself on innovation by establishing active engagement of a mosaic of actors from the day one of projects and promoting lasting coalitions between global and local partners. Objectively, the goal of WaL was to generate bankable and scalable solutions to water problems that could be replicated in other cities and regions through an interdisciplinary design process led by public-private partnerships.

In a very schematic way, the transfer of the proposed design approach to water problems works as follows: the Dutch government through the RVO selects and funds two design teams per city, which will then formulate a design proposition supported by a workshop-based process. The charismatic personality of Henk Ovink and his role as a networked expert is central to build coalitions that conceive and justify the need for a Dutch approach to Global water problems. Acting as a knowledge broker through WaL, Ovink’s role is to raise awareness about Chennai’s water problems while introducing a translated Dutch approach to the local audience. To enable the translation, the design competition has served as a platform through which multi-disciplinary teams made the portfolio of Dutch businesses look and feel more Indian. In this process, the partnerships of Dutch businesses and research institutes with local professionals in the consortium teams was central. Each of the selected teams was composed partly by professionals affiliated to Dutch institutions and companies and partly affiliated in India. An important exception, however, included the New Orleans based Architecture business Waggoner & Ball that owned experience with building the Dutch Dialogues initiative in the United States and was, therefore, an important asset.

The collaboration of the design teams with local stakeholders was built through a series of three workshops that counted on the experience and reputation of UN-Habitat to hold participatory processes. To include a community perspective in these workshops, the project counted on the partic-

ipation of the Partners for Resilience group which consisted of Wetlands International South Asia, Indian Red Cross (Tamil Nadu) and Red Cross Crescent Climate Centre. Two regional workshops to share the results with an international review board and potential financiers (NWO, 2020). To bridge innovative urban design ideas to the interest of potential funders, WaL counted on close collaboration with the development community by incorporating their feedback and reviews early into the preparation of the pilot proposals. Ultimately, the creation of this platform for actors to engage and share their associated imaginaries of water sensitivity has generated global-urban routes through which knowledge, capital and influence may flow. In the next section we present the possible backlash of creating such an elite epistemic community to guide the future cultural changes surrounding issues of urban water.

The backlash: the problem of a globally mobile water culture

The travel of knowledge in the case of WaL has been mobilized through a set of actors and their associated institutions and technologies that give form to the informational infrastructure of a globally mobile design approach to urban water. In this process of formation, the characterization of Indian cities as vulnerable to climate change and water impacts point to a particular way of seeing urban water premised on a certain notion of the water sensitive city. In this view, urban water involves a manageable resource and considers landscape architecture to play a crucial role in a broader context of conceiving and visualizing possible improvements. Suggesting a policy learning approach in which the water policies from The Netherlands can be used as an example to improve performances elsewhere, there is a danger to the approach initiated by WaL. If the epistemic confidence of the Dutch approach to water remains unquestioned, its operationalization may bring significant limitations in the enabling of a cultural change in the field of urban water. By delimiting the scope of debate in the global-urban networks it creates, the translation exercises of the Dutch approach through design competitions may potentially obscure local contingencies and marginalize a range of alternatives.

The Room for the River¹ scheme from the Netherlands, for instance, has entered a phase of “international spinoff”. For densely populated delta regions of the globe, this imaginary of resilience offers pathways to adapt to river overflows such as the creation of park areas and new building typologies for controlled flooding (Smith, 2011). On the other hand, it disguises the activities of displacement and relocation that the model inherently requires which may translate to mass evictions of poor families in countries of the Global South (Yarina, 2018). In a similar vein, the designs that have resulted from WaL are bound to guide specific interventions in the future and, therefore, producing winners and losers. In this process, the knowledge it creates can play a central role in articulating what acceptable relationships with water in Chennai are and can be, and for which and whose values. Therefore, breaking the boundaries of the elite epistemic community responsible for the formulation of these visions is necessary to achieve more equitable imaginations of water sensitive cities. If the globally mobile water culture that WaL is proposing is not tied to commitments with justice, it is likely that it ends up resonating with the values of the already privileged and most vocal sections of Indian society.

To overcome the tendency for urban water policies to travel via the routes of an elite epistemic community that is not sufficiently sensitive to contingencies, the role of global expertise in promoting a change in local water cultures must be reframed. While the Dutch approach to WSUD provides significant knowledge about urban water systems, the multiple paths of development traced by cities

1 The Room for the River is a Dutch government design plan that aims to address flood protection by creating more room for rivers in the Netherlands, allowing surrounding areas or rivers to be inundated during periods of high water levels.

in the Global South indicate a complication to general approaches to issues of urbanization. While this points to a challenge to the actors engaging in the WaL project, it also represents an opportunity for experts if they are not only wishing to apply their expertise but also willing to learn. For instance, the experience of those already attempting to enact cultural change from the grassroots level can bring significant insights on alternative routes towards a water sensitive scenario. The potential difficulty to the application of this idea, on the other hand, is that it does not meet the National policy goal discussed in the beginning of this piece – that of bringing profits back to the Netherlands. In that case, actors might feel tied to trace a particular route that stops them from engaging in such partnerships.

Conclusions

The aim of this study was to understand the role of Dutch design competitions in how Indian cities are reassembled through a ‘water sensitive’ policy lens. We have shown that the strategic shift from ‘aid’ to ‘trade’ in the development agenda of The Netherlands has called directly at the Dutch water sector due to the increasing international market opportunities. This emerging shift brings the private sector to engage in activities that were previously confined to the role of the development sector forming new coalitions and alliances. In this scenario, the promotion of knowledge sharing between countries is not a responsibility of State institutions alone but rather depends on the collaboration of a mosaic of actors, private and non-private. What seems to be a fuzzy coalition is the formation of a new assemblage that translates water sensitive policy ideas originated from the Dutch context to meet demands globally while also benefitting Dutch businesses. The principal way in which this translation happens is through the creation of an imaginary of water sensitivity that is appealing and meets broad societal goals. To achieve this, design competitions such as Water as Leverage play an important role in reassembling Indian cities as water sensitive. In this context, actors engage in the formation of an epistemic community to envision water sensitivity for the Indian urban context. Despite the success in terms of building a global-urban network to guide cultural change towards water sensitivity, the creation of an elite epistemic community through which knowledge, capital and influence may flow has its dangers in terms of equitability. In this context, it is likely that the future trajectory of transfer of urban water policies based on the argument to rethink the approach that has solved many of nineteenth century urban problems becomes far from smooth and unproblematic (White, 2016). For instance, the assumption that the inflexibility of existing technological and design components is accountable for impeding a transition to a sustainable scenario is still questioned. Moreover, the translation of the Dutch approach to contexts of the Global South encounters significant challenges. Nevertheless, exercises of policy mobility in the context India-Dutch collaborations for urban water may bring significant opportunities for learning if coalitions break the boundaries of elite epistemic communities.

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