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Puzzling, powering and perpetuating: Long-term decision-making by the Dutch Delta Committee

Martijn van der Steen^{a,b}, Nancy Chin-A-Fat^{a,*}, Martinus Vink^{c,d},
Mark van Twist^{a,e}

^a NSOB, The Hague, The Netherlands

^b Professor of Strategy & Foresight, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Public Administration & Sociology, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

^c Wageningen University, Wageningen, The Netherlands

^d PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment agency, The Hague, The Netherlands

^e Professor of Public Administration, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Public Administration & Sociology, Rotterdam, The Netherlands



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ABSTRACT

Long term policy issues like climate change adaptation are considered wicked in the sense that uncertain knowledge and volatile societal understandings associated to the issue might jeopardize long term sustainment of adaptation policies. Uncertainty or sudden societal opposition might politically be employed to dismantle earlier made policies or investments and therefore threaten long term adaptive capacity. This article highlights how successful long-term decision-making can be understood as a matter of puzzling over uncertainty and powering for getting things done, but above all requires sustainment of these decisions on the long term. For doing so the paper analyses the decision-making process of the Dutch Delta Committee in 2008, which firmly put the climate adaptation issue on the Dutch political agenda and subsequently sustained the issue on the policy agenda through the creation of a Delta Commissioner, a Delta Fund and a Delta Act. Our analysis illustrates how the crucial actors in and around the Second Delta Committee deployed strategies of puzzling, powering, and what we define as perpetuation to deal with the long-term policy issue of climate adaptation. The latter is especially important for policy issues that require a long-term continued effort by policy-makers, or will only manifest themselves on the long term. Then, it is not only important to create meaning and organize power *now*, but also to maintain and ensure that meaning and power for time to come.

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1. Introduction

The low lying Netherlands is characterized by its delta nature, with estuaries and marshlands that since medieval periods onwards were reclaimed from the sea by Dutch farmers unified in thousands of local water boards. The Netherlands consists for a large part of land that was reclaimed from the water, by a patchwork of smaller and larger water-works. This constitutes a diverse landscape of drainage canals and rivers embanked by dykes that is in constant need of maintenance.

* Corresponding author at: NSOB, Lange Voorhout 17, 2514 EB The Hague, The Netherlands. Fax: +31 6 4574 12 12.
E-mail address: chinafat@nsob.nl (N. Chin-A-Fat).

From Napoleonic times the Dutch state took a central role in protecting the Netherlands against floods and currently the ministry of water management with its own executive agency Rijkswaterstaat is responsible for Dutch flood safety, in cooperation with the political elected bodies of the local *Water boards*. That system worked well for ages. However, strong challenges lie ahead; rising sea level and more intense rainfall due to climate change, in addition to ongoing soil subsidence pose new long term challenges to the traditional tasks of water management (de Vries and Wolsink, 2009; Koningsveld, Mulder, Stive, Van Der Valk, & Van Der Weck, 2008; Prak and Luiten van Zanden, 2013; Vink, Benson, Boezeman, Cook, Dewulf, & Termeer, 2014; Warner, Wester, Vink, & Dewulf, in press).

These new developments have regenerated the political debate about water management; there is little societal discussion about the relevance of possible rising sea levels for a country partly below the current sea level. But although the topic is generally considered important, the sense of urgency to actually invest in water management has diminished over time. Partly, this is an effect of the relative success of the current water-works; ever since the large flood of 1953 the waterworks of the succeeding Delta Plan have kept the country safe, and apart from some recent hiccups after near flooding in 1993 and 1995 the sense of urgency faded (Warner, 2008). Nevertheless soil subsidence and climate change do pose serious threats to the nation that could become 'real' in the distant future. At the same time these threats are inherently speculative. They represent a future that is not yet here and that inevitably generates debate about what the future will be like and what that means for interventions now.

Understanding the process of reaching sustainable agreement and policy action about long-term wicked policy issues like climate change, requires more than the linear assumption that proper climate knowledge will automatically lead to proper decision-making (Biesbroek et al., 2015; Vink, Dewulf, & Termeer, 2013). To the contrary the classic seminal work of Hecló (1974) might be highly relevant. Hecló argues that decision-making over complex long term policy problems requires a strategy that addresses two sides of the same coin; processes of puzzling and powering (Hecló, 1974). Puzzling refers to activities that generate definitions of a societal problems and possible solutions to solve a societal problem. Puzzling is important because in a collective process policy actors develop a shared meaning to direct their efforts. However, to be effective puzzling needs to be accompanied by a powering strategy. To get things done in a plural society different actors need to join in a process and eventually agree, buy into the process, or at least not block the process (Hecló, 1974). That is partly a matter of 'pure power play', but as Hecló argues this is highly intertwined with the puzzling. Puzzling sets up powering, just like powering bounds or opens up the space for puzzling. These are not crisp separate categories, but in their interplay puzzling and powering generate dynamics around complex policy issues that might explain why climate adaptation is not such a linear process.

For long-term policy issues however, puzzling about uncertain future problems might not create enough urgency to empower a policy proposal. In addition to that, what might generate societal urgency today may face competing short-term interests in the future. Hence, solutions that help rally powerful stakeholders can work today, but do not necessarily hold for long. Even worse, it is often easy to resolve present-day puzzles and build coalitions of power at the expense of the long-term.

Therefore, this paper links the two concepts together, to better understand the difficulties of long-term decision-making, and to provide possible repertoire 'out' of the difficulty of long-term decision-making. We address the question *how long-term decision-making can be understood as a mutual process of puzzling and powering over long-term climate issues, which also requires deliberate efforts of perpetuating to consolidate policies in the future?* We do so by zooming in on the Second Dutch Delta Committee (Delta Committee, 2008d) which in 2008 succeeded in defining the climate adaptation issue in a societally legitimate, though scientifically selective way (Enserink, Kwakkel, & Veenman, 2013; Vink, Boezeman, Dewulf, & Termeer, 2013). Through strategically positioning the scientific knowledge in the societal debate the political advisory Committee not only created sufficient societal support (Boezeman, Vink, & Leroy, 2013; M. J. Vink, Boezeman, et al., 2013), but also succeeded in perpetuating its puzzling and powering on the national policy agenda for the long term.

To gain a deeper understanding of this particular policy success we will start with building a theoretical framework that adds the concept of perpetuating to the theoretical work on puzzling and powering over long-term issues. Then, we elaborate on our research-method and describe how we opened the black box of the administrative processes of long-term problem solving. After that, we contextualize our conceptual findings in view of traditional Dutch water management policy and present the results and analysis of our concrete case study, the Delta Committee. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings for our understanding of long-term policy making, and stress the importance of the processes of perpetuating in relation to existing theory on puzzling and powering around long-term policy issues, and draw our conclusions.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Wicked problems

The vast increase in literature on climate change of the last decade did not make governments unambiguously adapt to the impacts of climate change (Biesbroek et al., 2010). Like in the Dutch case adaptation to (potential) climate change impacts often concerns expensive infrastructural works, but may also concern more institutional changes enabling governments to deal more effectively with the potential impacts but changes power configurations (Gupta et al., 2010). Due to the long term at which impacts will become visible outcomes are intrinsically uncertain and since the expensive costs and institutional restructuring may touch upon budgets and responsibilities, adapting to climate change does not seem to be a straightforward technical challenge. Correspondingly, scholars have referred to climate change as a *wicked problem*, which

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