



## Research article

## Discursive junctions in flood risk governance – A comparative understanding in six European countries



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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 23 November 2016

Received in revised form

20 February 2017

Accepted 3 March 2017

Available online 19 March 2017

## Keywords:

Flood risk governance

Institutions

Discourses

Qualitative analysis

Europe

## ABSTRACT

Flood risks are managed differently across Europe. While a number of research studies aim to understand these differences, they tend to pay little attention to the social constructionist aspects of flood risk governance, i.e. the meaning that societies give to flood risk and governance. This paper aims to address this gap by understanding differences in flood risk management approaches (FRMA) from a discursive-institutional perspective. Based on this perspective, an analytical framework was developed to systematically analyse and compare discourses pertaining to flood risk and its governance in six European member states (England (the United Kingdom), Flanders (Belgium), France, the Netherlands, Poland and Sweden). Correspondingly, this paper demonstrates how the hegemonic discursive-institutional patterns of flood risk governance differ between the six European countries. These differences may influence the capability of countries to learn from each other, adopt new FRMAs or cooperate with each other. Moreover, the paper argues that differences in discourses partially account for the differences in FRMAs between countries, combined with other factors. Additionally, broader implications are discussed. For example, the research findings imply that some discourses tend to favour or disfavour other discourses, and that they additionally also tend to favour particular FRMAs; e.g. the flood risk discourse pertaining to *high manageability* of risks seems to favour a governance discourse of *collectivity* and *central governance*. The different insights imply that further research is necessary to understand the complex interaction of discourses and institutional arrangements.

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## 1. Introduction

Many European countries have experiences with the endless risk of flooding, yet they differ in their approaches to managing flood risk. The storm surge of 1953 affected large parts of the Dutch, Belgian and English coasts causing altogether over 2500 fatalities. Whereas the Belgian response focused on emergency and crisis management (Mees et al., 2016b, p. 17), the Dutch government implemented a long-term plan to close off large parts of the Rhine estuary with storm surge barriers (The Delta Works) (Kaufmann et al., 2016d, p. 8f), and in England, one important reaction was the establishment of the National Storm Tide Forecasting Service (Alexander et al., 2016b, p. 23). In 1987, heavy rainfall caused a flash flood in the French Alps that killed 27 people. In response, municipalities were required to consider flood risk when developing spatial plans (Larrue et al., 2016, p. 11). In 1997, a major fluvial

flooding in Poland killed 55 people and caused damage of €3 billion. A long-term response was a major reform of the crisis management system (Matczak et al., 2016a, p. 46). These examples illustrate not only the severe societal consequences of flooding, but they also show that countries differ in their Flood Risk Management Approach (FRMA). Some countries tend to focus on probability-reducing FRMAs, whereas other countries tend to focus on reducing the consequences of flooding. Nevertheless, in the course of the EU Water Framework and the EU Floods Directive member states are asked to adjust and harmonize their approaches (e.g. Kaika and Page, 2003; Nones, 2015; Priest et al., 2016).

A number of research studies aim to understand these differences in FRMAs. Factors singled out as influential include hydro-physical characteristics, for example the type of flooding (e.g. fluvial, coastal or pluvial), and also the probability and consequences (Bubeck et al., 2015; Samuels et al., 2006); the character of institutional arrangements (Rothstein et al., 2012); socio-economic and socio-political factors (Wiering et al., 2017); variety in epistemic communities, actor coalitions and policy entrepreneurs

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(Huiteima and Meijerink, 2009).

An aspect that tends to remain implicit is that flood risk and its governance are also social constructs (Luhmann, 1995). This means that actors give different meanings to flood risk and flood risk governance, depending on their experience with and knowledge of flood risk, and the broader political, economic and socio-cultural context (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982; Luhmann, 1995; Renn, 2008; Renn et al., 2011, p. 237).

Flood Risk Management Approaches (FRMAs) are developed and implemented within a broader context of Flood Risk Governance (FRG). FRG is defined as the formal and informal institutions, as well as the processes of institutionalisation, that guide collective activities to deal with flood risk. This definition is based on Renn et al. (2011), whose research on FRG is grounded in social theories of risk (e.g. Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982; Fischhoff et al., 1978; Slovic, 1987). FRG includes several, iterative components: (i) the continuous *communication* between and among different actors; (ii) *risk identification*, which includes the identification of particular risks that are selected to receive societal, political and scientific attention; (iii) *risk assessment*, which includes the qualitative and quantitative analysis of risks and the associated societal concerns; (iv) *risk evaluation* which comprises the consideration of norms and values to determine which level of risk is acceptable and what management measures are tolerated, and how responsibilities are distributed. Subsequently, this leads to (v) *flood risk management* (FRM), i.e. the implementation of FRMAs through institutions, e.g. policy and legal instruments.

This paper aims to understand differences in management approaches, which are implemented in urban areas by governmental and adjunct bodies, from a discursive-institutional perspective. Therefore, social constructions regarding flood risk and governance are conceptualised as discourses, which materialise into FRG institutions that in turn design and implement particular FRMAs. To this end, the paper describes the discursive-institutional patterns of six European member states (the United Kingdom, Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Poland and Sweden). It analyses differences in the discourses of flood risk and governance, and how they partly explain variations in FRMAs between countries. The following research questions are addressed. (1) How do selected European countries differ in their FRMAs? (2) How do these countries differ in their discourses on flood risk and governance? (3) How could variations in FRMAs be clarified by differences in discourses on flood risk and governance?

## 2. Discursive institutionalism

Discursive institutionalism (DI) is a theoretical perspective that is concerned with discourses as being key to understanding social realities (Philips and Jorgensen, 2002, p. 4). In this paper, discourses are understood as categorisations and concepts that give meaning to physical phenomena and social realities (Hajer, 1995, p.44; Foucault, 1972, p.117). In other words, discourses comprise – not necessarily coherent – problem definitions, normative points and factual as well as strategic considerations. Discourses may constitute and constrain (patterns of) behaviour and thus *materialise* into institutions. In other words, institutions may be described as sedimented discourses (Philips and Jorgensen, 2002, p.62), or temporary stabilisations of discourses (Arts et al., 2000, p. 54f). Institutions are understood as the ‘formal or informal procedures, routines, norms and conventions embedded in the organisational structure’ (Hall and Taylor, 1996, p.6). They serve to embody a set of discourses regarding what is possible, feasible and desirable (see Therborn, 1982), as well as regarding the legal and policy instruments appropriate to realise a given set of policy goals (Hall, 1993).

In this paper, discourses are conceived to be constitutive of institutions, while simultaneously being constituted by institutions (Fairclough, 1992; Foucault, 1972; Philips and Jorgensen, 2002, p. 20). Hajer (1995) distinguishes two iterative processes describing the materialization of discourses into institutions. (1) Discourse structuration occurs when a particular discourse starts to dominate the way people conceptualise the world. This structuration takes place within communicative practices. Within these practices, the discourse is produced and reproduced, i.e. continually adjusted. However, a certain ‘core meaning’ of the discourse stays stable. (2) Discourse institutionalisation occurs when widely accepted discourses solidify into particular institutional arrangements. The process is, of course, more complex than this simplified two-step model. In fact, any particular social terrain, such as FRG, is covered by a complex configuration of interrelated discourses. These discourses might describe different aspects of social realities, e.g. economic, political, environmental, and governance aspects. Some of these discourses might be more hegemonic, others more peripheral. The discourses may support and complement, but also oppose or deviate from one another (Fairclough, 1995; for an example see Kaufmann et al., 2016a; Philips and Jorgensen, 2002, pp. 74; 141). Social interaction is considered as the mediator of discourse structuration and discourse institutionalisation. Notably, actors may align with a multitude of discourses to understand social realities. Moreover, different actors might align with diverging discourses that represent different conceptions of flood risk and governance. A discursive struggle between these different conceptions might ensue (Hajer, 1995).

This understanding of the discourse institutionalisation process has a number of implications. Firstly, FRMAs reflect a combination of different flood risk-specific but also broader societal discourses. These discourses may complement another, but theoretically they might even diverge, e.g. an institution can also reflect a compromise between actors that are aligned with diverging discourses (Kaufmann et al., 2016a). This implies that institutions also reflect the interaction and domination patterns between actors that may advocate diverging discourses. As a result of this interaction pattern, certain discourses might be more pronounced in some institutions than in others. Secondly, an institutionalised FRMA can be stabilised through path dependency mechanisms (Mahoney, 2000; North, 1990; Page, 2006; Pierson, 2000). This stabilisation might result in a situation in which the institution ‘outlives’ the discourse, i.e. the majority of actors may no longer conceive social reality in line with the core of the discourse, but the institution prevails nevertheless. This stabilisation leads to a delay between emerging discourses and their stabilisation in institutions, as well as their implementation in practice. Thirdly, once certain discourses become institutionalised, it is more likely for complementary discourses to emerge and become institutionalised or implemented in practice. In other words, certain discourses favour certain institutional arrangements as they align with the institutionalised discourses, whilst they disfavour other institutional arrangements as they oppose or conflict with the underlying discourses. And conversely, some institutional arrangements hinder, or favour, certain discourses from actually emerging, let alone solidifying into institutions.

## 3. Analytical framework

These theoretical understandings need to be translated in an analytical framework. To analyse, compare and clarify differences in FRMAs between countries, Section 3.1 presents a typology of FRMAs and Section 3.2 presents a typology of discourses.

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