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You gain some funding, you lose some freedom: The ironies of flood protection in Limburg (The Netherlands)

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we show how applying an analytical framing of hegemony to policy making can draw out strategic positioning and negotiation of the actors involved that would remain hidden with a more rationalistic analysis. We show how long established flood protection management from the Dutch lowlands was imported into Limburg after two major flood events (1993/1995) and we argue this case highlights how existing hegemony is easily replicated in new situations. With the shock caused by these floods came a securitising discourse that transformed the portrayal of flood risks in Limburg as 'safety' rather than 'costly nuisance'. After an intense lobby by Limburg, the Meuse and its floodplains were included into the Dutch Flood Defence Law in 2005, becoming a national responsibility. While most Limburg inhabitants see increased protection against flooding as beneficial, the new law also meant strict design procedures and planning restrictions. Water expertise plays an important role in setting the new rules that determine which local ambitions are compatible with the national laws and policies. While securitisation helped to actively reproduce the existing (perception of) hegemonic relations in this case, the relationship between securitisation and hegemony is context-dependent, and both hegemon and non-hegemon can use a securitisation strategy to their advantage. Exactly how this will happen cannot be predicted, but 'securitization' and 'hegemony' are important sensitising concepts that can alert the observer to mechanisms of power re-distribution in other situations and settings.

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1. Introduction

Much scholarship on hegemony focuses on the predominance of the global North over the South (e.g. Buchanan, 2013; Clark, 2011; Norloff, 2012; Rajao, 2013). In this paper, however, we examine an example of hegemony at a smaller scale, coincidentally also by a dominant North but this time over a southern region within the same country, The Netherlands. The flood management system from the Dutch lowlands (the polder system, on the right in Fig. 1) is found in the yellow

areas in Fig. 2. Without protection this area would be prone to regular or permanent flooding with potentially serious loss of life (Maaskant et al., 2009). This lowland system of flood protection by dikes was recently transferred to the historically and geographically distinct province of Limburg (Maasdal, on the left in Fig. 1) located in the box in the lower right of Fig. 2, where flooding is an occasional problem (more details in Section 2). This transfer of the lowlands flood management was triggered by two major flood events in 1993 and 1995, which gave rise to a 'securitization' discourse, in first instance nationally but when it came to deciding on flood protection

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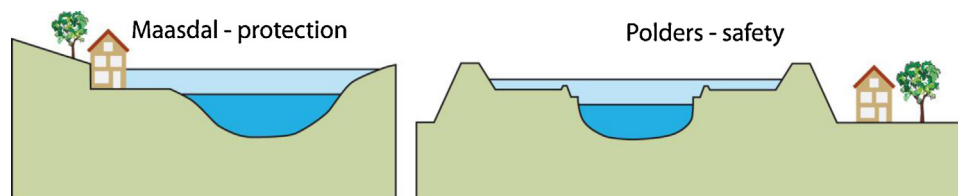


Fig. 1 – Cross sections of the river systems in Limburg (Maasdal) and in the Dutch lowlands (Polders).

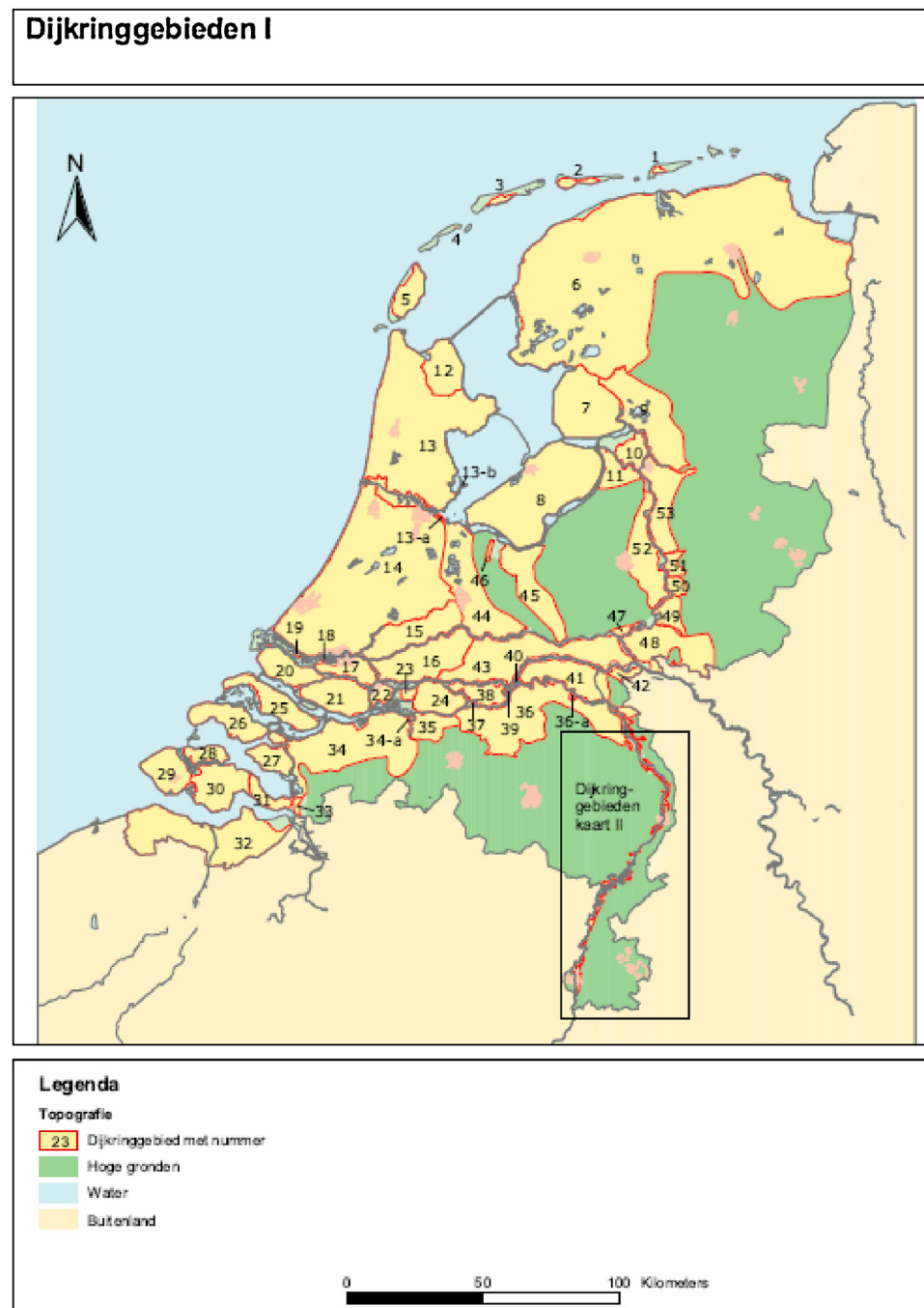


Fig. 2 – Flood defence areas in The Netherlands (Ministerie van V&W, 2007a) (for boxed area see Fig. 6). (For interpretation of the references to color in the text, the reader is referred to the web version of the article.)

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