



A game of give and take: The introduction of multi-layer (water) safety in the Netherlands and Flanders



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ABSTRACT

At the beginning of the 21st century, the Netherlands and Flanders introduced a risk-based approach to flood risk management (FRM), labelled as multi-layer (water) safety. In contrast to a flood defence approach, risk-based management stresses the need to manage both the consequences and probability of a flood. The concept has developed differently in the two countries, as we conclude from a discursive-institutionalist research perspective. The Netherlands is characterised by a high institutionalization of the traditional flood defence discourse and a more closed policy arrangement, whereas in Flanders, the flood defence discourse is less institutionalized and the arrangement is more open. In both countries we see an opening of the arrangement preceding the establishment of multi-layer (water) safety, but at the same time, actors stress different aspects of the concept in order to increase its compatibility with the existing policy arrangement. In the Netherlands, the focus is on probability management, in Flanders on consequence management. In the Netherlands, multi-layer (water) safety as a concept could be established because it stabilises the system in the short-term by reinforcing the importance of flood defence, whereas in Flanders, policymakers were receptive to the concept because it supports a shift of responsibility towards actors outside traditional water management.

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1. Introduction

Flooding is one of the most severe natural hazards in Europe (Feyen et al., 2012; Kundzewicz et al., 2013). Even more so, it is increasing due to socio-economic development in flood-prone areas and the projected consequences of climate change (Abdellatif et al., 2015; Alfieri et al., 2015). In order to adapt to this hazard, new management approaches are being developed at global, European and national level. They include, for example, integrated water resource management (IWRM) promoting an integral, catchment-wide approach (Mostert, 2006; Molle, 2009), or risk-based concepts, which take both the probability and the impact of potential adverse outcomes into consideration in order to minimize them to an acceptable level (Renn, 2008). Countries differ in the way they implement these approaches (Rothstein et al., 2012). A number of studies aim to explain differences in management approaches and the stability or alteration of them (e.g. Samuels et al., 2006; Bubeck et al., 2015). Factors singled out as

influential include the type and severity of flooding, the character of governance arrangements, variety in epistemic communities or advocacy coalitions, learning and feedback processes, as well as path dependency mechanisms (for an overview see Bubeck et al., 2015). However, much of this research tends to pay little attention to flood risk as a social construct, conceptualized in this paper as discourse. Different societies, in other words, ascribe different meanings to flood risk, which materialize differently in particular management approaches (Renn, 2008). In this paper we analyse the interaction between new and existing discourses regarding flood risk, expressing itself in a continuous process of institutionalization and re-institutionalization of management approaches.

In our analysis, we focus on the discourse of ‘multi-layer (water) safety’, or more precisely multiple-tiered flood risk management. This risk-based approach to flood management (FM) became popular in the 21st century both in the Netherlands and Flanders. It was officially introduced through the policy concept of ‘multi-layer safety’ (MLS) in the Netherlands in 2009, and ‘multi-layer water

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Table 1
ML(W)S terminology in the Netherlands, Flanders and EU.

EU	The Netherlands	Flanders
Prevention, i.e. avoiding or adapting construction in flood-prone areas	Prevention, i.e. avoid flood by reducing their likelihood through flood defence measures	Prevention, i.e. avoiding or adapting construction in flood-prone areas
Protection, i.e. reduce likelihood of floods through flood defence measures	Adaptive spatial planning, i.e. avoid or adapt construction	Protection, i.e. reduce likelihood of floods through flood defence measures
Preparation, i.e. emergency management	Emergency management	Preparation, i.e. emergency management

safety' (MLWS) in Flanders in 2013.¹ The concept describes a set of flood risk management (FRM) measures (and instruments) to address the probability and consequences of flooding. This development was partly, but not entirely, related to the development and implementation of the EU Floods Directive. With the Floods Directive (2007) a risk-based approach to flood management is promoted at European level. The Directive relies on three complementary approaches (3P): prevention, i.e. avoiding or adapting constructions in flood-prone areas; protection, i.e. reducing the likelihood of flooding through structural flood defence measures; and preparedness, which is connected to emergency management. In Flanders, these three approaches have been translated into multi-layer water safety (see Table 1). Analogue to the EU Directive no order of priority exists between the different layers. This is different in the Netherlands, where prevention is interpreted as preventing flooding through structural measures. A decision is made to clearly prioritize this layer. Adaptive spatial planning and emergency management measures function as supportive second and third layers, respectively.

The aim of this paper is to explain these differences by analysing the interaction between existing and new discourses. Therefore, a discursive-institutionalist perspective is adopted. Correspondingly, this paper examines the following research question: which discursive-institutional interactions influence the establishment of the ML(W)S concept in the Netherlands and Flanders and explain differences in the appropriation of the concept in the two countries?

The article is structured as follows. In section one we introduce our theoretical assumptions. The next section addresses our methodology. The results section consists of an analysis of the development of ML(W)S in the Netherlands and Flanders, followed by a comparison in the discussion section.

2. Theory

In accordance with our research aim, which is to analyse the interaction of new discourses and existing institutional systems, we adopt a discursive-institutionalist perspective (cf. Schmidt, 2001; Fischer, 2003). We define discourses as an 'ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices' (Hajer, 1995, p. 44); and institutions as 'the formal or informal procedures, routines, norms and conventions embedded in the organizational structure' (Hall and Taylor, 1996, p. 6). Both influence one another: institutions are constituted by discourses, but because institutions in turn govern the behaviour of individuals, they also influence the establishment of new discourses. Different actors articulate and rearticulate discourses in communicative practices. Thereby they produce and reproduce the existing discursive structure, but they also change and adapt it (Giddens, 1984; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Discourses,

and correspondingly institutions, are only temporarily and partly fixed and therefore open to change (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985).

Hajer (1995) distinguishes two processes to evaluate the institutionalization of discourses. Discourse *structuration* occurs when a particular discourse is adopted by a broad range of actors and starts to dominate the way in which people conceptualize the world. This is a simplified conception, especially because there is no complete fixation of meaning via discourses (see Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). We argue that the achievement of discourse structuration is prone to adjustments of meaning, either incrementally during its reproduction in communicative practices, or in a more noticeable fashion during discursive struggles in which meaning is adjusted in order to achieve consensus. The second process distinguished by Hajer is discourse *institutionalization*, which occurs when the discourse solidifies into arrangements and organizational practices (e.g. legislation, policy documents) (Hajer, 1995). We argue that both are iterative processes. Already a certain degree of discourse structuration can cause some degree of discourse institutionalization. That may in turn enhance discourse structuration for a broader range of actors, which can cause further discourse institutionalization.

Institutions are not necessarily the result of one hegemonic, i.e. dominant, discourse. They may be the outcome of different, partly fixed discourses standing in relation to each other (Dryzek, 2005, p. 22). They can be hegemonic to varying degrees (Philips and Jorgensen, 2002, p. 74). We use the analytical concept *order of discourse* to describe the social space in which a complex configuration of interrelated discourses partly cover the same social terrain, and their positioning therein, i.e. opposing or supporting each other (Philips and Jorgensen, 2002, pp. 74, 141). The order of discourse is an analytical concept based on the research aim. For instance, the order of discourse can be music, where the discourses of 'classical' and 'modern music' are situated. However, if the aim is to analyse modern music, this could be the order of discourse in which discourses like 'hip hop' and 'pop' are distinguished (compare also Philips and Jorgensen, 2002, p. 143).

The relationship between discourses is shaped through interdiscursivity, i.e. when 'different discourses are articulated together in a communicative event' (Fairclough, 1993, p. 137). By drawing on elements from several discourses at the same time, e.g. in policy documents or political speeches, discourses can become interlinked with each other. This linkage can either drive change by combining new discourses in an innovative way, or advance stability by mixing discourses in a conventional way that supports existing ideas (Philips and Jorgensen, 2002, p. 73).

Discursive struggle can ensue between different discourse coalitions, i.e. actor coalitions that aim to influence the order of discourse by reinforcing a particular set of storylines in a given policy domain. Storylines 'interpret events and courses of action in concrete social contexts' (Hajer, 2003, p. 103). They condense facts, emphasize certain aspects and silence others, and persuasively structure the way people think about a problem (Hajer, 2003, p. 103). They can be signs of interdiscursivity if they connect previously unconnected discourses in one statement.

Dislocation events occur when the hegemonic discourses are destabilized and fail to be in line with reality, because of the emergence of new political or economic systems or external shock events

¹ In this paper we will henceforth use multi-layer (water) safety, or ML(W)S, when referring to both countries.

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