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The Dutch Delta Committee as a boundary organisation

Daan Boezeman [a,*], *Martinus Vink* [b], *Pieter Leroy* [a]

[a] *Institute for Management Research, Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands*
[b] *Public Administration and Policy Group, Wageningen University, The Netherlands*

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ABSTRACT

Scholars stress the need to bring science and policy together for effective policy making. This paper highlights an interesting site of co-production: the second Dutch Delta Committee. Consisting of representatives of science, politics, policy and industry, this state committee advised the Dutch government on adapting to climate change in 2008. Although the committee went beyond common climate projections and advocated non-incremental policy recommendations, its report provoked little opposition. Subsequently, its recommendations shaped institutional reform and policy development in Dutch adaptive governance. Using the concept of boundary organisations, this paper opens up the black box of the advisory process to explain the Delta Committee's functioning. We conclude that the current understanding of the effectiveness of boundary organisations tends to focus on their internal organisation. The internal processing, shaped by the deliberate composition and organisation of the committee, was indeed important for the production of useful knowledge and management of multiple boundaries. However, this was paralleled by external practices of continued interaction with a range of political, departmental, scientific and public actors in which the Committee positioned the advise. While the former mainly enabled the production of a high quality advice, the latter quested for its acceptance and legitimacy.

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1. Introduction

Late 2008, the second Delta Committee presented a comprehensive vision for the long-term protection (2100–2200) of the Netherlands in the face of climate change, laid down in the '*Working* together with water' report (Deltacommissie, 2008, emphasis in original). Chaired by the well-known Dutch politician and former minister Cees Veerman, the Committee was asked to assess the impact of climate change on the Dutch coastal area and to advise on possible policy strategies to help shape the future of the Netherlands. In the response to '*Working* together with water', the Dutch cabinet endorsed this vision, making it the starting point for further elaboration and decision-making (Huizinga, 2008). Subsequently, the Committee's recommendations shaped institutional reform and policy development in Dutch adaptive governance, provoking some debate in national newspapers but meeting little opposition. This was remarkable, because the committee went well beyond the common IPCC climate projections and recommended policies that were non-incremental.

Although a linear model keeps informing common knowledge of the relation between science and policy, scholars have long stressed the need to bring science and policy together. Our understanding of the patterns of exchange and the conditions under which this exchange is effective is, however, limited (Guston, 2001). Critically examining the practices under which convergence is assumed, debated and achieved

* *Corresponding author at*: P.O. Box 9108, 6500 HK Nijmegen, The Netherlands. Tel.: +31 024 361 30 50.
E-mail address: d.boezeman@fm.ru.nl (D. Boezeman).
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remains a challenge for science studies (Raman, 2005). The same goes for the processes in which expertise and politics are interwoven in struggles over hegemonic meaning in environmental policy (Wesselink et al., forthcoming). Boundary organisations often play an important role in the science-policy interface, notably also in climate adaptation governance (Kirchhoff et al., 2013). They can be seen as sites of co-production, and are considered a particularly promising way to reconcile the supply and demand of scientific knowledge for effective action (Clark et al., 2011; McNie, 2007).

Studies on the Committee's report and the subsequent public debate thereon focus on its output, yet treat the Committee as a single agent (Van Rijswoud, 2012; Verduijn et al., 2012; Vink et al., in press). This article understands the Delta Committee as a rare find of a co-production site in the field of climate adaptation and tries to open up the black box of its advisory process. The Committee can be thought of as a place where representatives of politics, science, departmental administration and industry met for the joint production of knowledge to shape adaptation policies in the Netherlands. Here scientific assessments of climate risks were forged together with normative ideas on how to respond to these risks.

Besides the task of providing knowledge that is scientifically rigorous, boundary organisations and scientific advisory boards at large find themselves confronted with an increase in the demands for transparency, participation and democratisation in western societies (Bijker et al., 2009; Nowotny, 2003). The responsiveness to these demands is often a starting point to explain the effective harmonisation of science and politics (Clark et al., 2011). Despite scholarly efforts, the question how scientific advice to policy is organised and how that affects the capacity of boundary organisations to effectively bridge politics and science has remained rather under-researched (Guston, 2005; Lentsch and Weingart, 2011).

To contribute to the understanding of boundary organisations, we follow a qualitative approach to make a reconstruction of the practices and organisation of the Delta Committee. What practices can be observed in the production of the science based policy advice and how do these practices relate to the effectiveness of boundary organisations? This paper proceeds by elaborating the boundary organisation concept and discussing its strengths and limitations. Our methodological approach follows from this discussion. We then put the Delta Committee and its mandate in the context of the Dutch science-policy landscape, and describe the practices and social interactions through which the Delta Committee produced its advice. Thereupon we draw conclusions, reflect on the literature on boundary organisations and suggest directions for further research.

2. Boundary organisations

This paper starts from the perspective of interacting social worlds (Clarke and Star, 2008). Social worlds are defined as universes of discourse. Science, politics, a policy community or the water industry can be seen as collectives with a shared commitment to certain activities, sharing resources, norms and rationalities in going about in their businesses. When social worlds meet, agents engage in boundary work (Gieryn, 1995). By demarcating perceptible, yet contingent boundaries between these social worlds, agents strive for the legitimate cognitive authority of the collective over particular issues. With Jasanoff (1990) boundary work has been stretched not only to include demarcation, but also to focus on coordination efforts of negotiating acceptable ways of interaction and exchange between these worlds.

Advisory bodies like the Delta Committee operate in a boundary zone between social worlds. Often they are conceptualised as boundary organisations, which function as an intermediate between science and politics, facilitating the two-way flow of information (Guston, 2001; Lentsch and Weingart, 2011; Miller, 2001). Recognising the existence of cultural barriers between science and politics, these organisations are hybrids and manage hybrids, mixing elements of different worlds which are often hard to disentangle. They are responsive to, draw on and deliver translated output to members on either side of the boundary. Guston (2001) distinguishes at least three characteristics of such organisations. Firstly, both scientific and political actors, as well as professionals mediating the two, participate in these organisations. Secondly, they enable the joint production of boundary objects (Star and Griesemer, 1989), such as reports, norms or programmes. Therefore, they are places allowing for collaboration. Thirdly, operating at the frontier of different worlds, boundary organisations have lines of accountability to both worlds. These double lines should also guarantee their role of mediator.

Boundary organisations provide serviceable truths, truthful scientific knowledge aimed at serving certain policy goals (Bijker et al., 2009). Often, their output is suggested to be effectively usable when it is simultaneously perceived as *credible*, meaning scientifically adequate, *salient*, meaning relevant and timely for decision makers, and *legitimate*, meaning acceptable to divergent set of stakeholders (Clark et al., 2011). In the same light, durable claims are considered be *epistemic*, *social* and *political* robust (Lentsch and Weingart, 2011; Nowotny, 2003). Both series of requirements refer to the merging of different social worlds' norms in a knowledge claim and to the resilience of these claims to the subsequent testing and scrutinising across the social worlds.

While a highly generative concept, the boundary organisations concept has been criticised. Firstly, the literature directs us to look at the internal social arrangements and practices of committees (Guston, 2005; Lentsch and Weingart, 2011; Raman, 2005). The robustness of claims are suggested to be enhanced by practices such as reciprocal communication, mediation and translation, and by institutional features to create the systematic commitment to those practices and to stimulate members to cooperate (Cash et al., 2003). While the internal practices and organisation are important, this focus tends to overlook the back stage practices of positioning the advisory report (Bijker et al., 2009). By interacting with a dynamic set of actors (Miller, 2001), boundary organisations attune their advisory report vis-à-vis dominant actors, ideas, narratives and institutional patterns of all involved social worlds. Secondly, organising constant feedback and working in an iterative style to strengthen credibility, salience and legitimacy are considered important features of boundary

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