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Watered-down politics? Inclusive water governance in the Netherlands

Dik Roth ^{a,*}, Martijn Vink ^{a,b}, Jeroen Warner ^a, Madeline Winnubst ^c

^a Wageningen University, Wageningen, The Netherlands

^b Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency, The Hague, The Netherlands

^c Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

In the past decades Dutch flood defence infrastructure has met with a growing societal awareness of landscape and cultural values, of the importance of local livelihoods, and increasingly strong claims and demands for active citizen involvement in decision-making and planning processes that change people's life-worlds. These have wrought important political and institutional changes in the flood security domain: participatory and environmental procedures are now part and parcel of flood defence decision making. This article points at the contradictions in Dutch-style inclusive decision-making. Water problems, it is assumed, are better tackled by more inclusive decision-making processes, while more integrated regional land-use planning is explored to accommodate multiple interests. Yet, greater scope for participation seems to go with a strong tendency towards depoliticization. In the process the stakes may become so fuzzy that participants risk losing interest in participating and may 'exit' or 'voice' in different fora. In some cases, participatory processes were still in train when a decision had already been taken. Echoing the concerns of Chantal Mouffe and others, we will argue that 'the political' may also be obscured at the peril of turning out self-defeating. This calls into question whether in the case of the Netherlands 'inclusive governance' is always progress. We focus on how these processes have been and are governed, what this means in terms of 'stakeholder involvement', and whether 'inclusiveness' is always the solution. We review a number of experiences in Dutch coastal, lake and river landscapes — the River Meuse, the Overdiepse polder, and the IJsselmeer — with a special focus on the 'governance' aspects in relation to the issue of inclusiveness in the decision-making processes involved.

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1. Introduction: exploring 'inclusive development' in Dutch water governance

In the last few decades the concept of inclusive development has considerably gained in popularity. This is reflected in the various definitions and approaches that can be found in the development-oriented literature. According to UNDP, '[d]evelopment can be inclusive - and reduce poverty - only if all groups of people contribute to creating opportunities, share the benefits of development and participate in decision-making'.¹ Oxfam defines it as 'a pro-poor approach that equally values and incorporates the contributions

of all stakeholders - including marginalized groups - in addressing development issues. It promotes transparency and accountability, and enhances development cooperation outcomes through collaboration between civil society, governments and private sector actors'.² For Gupta et al. (2015: 542) the concept 'emphasizes the social and environmental aspects of sustainable development'. According to these authors 'inclusive development has a strong ecological component as the poorest often depend upon local resources (soil, forests, fish, water) and are vulnerable to land, water, fish and carbon credit grabbing' (2015: 544).

As a 'boundary concept', inclusive development connects a diversity of developmental actors around a number of shared core elements. One of those is 'participatory development' or

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: dik.roth@wur.nl (D. Roth), martijn.vink@pbl.nl (M. Vink), jeroen.warner@wur.nl (J. Warner), m.h.winnubst@uu.nl (M. Winnubst).

¹ http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/ourwork/povertyreduction/focus_areas/focus_inclusive_development.html (retrieved 21 September 2016).

² https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/inclusive_development.pdf (retrieved 21 September 2016).

'stakeholder involvement'. Notwithstanding a long tradition of criticism of participation and stakeholder approaches (e.g. Cleaver, 1999; Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Harriss, 2002), these very notions have become the default assumption of 'good' and inclusive development, widely embraced in academic and policy circles. Thus, according to Gupta et al. (2015: 547) 'inclusive development calls for participatory approaches in governance'. According to Oxfam 'development initiatives are more effective [...] when all stakeholders, especially citizens and marginalized communities, are actively involved in the planning, execution and monitoring of development programs'.³ As tends to be the case with such concepts, the superficial consensus shaping up around them, often creating 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1983), may hide important divergences, contradictions and crucial differences that only come to the fore in the practices of policy-making, planning, managing and governing that are legitimized by such notions that are embraced by all (see Mosse, 2004).

This article deals with the issue of stakeholder inclusion in interventions in the delta landscapes of the Netherlands. As a deltaic country — 26% of the country is located below sea level while another 29% is flood-sensitive (Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency, 2010) — wrested from sea and coastal marshes by diking, pumping and other human interventions, the Netherlands has a long history of both local and state-organized water control. Flood risk management is an ongoing concern, given a new urgency by climate change and its imputed consequences for glacier melt, rainfall patterns, river discharges and sea level rise. However, what does 'inclusive development' actually mean in a highly developed, well-to-do country with an established system of parliamentary democracy and a water management tradition based on what the Dutch refer to as 'poldering' — seeking inclusive negotiated solutions to societal problems?

Compared to the other papers of this special issue, the Netherlands is undoubtedly a special case. The issues are less evidently 'developmental' in the sense of being related to poverty alleviation and improvement of the weak socio-economic position of the poor. The people confronted with the processes analysed here are not poor or marginalized in a socio-economic sense, such as is often the case in developing countries. Often even the contrary is the case: many people are relatively highly educated, well-to-do citizens with extensive social networks and knowing their way into the worlds of policy-making and politics. However, marginalization can also refer to something different from socio-economic position per se: to exclusion from processes of representation and decision-making in matters influencing the life-worlds of citizens. In that sense, marginalization in relation to a variety of social-environmental issues including flood policy *does* seem to take place in the Netherlands. The degree of participation of citizens allowed by the government is a topic of debate in many interventions in the framework of flood risk management or other issues.

With the help of three Dutch cases of coastal and river management (the River Meuse, the Overdiepse polder, and the IJsselmeer), this article shows some of the key dilemmas and contradictions that are inextricably linked to participatory approaches. More specifically, this article points at the contradictions in traditional Dutch-style inclusive decision-making, novel 'inclusive' decentralized participatory processes and 'securitized' command-and-control approaches existing and emerging alongside each other. In the past decades, starting in the 1970s, policies and planning for Dutch flood defence infrastructure met with a

growing societal awareness of ecological, landscape and cultural values, and of the importance of local livelihoods (Disco, 2002). The usual top-down plans had to contend with increasingly strong claims and demands for active citizen involvement in decision-making on planning processes that change people's life-worlds. These have wrought important political and institutional changes in the flood security domain: participatory and environmental procedures are now part and parcel of many flood defence and flood risk management interventions.

At the same time, this greater scope for participation seems to go with a strong tendency towards depoliticization of the issues at stake. In allowing for intensified participation of a wide array of individual stakeholders, the stakes may become dispersed and decision-making fuzzy. In such a process the participants risk losing interest in participating and may opt for 'exit' or 'voice' in different fora. Critical social scientists (e.g. Cleaver, 1999; Harriss, 2002; Mouffe, 2005) explicitly recognize forms of protest, resistance and 'counter-development' (Arce and Long, 2000) as relevant and functional forms of participation, but for policy-makers that is often one step too far. In the Dutch water world, in some cases participatory processes were still in train when a final decision had already been taken, rendering 'inclusion' largely symbolic. Echoing Mouffe (2005) and others, we argue that in participatory planning processes 'the political' — defined by Mouffe as 'the antagonism [...] constitutive of human societies' (2005: 9) — may be obscured, at the peril of turning out self-defeating. Other problems may also emerge: citizens may lose interest in participating because non-issues are at stake, because they choose to avoid the responsibilities that go with the right to have a say, or because they believe that the policies or plans at stake will never materialize anyway. In addition, they may participate for quite different reasons than being part of an apparently transparent process leading to shared and agreed upon decisions. When certain actors see a policy or intervention that comes along as a window of opportunity to derive specific benefits from a cooperative attitude, participation may be part of their strategy to gain access to such benefits.

This calls into question whether in the case of the Netherlands more 'inclusive governance' in the sense of more participation inexorably means progress (see also Hurlbert and Gupta, 2015). Based on experiences in Dutch riverine and coastal delta landscapes we focus on how these processes have been and are governed, what this means in terms of 'stakeholder involvement', and whether 'inclusiveness' in decision-making processes is necessarily the solution. At the same time, in the Netherlands situations abound where some form of critical countervailing power outside the procedures of parliamentary democracy has often proved crucial for critically scrutinizing expert reports and recommendations, policy intentions, and government decisions. How to deal, then, with inclusive development in the shape of participation, in view of these problems and dilemmas?

This article consists of the following sections. After this introduction we present a brief overview of literature on participation in development more generally, and in water governance settings in the Dutch water domain. Next, we concisely discuss key developments in the policies and practices of surface water interventions in the Netherlands. This section is followed by the presentation of three cases to illustrate three important dimensions of participatory water governance in the Netherlands, followed by a discussion of the cases and a conclusion.

2. Participatory approaches to flood risk management: how to approach 'the political'?

The types of water policies and interventions deployed to keep dry feet in a densely populated and industrialized deltaic country

³ https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/inclusive_development.pdf (retrieved 21 September 2016).

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