



## Watered-down politics? Inclusive water governance in 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'.<sup>1</sup> 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'.<sup>2</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/ourwork/povertyreduction/focus\\_areas/focus\\_inclusive\\_development.html](http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/ourwork/povertyreduction/focus_areas/focus_inclusive_development.html) (retrieved 21 September 2016).

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/inclusive\\_development.pdf](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'.<sup>3</sup> 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

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/inclusive\\_development.pdf](https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/inclusive_development.pdf) (retrieved 21 September 2016).

like the Netherlands inevitably influence the lives of citizens in coastal and riverine landscapes. Whether based primarily on structural flood defence, as was the case before the turn of the century, or on combinations of infrastructural and spatial solutions, which were introduced in the framework of the Dutch 'Room for the River' programme<sup>4</sup> from the year 2000 onwards, measures for flood risk management are socially and politically sensitive, and always contested by people who feel damaged by, insecure or excessively burdened with the 'bads' of such measures (Wolsink, 2006; Warner et al., 2013a, b). Conflicts with citizen groups about interventions in riverine landscapes through dike enhancement and 'calamity storage' of water (e.g. Roth and Warner, 2007; Warner, 2011) gradually made governmental actors aware of the need for more interactive and negotiated approaches in dealing with flood risk management issues, if only to avoid protests and forms of resistance against government plans. This created windows of opportunity for citizens to become more involved in planning and decision-making processes as 'stakeholders' (Warner et al., 2013a). In addition, in a European context participatory approaches and the inclusion of civil society actors in decision-making have increasingly been stressed, and translated into formal requirements in the context of the European Union's Water Framework Directive adopted in 2000 (Hartmann and Driessen, 2013). Such inclusive approaches are generally expected to strengthen societal support for, and enhance the democratic legitimacy of decisions, and lead to more informed and effective policies. However, there are major problems with both the limited extent to which these principles are put into practice and with issues of democratic legitimacy *vis-à-vis* a wider public (Behagel and Turnhout, 2011).

Moreover, participation comes in many shapes and guises, as is illustrated by the rungs of the widely-known 'participation ladder' (Arnstein, 1969). The flipside of forms of inclusion through participatory processes is their instrumentality. In the Dutch water world, the point of departure was, and still is, primarily instrumental: creating greater legitimacy or at least acceptance among affected citizens for decisions that have often already been taken. This often comes down to establishing legitimizing forms of organisation and orchestration of participatory processes, as happened in the case of 'calamity polders',<sup>5</sup> in Room for the River projects, and also in current planning processes for water interventions (Roth and Warner, 2009; Winnubst, 2011; Boezeman et al., 2014). These forms of inclusion tend to create dilemmas for those who become enrolled in such government-orchestrated participatory trajectories: are there still real choices to be made? Can participating citizens still say 'no', or will their 'empowerment' lead to a *de facto* loss of power? How will the form of inclusion of stakeholder representatives influence the ways in which they relate to those they claim to represent and the legitimacy of their representative position?

In contrast to the participatory approaches since long

propagated by Western donors in their policies for developing countries, serious attention to participatory approaches to flood risk management in the Netherlands is a relatively recent phenomenon. Hence, much can be learned from the more critical participation literature that focuses on developing countries. Participation, Cleaver (1999: 597) claims, is an 'act of faith in development; something we believe in and never question'. Thus, participation tends to be approached from a basically normative point of view in which the 'goodness' of and need for participation are stressed, often at the expense of attention to power relations and the political dimensions of participatory approaches that include 'stakeholders' (Warner, 2007; Behagel and Turnhout, 2011). As Cleaver argues, such approaches, characterized by a mix of efficiency and rather depoliticized and elusive notions of 'empowerment', tend to focus on 'getting the techniques right' in the framework of specific project-based interventions. Cleaver is no less critical of the concept of 'social inclusion', as this 'mistakenly assume[s] automatic linkages between involvement and social responsibility' (1999: 599).

In reaction to environmental concerns and a wider belief that better decision-making should be more inclusive, Dryzek introduced the concept of 'deliberative democracy' (Dryzek, 2002) and, more generally formulated, 'deliberative governance' (Dryzek, 2010). Inclusive deliberation is argued to yield more legitimate, better and more just policies. In a similar way, from the 1990s onwards the idea of multi-stakeholder platforms had gained attention. The fundamental assumption underpinning these approaches stems from the Habermasian views on dialogue, undistorted by power differentials and information differences, where assumptions are challenged and a kind of truth is formed (Innes, 2004). These approaches did not remain unchallenged. Faysse makes a distinction between the 'dialogue vision' and the 'critical vision'. While the former sees the organisation of communication and dialogue as the way forward towards consensus, the latter argues that these processes and interactions cannot be abstracted from the power relations between actors in multi-stakeholder and participatory processes (2006: 222). At an instrumental level, such criticism questions the extent to which these deliberative approaches can deal with, and yield 'inclusive' decisions over, the wide variety of perspectives, frames and interests present in society (van Eeten, 2001; Innes, 2004). Others took more normative approaches, questioning the political meaning of 'consensus' and 'inclusion' in these deliberative approaches (Innes and Booher, 2004; Newman et al., 2004; government responsiveness: Yang and Callahan, 2007; Yang and Pandey, 2011; legitimacy: Parkinson, 2003, 2004; political equality: Fishkin, 2011).

Adding a new dimension to the extensive literature on participation, Hurlbert and Gupta (2015) developed the 'split ladder of participation'. According to these authors, participation is often romanticised, and the literature on participation 'scarcely covers the conditions under which participation may work and the conditions which determine what level of participation should be used (Warren, 2009) for different policy problems' (2015: 101). As the authors argue, participation is not always necessary or useful, nor automatically leading to consensus. Linking participation to problem type, learning, and type of management or governance required, the split ladder identifies unstructured problems as the domain where public participation can be usefully expanded, using adaptive governance approaches and encouraging social learning. Though we share the basic points of departure of the authors — often participation is idealized while it is not always needed, effective, or applicable; structuring of the problem is an important determinant of the potential of participatory approaches — we have doubts about the assumptions behind this approach. The basic idea is still that consensus seeking (aided by building trust and

<sup>4</sup> 'Room for the River' (2000–2015) was a Dutch flood risk management programme aiming at the integration of spatial and infrastructural flood protection measures for the major rivers of the Netherlands. Through the (partial) removal of "hard" boundaries it ended the rigid spatial-infrastructural separation of water and land on which Dutch flood risk management had been based. The programme consisted of 34 (initially 39) project interventions, scattered along the Rivers Rhine and Waal, Meuse, IJssel and Lek (see van Buuren et al., 2012; Nillesen and Kok, 2015; Rijke et al., 2012).

<sup>5</sup> 'Calamity polders' are low-lying areas surrounded by dikes and situated along the rivers, that can be used for emergency water storage in times of extremely high river discharges and threats of flooding in more densely populated areas a dense economic infrastructure. Between 2000 and 2005 calamity polders were planned in the Netherlands as an instrument to deal with such flood threats (Roth and Warner, 2009; see also below).

social learning) is among the highest aims of participatory approaches.

Gaventa criticises the consensual language characterising many participatory approaches, including the more critical variants. According to the author, '[t]he very spread and adoption by powerful actors of the language and discourse of participation and inclusion confuses boundaries of who has authority and who does not, who should be on the "inside" and who is on the "outside" of decision-making and policymaking arenas. Changing governance arrangements, which call for "co-governance" and "participatory governance" challenge our traditional categories of the rulers and the ruled, the policymakers and the public. The use of terms such as "partnership" and "shared ownership" ... invite engagement on a "level playing field" but obscures inequalities of resources and power' (2006: 23). Thus, idealizing approaches to participation, expressed, produced and reproduced discursively in the kind of consensual language Gaventa refers to, tend to hide from view the basically political character of participatory processes characterized by unequal command of resources and relations of power.

Mouffe's (2005; see also Mouffe, 1993) position on consensual approaches to democratic forms of decision-making deserves special attention in this context. Mouffe regards such approaches, which tend to be based on combinations of institutional design and rational choice, as 'anti-political' or 'post-political', and therefore in denial of the very core of 'the political': its contested and antagonistic character. Instead she stresses the need for an "agonistic" public sphere of contestation where different hegemonic political projects can be confronted' (2005: 3) in a 'conflictual consensus' between opponents as 'legitimate enemies' (2005: 52). Thus, democratic processes, in Mouffe's view, should be about recognizing and organizing contestation and confrontation rather than constructing consensus. For Mouffe, this is the domain of 'the political', the basic antagonism that is 'constitutive of human societies' (2005: 9) and creates political identities along lines of we/they, friend/enemy distinctions around issues where real choices with real consequences such as in- or exclusion are at stake. These processes take shape in an always contingent hegemonic order, subject to counter-hegemonic challenges.

Thus 'taming' the antagonism basic to the political, which is the main function of democratic processes, requires turning antagonistic relations into 'agonistic relations' between adversaries rather than enemies. Akin to ideas expressed in Li's (2007) 'rendering technical', Mouffe criticizes the reduction of this crucial dimension of 'the political' to a set of depoliticized technically formulated (participatory) procedures as 'post-political' (2005: 34). There are real power differences and contestations, she claims, with real benefits and burdens at stake for various actors, and real conflicts of interest related to these. Rather than eliding these from the process, they need to be placed up front, in a way that creates space for political contestation and, crucially, transformation of existing power relations. Approaches in which these contestational relations are presented as dialogical, consensual, cooperative, technical and neutral will, in the end, risk strengthening the antagonistic character of political relations. This comes at the expense of options for turning them into adversarial relations in which existing contestations, power differences and diversity of stakes and interests can become the point of departure for the political process (Mouffe, 2005).

### 3. Dutch 'poldering' and inclusive governance: a historical perspective

For centuries Dutch delta dwellers have lived with the constant threat of the sea, its severe North Atlantic storm surges, and rising sea levels (Koningsveld et al., 2008). Even before the Dutch delta

was governed by a central authority, medieval communities started building levees to protect the community and its lands from floods. To a much larger extent than the earlier mounds (Dutch *terpen*) that were built from prehistoric times, these embanked 'polder' areas crucially required a form of collective action, and decision-making over competing claims. Polders were governed by water management boards that negotiated these polder politics through interest organisation and representation. In Napoleonic times Dutch water management became centralized in a national public works authority, but still together and in interaction with the water boards. Water boards are still part and parcel of the Dutch constitutional decision-making structure. However, their number has been considerably reduced in the last decades (from around 3500 before 1900, and 2600 in 1950, down to the current 23) due to processes of reorganization and ongoing centralization and professionalization (see Toonen et al., 2006).

Inclusiveness in water management is still largely taken care of in the water board decision-making process, given the dependence on each and every one's goodwill in keeping low-lying land dry. Until the 1990s this process, often referred to as 'poldering' (Dutch *polderen*), was characterized by representation of societal interests through interest groups like farmers' organisations, business organisations and environmentalists. These organized interests were negotiated along institutionalized interaction patterns and within (semi-)official arenas, like general meetings at water boards, but also routinized meetings between water board administrators, interest groups and mutually acknowledged expertise. Since 2008 political parties were allowed to take part in formal decision-making, which in theory opened up the negotiation process to citizens who, in turn, had to pay an earmarked water board tax ('no taxation without representation'). Nevertheless, inclusion of interests in water management still represents a strong 'poldering'-flavoured process of organized interest groups having an institutionalized say in administration and political decision-making (Boezeman et al., 2014; Halffman, 2009; Vink et al., 2015a). This 'poldering' in water management exemplifies what classical European political scientists such as Schmitter defined as a typically Dutch *neo-corporatist* state tradition where institutionalized 'systems of interest intermediation' are employed to negotiate between national interests represented by the state, and specific, often traditionally determined, societal interests represented by unions, business organisations, religious institutions and the like (Schmitter, 1974; for the Netherlands see e.g. Behagel and Turnhout, 2011).

From the 1990s onwards a wider process of 'democratisation' took place in water management. This concerns less institutionalized but more ad-hoc organized participatory trajectories often framed as 'joint fact finding' or 'multi-stakeholder participation'. These aim at a better understanding of the local situation (better use of local knowledge) and a more legitimate implementation in the eyes of directly affected stakeholders. This more inclusive, interactive governance ambition (Innes and Booher, 2004; van Woerkom, 2000) emerged alongside the existing poldering arrangements and routines, and deviated from the existing approach in the number and type of actors taking part. Participants generally are less well organized or traditionally determined, processes are more open and institutionalisation is weak. Participation does not necessarily lead to decision-making and this decision-making is never officially binding since these participatory trajectories take place outside the constitutional decision-making arenas (Warner, 2007; Vink, 2015). Inspired by a decidedly Habermasian argumentative turn, representing multiple interests and experiences was held to promote dispute resolution (Ramirez, 1999) and consensus-building based on the 'best argument'.

At the same time, however, a remarkably reverse development

of securitization and centralization took place as well. Securitization and centralization predominantly took place in the shape of emergency laws to deal with human-made bottlenecks in the water system. These had been defined after two near-flooding events in the 1990s, and led to a crash programme for dike enhancement and the 'Room for the River' programme. A decade later a national Delta Act, Delta fund and 'Delta commissioner' were established in reaction to growing concerns about a changing climate (Vink, 2015; Warner, 2011).

In the 'developed' context of the Netherlands, society has always somehow played a role in the long history of decision-making on water management. Mostly through organized interests representing large parts of society in decision-making, with or without central authority, depending on the historical era of concern. As we already indicated these traditional forms of inclusion are more and more being paralleled by direct forms of 'inclusive' (stakeholder) participation, sometimes alongside continuing trends and patterns of centralization. This makes the Netherlands an interesting case for analysing what these new forms of governing lead to in terms of 'inclusiveness'. To what extent did 'inclusive' (participatory) development lead to 'inclusive' outcomes, and to what extent did it lead to actual policy outcomes at all?

#### 4. Three Dutch cases of inclusive development in flood risk management

##### 4.1. Case study selection, research methods and analysis

To illustrate and further analyse this character of inclusive development as a mix of beneficial and more problematic dimensions of planning and decision-making rather than something intrinsically 'good', in this section we present three short case studies from the Dutch water governance domain. The cases we use in this article to further explore these issues have been extensively researched by the authors of this paper: research on the Meuse case covers data from the period between, 1986 and 2016, but especially the 'crunch moment' 1998–2002 (see e.g. Warner, 2011, 2016); the Overdiepse polder case study covers the period between 2005 and 2015 (see e.g. Roth and Winnubst, 2009, 2014; 2015); and the IJsselmeer case was intensively researched between 2010 and 2014 (see e.g. Vink and Mulligen, 2013; Vink et al., 2015a, b; Vink, 2015). Though research on these cases was not done with the specific issue of 'inclusion' that is the topic of this article in mind, the secondary analysis of participatory planning processes was a key dimension of all case studies used here. For the purpose of this article we basically revisited our data to flesh out and elaborate aspects of these cases that can provide us with a better understanding of the dilemmas of participation mentioned above. We did so from a perspective based on Mouffe's theorization of 'the political', as explained in the text.

The cases were selected because, first, they represent the various dimensions of inclusive approaches to flood risk management that we want to discuss here. Second, they cover three different periods in which authorities dealt differently with inclusion through participatory processes. The Meuse case (from the 1990s) covers a period in which experience with participatory processes was still very limited and interest in it lukewarm at most. The Overdiepse polder case concerns a project in the national Room for the River programme, a programme touted as an example of 'governance' and participation. The project was planned and implemented between 2000 and 2015. The IJsselmeer case represents a new, post-Room for the River, period in Dutch water governance formally framed as decentralized regional decision-making on the basis of centrally determined 'water tasks' (Dutch: *wateropgaven*). In all cases, the research was mainly based on in-

depth interviews with a variety of governmental and non-governmental actors involved in the issues and processes at stake. In the case of the IJsselmeer interviews were supported by text analysis of over 20 governmental and stakeholder meetings that took place between 2010 and 2014.

For the Meuse case documentary research was conducted covering project documents, policy papers, public consultation minutes, activist websites and press reports. In addition to that, 16 in-depth interviews and several conversations 'in passing' were conducted with local and national actors between 2000 and 2011, though not explicitly with a view to undertaking longitudinal research. It also draws on a debate held at Wageningen University in 2005 involving the BOM citizen action coalition (the case below) and the Maaswerken's then stakeholder relations officer (*omgevingsmanager*). The 2011 local interviews were held together with Karen Engel, Bart Weijts and Lucia Velotti. Interviewees were selected based on their role in the decision-making and conflict over the river Meuse.

Analysis of the Overdiepse polder case is based on extensive longitudinal research between 2005 and 2015, mainly through in-depth interviews with various stakeholders. Additional sources used in our analysis were project newsletters and other communication, press coverage of the various stages and emerging issues in the project, policy and project documents, and scientific publications. The research covers the second part of the planning period (2000–2009; the first part was covered through interviews and policy documents) and the full implementation period (2010–2015). Our research involved a large number of in-depth interviews with inhabitants and former inhabitants of the polder, representatives of the farmers (also inhabitant of the polder), and representatives and spokespersons of the government agencies and administrations involved in the planning and implementation of the project, totalling 42 interviews. People interviewed were selected on the basis of their stakes in the process and roles in organizing farmers, planning and decision-making.

Analysis of the IJsselmeer case is based on participatory observations that took place within the policy-development programme *Delta Programme for the IJsselmeer region* between 2010 and 2014. Through 21 semi-structured interviews, text analysis of several official documents and text analysis of plenary dialogues of over 20 governmental and stakeholder meetings the research provided an longitudinal account of the policy debates and policy processes that took place within the institutional context of this regional sub programme of the Dutch national *Delta Programme*. The people interviewed were selected based on a sample of the institutional positions they represented: We interviewed politically elected decision-makers from both the provincial and municipality level, we interviewed civil servants from the regional and local level governmental organisations involved, and we interviewed representatives of business organisations, civil society organisations, advisory councils and consultancies involved in the programme.<sup>6</sup>

##### 4.2. Forum shopping: River Meuse

The river Meuse (Dutch: *Maas*) has its origin in France, flows through Belgium, crossing into the Netherlands in the southern-most province of Limburg, from which it empties into the North Sea at the port of Rotterdam. The 'normalisation' (channelization) of the river in the 1930s, and the closing off of some branches, increased flood risk and impoverished biodiversity and riverine landscape

<sup>6</sup> An in-depth account of the precise frame developments, policy process and interview results on which our analysis is based can be found in Vink 2015; Vink et al., 2015a, b; Vink and Mulligen 2013.

values. Renaturing the River Meuse in the southern Limburg valley, where it is the natural border with Belgium (*Grensmaas*), was a languishing proposal developed by nature conservation organisations and the provincial authority. The proposal had emerged in the 1980s but was given a new lease on life by the Meuse flood peaks of late 1993 and early 1995, which caused local damage. These unanticipated floods triggered an emergency law (1995–1997) bypassing normal participation and environmental assessment requirements. The Maas project, reinvented as a flood defence project aiming to rehabilitate the river from the mining of gravel from the Border Meuse, was now scaled up into an integrated regional programme that included the downstream Sandy Meuse section (*Zandmaas*) and a navigation channel to facilitate river navigation (*Maasroute*), and taken over by the national Public Works Department in 1997. A consortium was created consisting of public agencies, an environmental conservation NGO (*Natuurmonumenten*), and regional ‘gravel kings’ who had also amassed considerable land holdings. This deal, however, created distance from local citizens, worsened by prolonged ‘radio silence’ (1998–2001).

The dual project leadership model opted for—half national Public Works Department (*Rijkswaterstaat*) and half under the authority of the province of Limburg — depoliticized the issue of perceived inequality between the ‘West’ of the Netherlands and Limburg in the South. There was clearly ‘a senior-junior relationship, cultivated by both sides’ (Wesselink et al., 2013). The province of Limburg had only become Dutch due to geopolitical gerrymandering in the 18th and 19th centuries, and still has a strong regional identity. It also had a long history of resource extraction. As a result, Limburgers considered themselves colonised by ‘Holland’ – the western part of the Netherlands, the country’s political and economic mainstay. The Maaswerken project symbolised the ‘intrusion’ of *Rijkswaterstaat*, which took the lead in a process seen as necessarily regional. To add insult to injury, ‘the West’ refused to give the Limburg valley, which is flood-prone but well above sea level, the same protection standard as the West, which is well below sea level (Wesselink et al., 2013). Citizen and farmer protest groups emerged and asserted themselves, soon clustering together into a forum called ‘BOM’.<sup>7</sup> The top-down, slow, and non-inclusionary participatory planning process that was to lead to an Environmental Impact Assessment and project deal broke down in 2001, only to be revived in a far more informal and inclusive participation process run with some success by the provincial authority. Exit *Rijkswaterstaat* as lead actor.

BOM was now considered a legitimate ‘poldering partner’ by the Provincial authority, yet played double cross by keeping the dialogue going with the officials while at the same time fighting the project in court, in cahoots with Belgian gravel companies excluded from tendering. Moreover, while *Natuurmonumenten* as a consortium member, and BOM as a concerned citizens’ NGO agreed to dialogue with the provincial project leaders, another citizens’ organisation adverse to the Maaswerken project, *Federatief Verband tegen Ontgrondingen* (Federation against Aggregates Extraction) for a considerable time decided to stay out of this, and filed lawsuits against Maaswerken, though now the *Federatief Verband* had joined the ‘sounding board group’ (*Klankbordgroep*).<sup>8</sup> In brief, concerned stakeholders expediently juggled ‘voice’ and ‘exit’ in various fora.

Note that the ‘integrated approach’ stopped at the national border: while the Common Meuse, as noted above, is a border river

shared with Belgium, there was hardly any consideration of the impact of Dutch interventions on the Belgian side. This delimitation continued when the public sector initiated a participatory process for scenario-building beyond 2030. Transboundary cooperation remained very limited until 2009, when the Netherlands facilitated a smaller ‘green’ flood protection project on the Belgian side. Thus, sovereignty mostly trumped ‘inclusivity of development’.

#### 4.3. The downside of successful inclusive development: the Overdiepse Polder

The Overdiepse Polder in the Province of Noord-Brabant is located between the bifurcation and confluence points of two branches of the River Meuse. After two periods of extremely high water and near-floods in 1993 and 1995, Dutch flood risk management policies shifted from an infrastructural focus on diking towards locally adapted combinations of infrastructural and spatial forms of protection (see Baan and Klijn, 2004; Rijke et al., 2012). In the year 2000 the polder appeared on the maps of policy-makers as ‘search area’ with potential for calamity floodwater storage in the framework of the new so-called ‘Room for the River’ programme that was an expression of the shift towards spatial flood protection policies. Covering around 550 ha of mainly agricultural land protected by dikes and another 180 ha of river forelands outside the dikes, the polder had – and still has – a mainly agricultural function that became threatened by the plans for calamity water storage. Initially, therefore, the plans had created quite a stir among the 19 households inhabiting the small polder. However, after intensive discussions between the inhabitants, they jointly decided not to resist the plan but to explore the possible opportunities it entailed for inclusive development by combining the public interest of calamity flood water storage with their own entrepreneurial interests as dairy farmers (Roth and Winnubst, 2014).

Assisted by regional politicians, a farmers’ organisation and the Province of Noord-Brabant, the inhabitants developed a plan in which the residential, agricultural and water storage functions of the polder could be combined. The farmers had creatively based their plan on an age-old form of Dutch flood adaptation: building on mounds (Dutch *terpen*). Aided by a political window of opportunity for putting on the agenda appealing flood adaptation projects in Dutch water policy circles, which was struggling with a low public flood risk awareness and growing concern for the possible effects of a changing climate, the polder dwellers managed to get their idea accepted. Thus the inhabitants made optimal use of a set of political and institutional conditions in the water domain that were conducive to exploring new technical solutions, institutional arrangements, policy changes, and ideas developed by concerned citizens in cooperation with other actors with ‘mind space’ (Warner et al., 2013a) for new and creative solutions. The initiative leaned heavily on two farmers with political connections, strong networks, and the qualities needed for leading this initiative. These farmers came to play an important representative role in negotiations and interactions with the government (Roth and Winnubst, 2014).

To some extent it was a win-win situation indeed: inhabitants gained a greater degree of control over the project, its goals, and the process towards reaching them than would have been possible if they had left the initiative to the government. Moreover, they negotiated project goals that explicitly included strengthening of the farmers’ agricultural enterprises in the polder, and support (buy-outs) for those who would have to leave the polder. For the engineers of *Rijkswaterstaat*, the project’s effect on the river water level (a 27 cm water level reduction in periods of high discharges) was good news, while administrators, policy-makers and politicians could use its appeal for their ‘living with water’ strategies to make the public ‘water-aware’. Financed by the ‘Room for the River’

<sup>7</sup> Bewoners Overleg Maaswerken, i.e. Maaswerken Inhabitants Forum, the abbreviation BOM is also Dutch for ‘bomb’.

<sup>8</sup> Raad van State, Uitspraak 200801430/1 Online: <https://www.raadvanstate.nl/uitspraken/zoeken-inuitspraken/tekst-uitspraak.html>.

programme and Province of Noord-Brabant, the reconstruction of the polder entailed the demolition of the existing houses, stables and related farm infrastructure, the construction of eight mounds, adaptation of dikes and other infrastructure, and the building of new farms on the newly constructed mounds. Land left by the farmers who moved out of the polder was reallocated to the remaining farming households, who could thus further strengthen their farming enterprises. Thus the polder was prepared for temporary water storage while still keeping its agricultural function, with possibilities for the 'stayers' to expand their farm with some land left by the 'movers' who did not want to participate and left the polder (Roth and Winnubst, 2014).

The Overdiepse Polder has become a showcase of the Dutch 'Room for the River' programme, an example of successful spatial adaptation to climate change in close cooperation with local stakeholders. The project is, without doubt, one of the most successful 'Room for the River' projects and a good example of the benefits of inclusive development. Contrary to many other 'Room for the River' projects that were characterized by a mix of top-down, 'command-and-control' styles of governing and more participatory approaches, the Overdiepse Polder project was fully based on an idea developed by the inhabitants as an alternative to simply ceding the polder area to calamity storage (see Edelenbos et al., 2013; Roth and Winnubst, 2014). It clearly illustrates the advantages for both citizens and governmental actors of a decentralized and joint planning and implementation process (with the Provincial authority playing an important and constructive role), paying due attention to inclusive participatory planning processes. Yet this type of inclusive development raises questions on the terms of inclusion, the practices that it leads to, and the character of the solutions reached. In the case discussed here, the way in which participation was organized created various tensions among the inhabitants, between inhabitants and their representatives, and between inhabitants and governmental actors like the province. This was further aggravated by the specific process of reconstruction of the polder, which required that part of the families would be moving out while others could stay (see above). This was a very sensitive issue; although those who left the polder received compensation from the government, the uncertainties about others' priorities, intentions and chances of staying in the polder created tensions and distrust.

Once the mounds plan for the Overdiepse Polder began to gain traction, the farmers who had developed the plan organized into the *Belangengroep Overdiepse Polder* (Overdiepse Polder Interest Group) to represent their interests in negotiations with the government. This initially strengthened their position in these negotiations with government representatives of (especially) the province. However, the position of the *Belangengroep's* board was a rather precarious one: on the one hand it had to represent the inhabitants in a way that the provincial and central government actors would consider constructive, on the other hand it had to show satisfactory results to the inhabitants to retain their support and trust. The representatives of the inhabitants had little room for manoeuvre. First, notwithstanding their 'inclusion', at the end of the day they were dependent on the basically hierarchical relations with the provincial and (especially) the central government, where financial and procedural decisions were taken and the space for flexibility and experimentation was small. Second, they represented farmer families who were all developing their own priorities, strategies, and objectives for negotiating the best outcome for their future enterprises, either in the Overdiepse polder or elsewhere. Most families had their own (often hidden) agendas, in some cases consistent throughout the process, in others changing under the influence of changing farmer estimations of their chances and what would best serve their interest. At the same time, the

board could not always bring positive news about the outcomes of negotiations with the government, nor prioritize and satisfy all individual ambitions and demands (Roth and Winnubst, 2015).

The inhabitants and their representatives were relatively strongly positioned in their negotiations with the government: to turn the intervention in the polder into a showcase project of innovative Dutch water policy and adaptive management, the governmental actors of (especially) the province were dependent on the readiness of the board to closely cooperate. This gave the farmer representatives quite some negotiating power in their dealings with the province. The farmer representatives of the *Belangengroep* had put their bets on constructive but critical cooperation with the government, representing the farmers in the polder as disinterestedly as possible. However, in the planning process deals also had to be made. This increasingly led to allegations that the board of the *Belangengroep* had become too cooperative and closely affiliated with the governmental actors, considered by some inhabitants to be opponents or even enemies rather than 'partners' in a participatory process. This led to deepening frustrations, tensions, and growing opposition to the board. These tensions became most acutely felt at some of the crucial stages in decision-making about the future of the polder, and even made some farmers decide to withdraw their participation and support altogether.

One major issue concerns the moment in the planning process when a choice had to be made between three alternative options for reconstruction of the polder. With the aid of a consultant the farmers had developed three variants, known as 'the terps (mounds) plan' (discussed here), 'the central dike alternative' (which was to divide the polder into two spatial compartments; one for settlement, the other for calamity storage of water), and the 'nature alternative' (buying out the farmers and returning the polder to nature). There was a clear majority in favour of the mounds plan, with only a few farmers supporting either the dike variant or the nature alternative. Although evidence is contradictory, it seems that conflicts arose when one of the farmer representatives reported a 'unanimous decision' to the province, which had sought a consensual outcome. In reaction, one farmer withdrew from the board since a majority vote had been presented as a consensual decision. The farmer refused to see this as a neut process, as he felt the board members and others living in the southern part of the polder stood a much better chance of claiming a mound than farmers on the other side. Another key issue, building on the growing distrust between the inhabitants and their representatives, was the accusation on the part of the 'movers' to the extent that the *Belangengroep* increasingly represented the 'stayers' and hence did no longer represent all farmer families (Roth and Winnubst, 2015). Farmers who had decided to move out or were looking for opportunities to do so (e.g. by exploring options to buy a farm outside the polder) felt unrepresented and not actively supported by the *Belangengroep* in their attempts to leave the polder and build up a new enterprise elsewhere.

#### 4.4. Depoliticization and loss of interest: the Delta Programme for the IJsselmeer region

In reaction to alarming messages about climate change and associated sea level rise, and changing precipitation patterns, in 2008 a Dutch political advisory committee—the Second Delta Committee—presented its rather far-reaching recommendations to the Cabinet (Delta Committee, 2008). Most recommendations concerned infrastructural works, but the most important recommendations concerned changes in water management and governance approaches. In addition to a new delta law, delta fund and a commissioner of state (*Delta commissioner*), the committee

recommended a national 'programme' to deal with the climate change challenge. The Dutch Cabinet and Parliament accorded the recommendations without serious debate (Boezeman et al., 2013; van der Steen et al., 2016). The Delta Programme consisted of several, geographically and thematically based sub-programmes. Although the programmes were organized in a rather centralized fashion, with the Delta Commissioner overseeing their practices, some of them took on board a more deliberative approach as well.

A sub-programme for the IJsselmeer (*Lake IJssel*) region, *Delta Programme for the IJsselmeer region* had to operationalize the rather controversial plan drafted by its predecessor the Delta Committee to increase the lake's water storage capacity and discharge capacity to the sea. Both capacities could be increased by raising the lake's water level by 1.5 m. The increased storage capacity and discharge capacity would anticipate future droughts and sea-level rise. Contrary to the traditional Dutch 'poldering' approach, in the Delta Programme for the lake IJssel region a large number of actors were voluntarily participating in an ad-hoc organized four-year governance trajectory aiming at a 'broad-based advice to the Delta Commissioner'<sup>9</sup> on how to enlarge both capacities of this former estuary of the Dutch delta (*Delta Programma IJsselmeergebied*, 2013). This former *Zuiderzee* estuary, which technically became the *IJsselmeer* (Lake IJssel) in 1936 after the construction of a major closure dam, *Afsluitdijk*, already functions as a freshwater reservoir, which still discharges its river-influxes to the sea. However, predicted climate-change related increases in river influxes, sea-level rise, evapotranspiration and salinization pointed towards the need to enlarge the lakes storage and discharge capacity (*Delta Committee*, 2008). Rising water levels would, however, lead to permanent inundation of touristic fishery towns, local industrial areas, campsites, marina's and nature reserves.

The (in total) more than 300 participants of the governance process consisted of societal representatives, administrators from regional and local governmental organisations, and politically elected decision-makers from the same governmental organisations. The process was open to everybody, guaranteeing some degree of inclusivity. The national government was represented through the coordinating administrators, who organized yearly consultation rounds for stakeholders, issue-specific discussion rounds for provincial and water board administrators, and conferences for politically elected decision-makers. On a voluntary basis participants could discuss and co-design the advice at the consultation rounds, and on the same voluntary basis the politically elected decision makers were asked to decide over the final advice to the Delta Commissioner at the so-called *decision-makers'* conferences.

Despite widespread initial participation, the participatory process ran out of steam, and reaching agreement over the advice to the Delta Commissioner appeared difficult. Politically elected decision-makers and societal representatives appeared to search for different, more political venues for voicing their interests instead. A closer look reveals that, due to the wide-ranging voluntary inclusion of public and private actors, the national administrators organizing the governance process struggled in keeping all participants 'on board'. At the same time administrators tended to depoliticize the issues at stake in deliberations. For the reasons behind this we have to look into the formal structure,

procedures and political constellation at that time. First of all, depoliticization concerned the climate-sceptic parties that supported the national government at that time. Administrators had to maintain the legitimacy of the participatory process towards both the national government and all regional stakeholders. Articulation of potentially negative trade-offs of raising water levels in the national interest, could lead to the exit of potentially marginalized participants, undermining the legitimacy of the participatory process towards both regional and local stakeholders who expected a programme that listened to their voices, and national government that expected a regional sub programme building regional legitimacy for national ambitions. In addition, articulating trade-offs could lead to opposition in Parliament, where climate-sceptic parties were feared to liaise with regional opponents, potentially jeopardizing the legitimacy of the entire Delta Programme. Therefore potentially competing interests over rising water levels were framed as 'options' or as a reason for searching for 'win-win situations'. The issue of raising water levels was not framed as a political negotiation between national government, regional governments and individual stakeholders, but rather as a matter of 'getting the right knowledge at the table' to lead to a 'good' decision.

Conflict among participants, or between participants and the national administrators, was indeed avoided. Most voluntarily participating actors were kept 'on board', but the rather non-politically framed interactions in the debate did not allow for a strong articulation of interests and mutual negotiation, let alone for reaching a negotiated compromise on what to advice. As some participating regional political decision-makers put it, the pain that specific parties would have to suffer in case of raising water levels was not voiced, simply because of the ambiguous voluntary status of the participatory governance process and its uncertain effects on more formal negotiations later on. This hesitation in the articulation of interests made it difficult for participants to see mutual dependencies and to get clear where all actors were positioned. The debate, framed in rather technical terms, in combination with broad voluntary participation and the unclear status of the process therefore led to apathy rather than negotiations. In line with that, regional political decision-makers and societal representatives participating in the process indicated they would rather exit the governance process to start negotiations in other venues, such as their political parties, or through direct lobbying with national political decision-makers (Vink, 2015; Vink and Mulligen, 2013).

## 5. Discussion: how inclusive governance might jeopardize inclusive outcomes

A scaling-up of the *Meuse project* revealed a top-down and securitized approach and getting on board 'stakeholders' whose role is not widely acknowledged locally. These developments brought to the surface, and revived, a historically grown rift between a regional Limburg identity and a 'western' one, rooted in perceived images of ongoing inequality and being unfairly dealt with by the 'colonial' national government. A spin-off of (ignoring) this troublesome relationship and the regional protests it generated against the Meuse project was the emergence of countervailing groups like BOM and *Federatief Verband*, and the role they played in the participatory processes facilitated by the province. They successfully manoeuvred ('shopped') between various fora of influence, joining or shunning consultative bodies (*Klankbordgroepen*), taking political or legal action all the way to the European court, whichever seemed most promising at a particular time.

In addition, whatever was decided in a participatory behind-the-scenes process was negated by economic realities overriding the deal arrived at. Moreover, when in the rebound consultations

<sup>9</sup> The Delta Commissioner is an unelected 'Commissioner of State' who functions in a relatively independent position directly under the responsibility of the Minister of Public Works and the Environment. The Delta Commissioner was instated to coordinate the six regional Delta Programmes, and prepare the 'Delta Decisions' to be made by the Cabinet. All concern flood safety and fresh water availability in view of a changing climate. <http://english.deltacommissaris.nl/>.



were designed to be more inclusive, they stopped at the border while planning was clearly going to reap transboundary effects and exclude stakeholders across the border. A transboundary alliance of convenience successfully opting for a 'forum shopping' strategy managed to stall the project for over a year more.

In the **Overdiepse polder case**, we observe a relatively inclusive planning process in preparing this polder for temporary water storage in periods of extreme water discharge. Although the inhabitants initially rejected these plans for water storage, in the formulation of which they had not been involved, they managed to turn this potential threat into an opportunity by taking the initiative rather than waiting for the government to act. They developed their own plan: the 'mounds plan'. However, there are several problematic dimensions to this process. First, although this was an undeniably 'inclusive' process, the terms of inclusion were problematic. The 'inclusive' planning and implementation process was a reaction to a top-down decision to change the function of the polder, to which the inhabitants reacted. Second, although this reaction can be seen as 'participation', 'joint planning' or 'inclusion', this should not obscure the fact that 'participating' farmers held widely differing views, positions and stakes. Several polder dwellers saw the government as an enemy rather than a partner. There was growing distrust between inhabitants, between inhabitants and their representatives, and between inhabitants and the government. Third, and related to this, farmers' attitudes towards 'inclusion' widely diverged: some (the representatives) took the initiatives, others decided to distance themselves, to wait and see while devising their own strategies, or to throw sand into the engine. Most farm operators opted for remaining passive and having themselves represented by two active inhabitants. At the same time they did not hesitate to pass the blame for any complication or drawback to their representatives. Constructive cooperation with the government actors, a focus on consensus rather than on recognizing a diversity of opinions and interests, and representation of 'stayers' rather than 'movers' became major divisive issues.

The developments described in the case of the **Delta Programme for the IJsselmeer region** question the inclusiveness of a governance process initially intended to be inclusive. Voice does not automatically lead to inclusive negotiation, let alone inclusive decision-making. In traditional Dutch 'poldering' the limited number of representatives of specific interest groups yields clear positions, mutual dependencies and negotiations. Although individual interests are generally ignored in these contexts, the institutionalized and routinized interaction patterns lead to outcomes that can be accounted for through some form of representation. Opening up participation for individual stakeholders yields a wide range of interests and new, less institutionalized, venues. In line with this, [van Eeten \(2001\)](#) criticizes deliberative democracy for yielding a cacophony of opinions difficult to choose from and to be accountable to for official decision-making. In this case the wide range of individual stakeholders making the governance process 'inclusive' did not lead to clear interests being articulated, nor to clear mutual dependencies either. Inclusive governance in situations of ambiguous interests and unclear responsibilities and dependencies might therefore lead to a '*political bystander effect*', or a vicious circle of non-decision making ([Vink, 2015](#)). As the case shows as well, non-decision making in the inclusively intended governance venue might subsequently invoke less inclusive decision-making in other venues instead.

The Meuse and IJsselmeer case studies show that real choices were not made in participatory trajectories. In the Meuse case study decision-making used to be a back stage activity rather than occurring front stage. In the IJsselmeer case study decisions were not made at all. Both cases show as well that ad hoc inclusive

trajectories might give opportunity for (often well organized) participants to strategically 'shop' from different fora to push for a specific interest. The Overdiepse polder case demonstrates that decision-making occurred back stage between the farmer representatives and the province. However, the farmers held their representatives accountable of the decisions made. All three case studies show that participation is not noncommittal as saying 'no' might be explained as nonconstructive and thus leads to apparently 'loss of power'. Whether participants will be empowered by the process itself is the question. In the Meuse and IJsselmeer case studies there was little room for empowerment of individual citizens as most of the stakeholders included in the process had a position in other formal decision making bodies. In the Overdiepse polder the farmers' initiative of the mounds plan and their participation in the project organisation can be viewed as empowerment. Their position was crucial in reaching the project's ultimate objective. As such, their position can be viewed as powerful to some extent (mainly in terms of possessing considerable nuisance power). For other farmers that could not cooperate in the plan due to the location of their farm, the trajectory did not lead to empowerment, but created more 'enemies' instead. All case studies show that the way stakeholder representatives are included in participatory trajectories does influence how they relate to their constituency. While in the Meuse and IJsselmeer case studies many stakeholders held official representative positions elsewhere, making these stakeholders hesitant to negotiate in ad hoc participatory processes with unclear status, in the Overdiepse polder case study the farmer representatives rarely had meetings with all farmers. Being at the core of the project organisation resulted in a more distant relationship between the representatives and their constituency. From a Mouffean viewpoint the case studies show an 'anti-political' or 'post-political' reality. The consensual goal aimed for in the participatory trajectories did not fit 'the political', where contestation between stakes is brought to the fore. Instead, in all case studies disagreement and discord was avoided. There was little room for actual decision making, which resulted in constituent buy-in and a fuzzy process with many interests that often remained implicit.

## 6. Conclusion

Acknowledging the potential benefits of inclusive and participatory forms of development, in this paper we have explored some of the more murky sides of such 'inclusiveness', using three cases of inclusive development in the world of Dutch water governance. We have drawn on the cases of *Meuse*, *Overdiepse Polder* and *Delta Programme for the IJsselmeer region* to illustrate participatory processes in a coastal setting in the latter case, and deltaic riverine settings in the first two cases. In various ways, the three cases illustrate one or more of the problematic aspects of inclusive development that we mentioned in the introduction to this paper. More participation, we argued, often also means the emergence of a cacophony of stakes and related fuzziness of decision-making. This, in turn, may lead to loss of interest among stakeholder groups, and make them decide to disengage from the established fora for multi-stakeholder participation and engage in forms of forum shopping to make their voices heard.

Contrary to the Habermasian ideal of a transparent, open and consensual 'community participation' on a level playing field, to which all actors fully subscribe without considering options and windows of opportunity for a BATNA (Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement), participatory processes tend to be coloured by power differences, hidden agendas, and perceived injustices that influence trust in the process. In addition, people may not want to participate anyway because they choose to avoid the

responsibilities that may come with participation and prefer leaving this task (and the risks, responsibilities and possible blames related to it!) to others. A major threat among these, we argued, is the tendency of depoliticization of issues by subduing the existing rifts, conflicts and contradictory goals and intentions to the assumptions and language of consensual decision-making. This may easily lead to situations in which participatory processes deal with non-issues; often the decisions have even already been taken. In such cases, people may easily lose interest in fora for participation that deal with marginal issues rather than the key ones. Generalizability of our findings to completely different situations is difficult. Context-specific dynamics of participatory processes and relations developing between actors involved are serious limitations to generalization, particularly in countries with different political regimes. What can be generalized is that people, making use of their agency, will always weigh the benefits, burdens or possible pitfalls of their inclusion, the alternative options available to them, and their chances of influencing the process and its outcomes against their estimations of the prevailing relations of power (see also Cleaver, 1999; Long and Long, 1992).

What does this all mean for future inclusive, participatory approaches to development planning, in the Netherlands and elsewhere? Should participation just be discarded, then, or are there ways to make such approaches and the processes emerging from them more effective and meaningful? With our Dutch case studies in mind and taking to heart Mouffe (1993, 2005) and other critical authors, we would argue for forms of participation that take ‘the political’ — ‘the antagonism [...] constitutive of human societies’ (2005: 9) — as their point of departure rather than the Habermasian consensus-seeking that tends to hide the conflicts, rifts and contestations at the core of participatory processes. This is easier said than done; even in the liberal democratic Netherlands, meaningful forms of participation, transparent agendas and relationships of trust are not given. Real differences may be presented as a consensus, there may be little to choose from, or the issues at stake may be depoliticized to such an extent that people simply lose interest. Critical scrutiny of and engagement with government policies, plans and projects by individuals or groups of organized citizens is as much needed now as before, as are forms of engaged scientific research that can analyse these issues independently and without a-priori assumptions about the merits of participation.

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