

Dutch-funded international water projects: are they effective and why (not)?

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The Dutch water sector is actively involved in a wide variety of international projects that involve a transfer of Dutch knowledge. The government financially supports some of these projects with the aim to (1) contribute to solving water-related problems, and (2) create economic opportunities for the Dutch water sector. This research evaluates to what extent Dutch-funded projects actually contribute to the achievement of these objectives. Moreover, it tries to explain what factors distinguish an effective from a less effective project. For this, we developed an evaluation framework, which we applied to three Dutch-funded flood risk projects that were implemented in Romania.

Evaluation of knowledge transfer projects

In this research, knowledge transfer projects are conceptualized as processes of social interaction. The course and outcomes of such processes basically result from the dynamic interaction between the characteristics (i.e. motivations, cognitions and resources) of actors involved. Processes are embedded in a wider, structural and project-specific context, but these contexts only exert an influence on the process via their influence on the actors involved (see Figure 1).

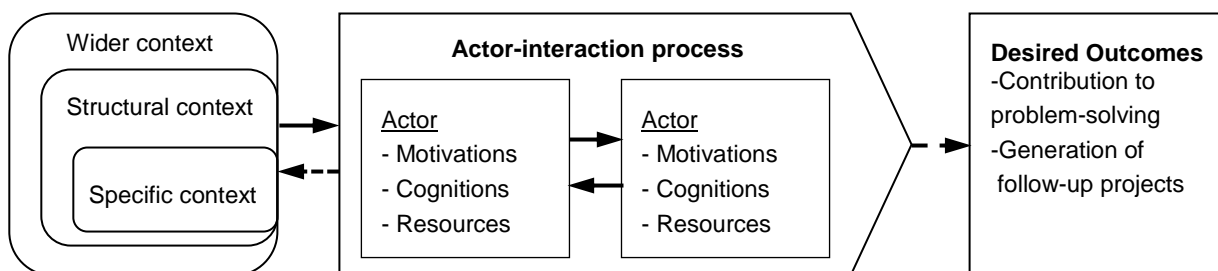


Figure 1 Dutch-funded projects as social interaction processes (adapted from De Boer and Bressers, 2011).

Literature shows that the realization of desired outcomes especially depends on the degree to which users (i.e. actors with a crucial role in the project or in follow-up actions) are engaged in the process. We identified six process criteria that help to measure this 'user engagement' in Dutch-funded projects: (1) stakeholder involvement; (2) institutional embedding; (3) integration of context-specific knowledge; (4) mutual understanding in communication; (5) proactive diffusion strategy; and (6) adaptive management.

Whether a project indeed contributes to the desired outcomes often only becomes visible on the longer term. We therefore also identified a set of immediate outcome criteria that help to predict the likelihood that such outcomes will be achieved: (1) a joint motivating goal; (2) negotiated knowledge base; (3) mobilization of necessary resources; and (4) positive relational experiences (Vinke-de Kruijf et al., 2012).

Dutch-Romanian case studies

We analysed three Dutch-funded flood risk projects in Romania by means of qualitative case study research. Case A aimed to develop a spatial plan for a region located just upstream the Danube Delta using the Dutch 'Room for the River' approach. Central in this project was the application of an interactive design method. The method was successfully applied, however, the project lacked serious

involvement of a powerful authority. This is one of the reasons why the project did not have any policy impact.

Case B was about the pilot implementation of an internet-based Flood Information and Warning System (FLIWAS). The installation of the server was troublesome as actors had difficulties in understanding each other. In the end, the application was not fully installed and the water authority never started using it. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Environment decided to include a tool like FLIWAS in an European project proposal.

Case C integrated flood risk reduction with drinking water and sanitation. Its main objective was to develop a master plan and to implement several no-regret measures. During the project, the idea to develop a concrete master plan was abandoned as it appeared that such plans already existed. The no-regret measures that were proposed were not having priority and could therefore not be financed. The most tangible outcome was a Water Partnership on drinking water and sanitation between some of the Dutch and Romanian actors.

Results

None of the presented projects resulted directly in a reduction of flood risks or new projects for the Dutch water sector. The most concrete impacts were that project results were used as input for a new project proposal (case B) and formed the basis for a partnership (case C). Besides this, the project had intangible outcomes, such as, the Dutch and Romanian actors learnt about a wide variety of topics. Comparison of the cases shows that the realization of follow-up actions often got stuck in a lack of financial resources. The underlying problem was that none of the actors was both able and willing to coordinate or to take the lead in mobilizing (external) resources. How actors experienced the collaboration and whether they developed a negotiated knowledge base directly contributed to this willingness. A further analysis of the processes shows that the effectiveness of a process was especially influenced by the institutional embedding of a project. If actors at decision-making positions had been involved in the process, they were also committed to initiate follow-up actions. The embedding also related to the access to context-specific knowledge and dissemination of the project results. The cases further highlight that there is often a need to adapt project goals and that mutual understanding – which can be enhanced by means of translation and through visualization, the involvement of actors that are familiar with both contexts and regular face-to-face meetings – is crucial for constructive interaction to occur. Stakeholder involvement did not directly impact the effectiveness of the projects but becomes very relevant in case of follow-up actions.

Lessons learnt

The cases show that Dutch-funded projects are often less effective than hoped for. One of the underlying problems is that actors often fail to create a proper linkage between the project and its context. To create such linkage, it is crucial to closely involve relevant actors – authorities, experts and stakeholders – of the benefiting country. Although we believe that there is no panacea to make projects more effective, we believe that they could become more effective by: (1) leaving part of a knowledge transfer project open so that new insights can be incorporated; (2) allocating more budget (and time) to dissemination and follow-up activities; and (3) improving the transfer of knowledge across projects.

References

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Case study reports (Vinke-de Kruijf, 2011a, 2011b, 2012) available online at: <http://doc.utwente.nl>