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SOCIAL INCLUSION IN WATER CLIMATE ADAPTATION

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM WATER AS LEVERAGE IN ASIA

*Stephanie Janssen, Dennis van Peppen, Annet Kempenaar, Henk Ovink, Margo van den Brink**

■ In a world of increasing climate change induced crises (such as droughts, floods, hurricanes) across the globe, especially in the places of high risk, there is a growing disconnect between sector focused big institutions' international water and climate projects and other issues (e.g. (Boltz, Freeman, Tront, & Rodriguez, 2020) such as the local needs of people. National governments, in conjunction with International Financial Institutions (IFI's), spend billions on, often, monofunctional projects aimed at protecting economic interests, cities, highly populated river basins and coastal zones against flooding, droughts and other impacts of climate change. Dominant infrastructure development practices generally leave little space for organizing socially inclusive processes that consider the local situation and connect with the people affected by the project(s).

While challenges in the physical and economic systems are usually well addressed, local values and perspectives – often having a social or cultural background – are not. In order to address different values and perspectives, genuine inclusiveness from the very beginning of any initiative, up to the implementation and exploitation of a project is required, organizing interaction, building trust, and developing coalitions with inhabitants, communities, local governments and NGOs (Laeni et al., 2021).

Over the past years, attention to inclusive planning and development processes in international water and climate projects has increased, and new approaches are emerging. The Water as Leverage for Resilient Cities Asia (WaL Asia) program is such a new approach. WaL Asia was initiated by the Dutch government in 2018 and aimed to be radically integral and inclusive by embracing a completely holistic approach (The Netherlands Enterprise Agency, 2018). Six design teams in three cities (Chennai in India, Khulna in Bangladesh and Semarang in Indonesia) took up the challenge to build locally grounded multi-stakeholder coalitions and develop holistic, integrated and inclusive strategies and transformative projects for improving urban livelihoods and climate resilience (The Netherlands Enterprise Agency, 2018).

The Community of Practice (CoP) of the Dutch Water Sector on social inclusion is an initiative to exchange ideas and insights and work together to improve social inclusive practices. In the CoP, WaL Asia was put central as a case study. WaL Asia stakeholders and 18 organizations in the CoP discussed insights and lessons from the WaL Asia program on enabling social inclusion. This article, reports on the collaborative learning results from this effort. We identify *entry points* for social inclusion in water climate adaptation projects, relating to inclusive community engagement, inclusive project development and inclusive commissioning. These entry points can be used as inspiration for the set-up of other inclusive practices aimed at developing locally grounded international water climate adaptation projects.

Background

Social inclusion in international efforts of the Dutch water sector

Since the 1970s, Dutch water related aid and knowledge exchange programs have been developed and implemented in Asia, Latin-America, and Africa. Global water challenges have only increased since and are

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expected to increase further in the future (Ligtvoet et al., 2018). Rapid urbanization, land subsidence, over-exploitation of water resources, pollution and insufficient water management are affecting water security in many places (ibid.). Climate change exacerbates this situation with increased storm and hurricane incidence, rainfall intensity and longer spells of drought. Efforts undertaken to ameliorate these challenges are not always successful. Examples of inflexible and unadoptable designed and built water infrastructure are numerous (Brown et al. 2020). Such interventions have negative effects upstream and downstream, benefit some people but negatively affect others and/or negatively affect the environment (Liao, 2014). For example, when homes and livelihoods are destroyed for water infrastructure or when water infrastructure has adverse effects on local ecosystems.

Dutch international water programs and projects have been criticized in publications by academics, NGO's and Dutch government evaluators. Critiques point at a largely (technical) single-focused solutions-oriented approach, and the lack of connection across challenges (intersectoral) as well as with communities, culture and local governance (e.g. Bakker, Kishimoto, & Nooy, 2017; Tesselaar, Turner, & De Beer, 2017; Yarina, 2018). Instigated by these kinds of critiques, a wider discussion was initiated in the Dutch water sector and with international partners, on social inclusion in international work. Among other actions, a Community of Practice (CoP) on social inclusion was initiated. While understanding social inclusion usually dwells on the inclusion of excluded or vulnerable groups, such as women, youth, the poor, or the disabled (e.g. The World Bank, 2013), the discussion in the Dutch water sector also includes the transfer of delta planning expertise to other countries (Hasan, Evers, & Zwarteveen, 2020), which reflects a broader understanding of social inclusion. The travel and transfer of Dutch water knowledge and expertise to different places is actively promoted by the Dutch government. Such transfer processes are very complex and with risk of implementation failure and impasses (Minkman, Letitre, & van Buuren, 2019), for example, due to a lack of attention to specific socio-economic, cultural and institutional conditions, local capacities and ownership. A central question regarding social inclusion is therefore: how to

translate, transfer, evaluate, re-think, evolve and localize Dutch water management knowledge *and* contribute to socially inclusive water climate adaptation?

Water as Leverage for Resilient Cities Asia

In 2018 the Dutch government together with international partners launched a new program with an explicit ambition to be inclusive: Water as Leverage for Resilient Cities Asia (WaL Asia). Three considerations formed the underlying rationale for WaL Asia. Firstly, it was recognized that water impacts on almost all 17 Sustainable Development Goals. WaL Asia therefore considered water a leveraging mechanism for climate adaptation action, environmental regeneration and social-economic development. Consequently, WaL Asia's focus and ambition was broader than 'just' improving water security. Rather, water was considered a catalyst for *integrated* (urban) development, providing opportunities to simultaneously address and improve multiple aspects of life on various scale levels. Secondly, a lack of funding and attention is given to capacity building and planning process in which (international) water and climate plans and projects are developed. Because of this, these processes tend to have a mono-sectoral orientation and those affected by the project are generally not included or heard, while this is exactly the basis for inclusion and resilience. WaL Asia therefore had an orientation on building local coalitions and the development of plans and project initiatives in the 'pre-project preparation phase'. It aimed for the development of 'comprehensive proposals for urban water projects' (The Netherlands Enterprise Agency, 2018) and the *inclusion* of all actors with a stake in the planning of such projects, including (international) donors and financiers as well as local communities (in all capacities: institutional, individual and informal). Thirdly, to develop integrated and inclusive plans and projects *innovative* approaches are needed. WaL Asia therefore followed a design-based planning process (Kempenaar et al., 2022; Laeni et al., 2020) aimed at adaptability to a changing environment and involving all stakeholders. The 2018 WaL program was focusing on Asia, currently the WaL process approach is being applied in other situations and environments, among others the Wadden Sea region in the Netherlands, Germany and Denmark and in Cartagena, Colombia.

The aim of WaL Asia was to develop concepts for water climate adaptation strategies and transformative and bankable resilience projects in three Asian cities: Khulna in Bangladesh, Semarang in Indonesia, and Chennai in India. Four main phases in the process can be distinguished (Kempenaar et al., 2022; Laeni, 2021). The first phase focused on preparing and setting up the WaL Asia program including the selection of three cities in close collaboration with international partners and the cities. This culminated in the launch of the actual program with a ‘Call to Action’ (The Netherlands Enterprise Agency, 2018) on Earth Day, 22 March 2018, inviting international multidisciplinary teams to take part in a challenge. In the second phase, for each city two design teams were selected to develop full-fledged climate resilient strategies and related transformative project initiatives based on creative designs in close collaboration with local governments, communities, NGO’s and various knowledge-, and financial partners. The second phase ended in the summer of 2019 when the teams delivered and presented their visions, strategies, and project initiatives. Currently, WaL Asia is in its third phase, which is focused on the development of bankable and implementable projects, and slowly moving towards the fourth phase, which is set out to implement – and where possible scale – the projects and spread the innovative approach of WaL Asia to other places.

Method: collaborative learning in the CoP

WaL Asia was used as case study in a meeting of the Community of Practice (CoP) on social inclusion in water climate adaptation. The intention was to understand social inclusion in a practical example and to learn and improve social inclusive practice using a four-step collaborative learning approach.

1 Gain understanding of the case study through interviews and document analysis

12 interviews were held with Dutch, Indian and Indonesian stakeholders in WaL Asia. Stakeholders represented different perspectives including local, international, NGO, consultancy and government perspectives and people with involvement in all

three cities. Interviewees were asked about their role, activities, ambitions, and challenges and they were invited for participation in the CoP meeting. For WaL Asia also various WaL policy documents (e.g. Government of the Netherlands, 2021; The Netherlands Enterprise Agency, 2018) and academic articles (e.g. Laeni, 2021; Laeni et al., 2021) were reviewed to explore the case.

2 Scoping the CoP meeting by developing relevant perspectives

After developing an understanding of the case study, the CoP meeting can be ‘scoped’. For WaL Asia, the following three perspectives emerged from the interviews and document study that were relevant for understanding the case and social inclusion in the case: community engagement, the project development process by design teams, and the way of commissioning.

3 Collaborative discussion, reflection and learning in CoP meeting

In the CoP meeting the case is discussed with CoP participants and case stakeholders. The WaL Asia meeting was a 5-hour online meeting on April 1st 2021 with 30 CoP participants and 20 WaL Asia stakeholders. The CoP meeting followed the three main phases of the ‘theory-u’ framework (Scharmer, 2016): first *understanding* the WaL Asia case study, second *collect insights*, and third *identify next steps* or actionable directions. Henk Ovink, initiator of WaL Asia, gave an introduction, and one of the design team leads presented their work. Three group interviews were held, each focusing on one of the three perspectives and with three different stakeholders in every group. Based on all this input break-out groups collecting *insights* and in the last part of the meeting, follow-up *actions points* were identified.

4 Capturing results in a report

The results of the CoP (both preparation and meeting) are captured in a meeting report. The WaL Asia meeting report (Janssen, Verder, & Burchard Levine, 2021) was sent to the CoP participants and stakeholders who participated in the meeting.

Table 1:
Entry points for social inclusion from the WaL Asia case.

Inclusive commissioning	Inclusive project development	Inclusive community engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Active presence of commissioner. ■ Team selection based on <i>how</i> they intend to work (not on <i>what</i>). ■ Work in partnerships with teams and co-create an enabling environment. ■ Organize flexibility and adaptation throughout the process. ■ Be trustworthy, transparent, open and inclusive to all stakeholders. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Create multidisciplinary teams. ■ Co-creation of local, indigenous, knowing with international expertise. ■ Employ a design-based iterative learning process. ■ Use water as a leverage for integrated urban development. ■ Apply a people-oriented approach. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Don't bring pre-defined problems and plans. ■ Listen to understand the local context. ■ Value local, indigenous knowledge. ■ Co-create solutions with local communities. ■ Be present on the ground and have strong partnerships with grassroots organizations.

Based on the interviews and documents (step 1), the developed perspectives (step 2), the reflection and discussion in the CoP meeting (step 3) we report the learnings of this collaborative learning journey through ‘entry points for social inclusion in water climate adaptation’. These entry points are developed for each of the three perspectives.

Results: entry points for social inclusion in water climate adaptation

Every situation is different. However, we can learn and take inspiration from other situations. This is one of the basic notions behind this collaborative learning effort. We found ideas on social inclusion in the WaL Asia case which we name ‘entry points’, as these are points that others can consider and take inspiration from when entering a process aiming for social inclusion. Depending on the situation, some points might be highly relevant, others less.

The entry points focus on three perspectives: inclusive commissioning, inclusive project development, and inclusive community engagement. An overview is provided in Table 1. The entry points are explained and elaborated in the following subsections.

Inclusive commissioning

WaL Asia was innovative in its approach to commissioning. Instead of a traditional top-down, linear commissioning approach, the Dutch commissioners were an integrated part of the process.

Active presence of commissioner

The first entry point is to invest in the process of commissioning and to be actively present as commissioner. The time spent on the commissioning side of WaL Asia was at times as costly and intense as the work on the side of the teams. Commissioning was considered a ‘verb’. Being present meant actively be(com)ing part of the network of teams and stakeholders, and being able to facilitate, lend a helping hand, intervene

and adjust the program process when needed. In Khulna, for example, the commissioner intervened halfway and started a conversation with one of the teams re-directing their strategy to ensure that the standards of WaL Asia were met.

Select multidisciplinary teams based on ‘how’ they want to do it (instead of ‘what’)

Second, to select teams, WaL Asia asked for multi-disciplinary teams and a strategy towards developing a vision and project initiatives. The team selection focused not on what teams had achieved or wanted to achieve, but on *how* the teams intended to enable innovation and foster a new ways of working. This approach came with uncertainties as the outcome of the process is unknown and required trust in the capacity of the teams.

Work in partnerships with the teams and co-create an enabling environment

The third entry point emphasizes partnerships: rather than acting as supervisors or evaluators of the final outcome, WaL Asia commissioners worked in partnership with the teams and the various stakeholders involved. The commissioner holds the purse, yet in contrast to more common approaches of accountability on pre-determined outputs, here the donor country – and the city – acted as a partner who supported the teams in achieving desired outcomes through co-creating an enabling environment for teams. Such a role involved a close relation between contractor and commissioner and trust in the partnership. In WaL Asia the commissioner supported the teams by organizing local and regional workshops; building relations with local, regional and national authorities; connecting with IFI’s to get them interested in WaL Asia concepts; organize workshops and (informal) soft-space dialogues (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2009) to connect the teams and all kinds of stakeholders; promoting WaL Asia concepts for uptake in bilateral and multilateral programs; and promotion of WaL Asia outcomes in international meetings. As a result, in WaL Asia the teams felt they were not left on their own, but rather part of something much bigger. For some it felt ‘like being part of a movement’.

Organize flexibility and adaptation throughout the process

The WaL Asia commissioner outlined the process, which was at the same time flexible and adaptive. The WaL Asia program allowed for changes, new ideas and responsiveness to what came up during the process. New insights grew in the course of the development of strategies and project initiatives, which did not always align with the earlier formulated 'Terms of Reference'. Being adaptive allowed these kind of developments, as well as experimenting, mistakes and being open to, for example, community-based initiatives. This approach facilitated 'learning-by-doing' and continuously improving. For the commissioner, teams and communities to be reliable partners in such a process rigorous transparency from the beginning is key. It also calls for the above-described active role of the commissioner.

Be trustworthy, transparent, open and inclusive to all stakeholders

In WaL Asia, being inclusive at all levels and towards all stakeholders was needed to further program development and implementation: (vulnerable) communities, NGOs, financiers, national, regional and local governments all have a part to play. Normally these stakeholders do not meet easily, or if they do, mainly in formal settings. In the informal 'soft space' dialogue setting stakeholders were able to interact and explore new perspectives. Be trustworthy, transparent, open and inclusive to all stakeholders is the final entry point related to inclusive commissioning.

Inclusive project development

'The ambitions set in WaL Asia were mind-blowing', according to one of the team leads. Inclusiveness was one of the key ambitions of the program, which challenged the design teams to develop inclusive strategies and project initiatives. What elements, or entry points, enabled inclusive development of the project proposals by the design teams?

Create multidisciplinary teams

First, WaL Asia called for multidisciplinary design teams. Different professional disciplines including engineers, architects, urban planners, and social experts, both international and local, worked jointly on strategies (first) and project ideas. Locally grounded team members, often NGO's, provided and organized local perspectives, including indigenous knowledge. Urban planners and

architects conceptualized ideas through design, and engineers provided and applied technical knowledge and solutions. This was a new approach for many of the professionals participating in the teams, an indication that genuine multidisciplinary teams are far from common. Team members evaluated their cooperation as highly valuable, enlightening, and inspiring.

Co-creation of local, indigenous knowledge with international expertise

A second important entry point related to inclusive project development is the importance to combine local, indigenous knowledge with international expertise. In WaL Asia, design teams successfully combined international and local knowledge. International experts became part of the local setting and locals became part of the team. The teams had to invest time to learn about local stakeholders thinking, their culture and indigenous knowledge and understand their mindset (Umans, 2021). This resulted in a valuable combination of local and international knowledge development, and a solid knowledge base for developing smart tailor-made project ideas.

Employ a design-based iterative learning process

Third, a design approach was employed when developing project proposals. In a design approach challenges are explored in coevolution with possible solutions in order to learn and develop an understanding of the challenges at hand and possible future situations. The technical feasibility and elaboration followed. This provided an iterative learning process stimulating creativity and room for developing integrated projects instead of single focused water infrastructure projects. For example, in WaL-Asia Chennai, historic temple tanks, existing water ways, and existing drainage canals were combined and redesigned for both flood management, water retention, water storage and water quality improvement, while at the same time improving the greening, beautification, and livability of the local urban environment. Such integrated ideas provide solutions to multiple issues and can provide additional benefits such as heat stress reduction and CO2 absorption capacity.

Use water as a leverage for integrated urban development

Fourth, in contrast to traditional water engineering projects, WaL Asia was not focused on developing solely single

focused water infrastructure projects. Water was instead used as a leverage for urban societal transformation and urban climate adaptation. Water was thus used as a means for broad urban transformation and improvement. For example, in Semarang one of the project initiatives that was developed focused on a network of resilient kampungs (neighbourhoods). It included proposals for a floodable park, alternative sources for water supply and a low-tech waste-to-energy facilities that bolsters the local energy supply. It illustrates how WaL Asia aimed to be holistic and integrated, and set out to use water as a leverage for integrated urban development.

Apply a people-oriented approach

Finally, the WaL Asia teams employed a 'people-oriented approach'. Understanding the local context and the people who live and work in this context marked the start of the process. Teams, supported by an enabling environment, interacted with all relevant actors and stakeholders: from local inhabitants and communities, to various levels of government, to NGO's and International Financial Institutions. The teams reached out and interacted with communities and stakeholders in multiple ways varying from additional workshops, to interviews, to games, to interviewing to 'just' talking to people on the street.

Inclusive community engagement

Involving local communities is central in social inclusive practice. Co-creating solutions with local communities and stakeholders, using local and indigenous knowledge and creating ownership is key. International initiatives like WaL Asia come with great responsibility to local people through the expectations such initiatives raise. In WaL Asia we have identified five *entry points* for inclusive community engagement.

Don't bring pre-defined problems and plans

WaL Asia left pre-defined problems and plans behind – the first important entry point for inclusive community engagement. In WaL Asia, the commissioner and teams shared influence and decision-power over the outcomes of the process. Moreover, the interaction and collaboration with the communities focused on problem definition and solution development. First step was creating an understanding of the local physical, social and cultural

circumstances and history by researching the local challenges (physical, governance, etc.) and interacting with local stakeholders and communities. After collaboratively exploring the 'problem space', participation was used for the development of plans and ideas. Local participants indicated afterwards that they experienced influence and ownership over the outcomes of the participation process, creating a level of genuine participation.

Listen to understand the local context

Second, in WaL Asia, listening to the local stakeholders was key to inclusive community engagement. Real listening requires empathy and an open mind. It can be (or usually is) quite difficult. Scharmer (2016) distinguishes four levels of listening. First level is listening by downloading, implying confirming what you already now. Level two is 'factual' listening: focusing on facts and whether these differ from what you already now. Level three is empathic listening, where you shift your position by stepping into another person's shoes. The fourth level is generative listening where you listen to the entire system of players and context. Truly connecting and inclusive approaches require level three and level four listening, as here you let go of predetermined frames and ideas and are open to listen what is actually happening. In Chennai, the WaL teams partnered with local Community Based Organisations (CBOs) to engage with people in several neighborhoods to listen to their concerns and challenges and to listen to their own ideas.

Value local, indigenous knowledge

Third, indigenous knowledge contribute 'locally-appropriate sustainable development' (UNESCO, 2023) as it contains local values and historical knowledge and practices related to the local natural systems. It is indispensable and has proven so in WaL Asia's strategy and project conceptualization. The city of 1000 tanks for the city of Chennai builds on the historic existence of tanks or ponds all over the city as part of the local natural system. This system has been destroyed for a large part as a result of urbanization and suboptimal urban planning. However, many of these natural ponds have been converted into temple tanks over the last decades. These temple tanks are now used in the city of 1000 tanks strategy as water retention, storage and aquifer recharge mechanisms.

Cocreate solutions with all local communities

WaL Asia set out to include all sorts of local communities and stakeholders. A diverse range of specific inclusion methods were applied in WaL Asia, such as an analysis of the most vulnerable and the most knowledgeable; youth engagement; townhall meetings; and collaborative drawing and sketching sessions. The insights gained enriched the process and designs, while local people gained awareness of their coexistence with water, often for the very first time. WaL Asia's local partners in Chennai, for example, messaged that 'true inclusion of vulnerable communities never happens in other programs', indicating the unique attempt of WaL to also include vulnerable groups in the process. In cities like Chennai and Khulna the poor are often being blamed for water problems because of illegal settlements in flood prone areas. Their voices are often excluded and not heard. However, they are part of the urban system and have valuable local indigenous knowledge. The fourth entry point for inclusive engagement is therefore the cocreation of solutions with all local communities and stakeholders.

Be present on the ground and have strong partnerships with grassroots organizations

Finally, WaL Asia was built on local presence and strong partnerships with local organizations; WaL Asia team members worked on the ground and in the city. The Chennai representatives indicated this was not seen often before. Local partners in the teams and being locally present enabled and fostered social inclusion in the project. Long(er)-term partnerships with grassroots organizations turned out to be able to close gaps between the international and local communities. Nevertheless, the local-international balance was subject to continuous reflection; to what extent is international expertise needed? What is the ideal combination of international and local expertise in strategy and project development? This balancing act was needed to create an equal partnership, and to build local capacity and ownership.

Discussion and conclusion

In the Dutch Water Sector, a need and curiosity towards more socially inclusive practices is experienced. In response to this need, Water as Leverage for Resilient

Cities Asia (WaL Asia) served as a case study in its Community of Practice on social inclusion. WaL Asia was an innovative approach for developing integrated and inclusive international water and climate projects. It aimed to use water as a leveraging mechanism for broader urban development taking into account the true needs of local people.

In discussions and debates about social inclusion there is a strong focus on vulnerable and excluded groups. A striking and innovative insight from WaL Asia is that social inclusion is about more than involving vulnerable communities. We should rather focus on the entire ecosystem of project development. Commissioning, project development as well as community engagement are important to take into account in the creation of inclusive planning processes. Consequently, based on the preparatory interviews, previous research on WaL Asia, and the talks and conversations during the CoP meeting, we identified various *entry points* for 'inclusive commissioning', 'inclusive project development', and 'inclusive community engagement'. The entry points are no guidelines, nor do they guarantee inclusiveness. The entry points were mainly formulated to provide inspiration for setting up inclusive processes in other water climate adaptation initiatives.

Taking the local specifics into account in setting up an inclusive process is crucial. No situation is the same. This makes that some entry points might be more relevant than others in a certain situation, or that inclusiveness calls for other actions or postures. Furthermore, inclusive project development comes with a range of additional challenges, such as language, social and cultural barriers, power structures, limited resources etc. Therefore, a blueprint recipe for social inclusive program or project development does not exist. WaL Asia also illustrates that inclusiveness is about being adaptive, flexible and having the willingness to struggle. Easy routes to integrated and inclusive climate adaptation projects therefore do not exist. But doing nothing is also no option and doing it wrongly should be avoided at all costs.

This brings us at a final point. There is still a lot to learn about what social inclusion truly means and how genuine inclusiveness is created in various situations. Therefore, we

call out to others who have set up planning processes with the aim to be inclusive, to share with us their insights and experiences. We are particularly curious to learn from non-Dutch cases as we acknowledge WaL Asia was a Dutch induced program, which we discussed in a Community of Practice with Dutch practitioners. We are eager to continue and enrich our learning journey on social inclusion in water and climate related planning projects. Social inclusion is an important and critical topic, if not essential in the creation of resilient urban areas and regions across the globe.

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