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## How the Second Delta Committee Set the Agenda for Climate Adaptation Policy: A Dutch Case Study on Framing Strategies for Policy Change

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**ABSTRACT:** In 2008, the Second State Delta Committee, commissioned by the Dutch Secretary of Public Works and Water Management, provided suggestions on how to defend the Netherlands against the expected impacts of climate change, such as sea level rise, longer periods of drought, more intense periods of rainfall and additional land subsidence over the coming two hundred years (Veerman, 2008). In this paper we show that even though no crisis actually occurred, the Second Delta Committee succeeded in three areas. First, the committee managed to create awareness and set the agenda for climate adaptation policy and the issue of safety in Dutch water management. Second, the committee succeeded to a large extent in getting the media, the public and politics to accept its frame and framing of the problems, causes, moral judgments and suggested remedies. Third, the committee has to a certain degree already succeeded in having its recommendations translated into policy programmes. It will be argued that framing strategies were key to the committee's success and that the committee used various framing strategies to convince the Cabinet, citizens and others of the urgency and necessity of implementing adaptation measures. The most important framing strategies identified were adherence to the climate adaptation narrative, using the story of our delta identity, creating a sense of urgency and collectiveness, and creating a crisis narrative.

**KEYWORDS:** Framing strategies, agenda setting, policy change, crises, climate change, the Netherlands

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*Our Committee's mandate is therefore unusual: we have been asked to come up with recommendations, not because a disaster has occurred, but rather to avoid one.*

*Second Delta Committee (Veerman, 2008)*

### INTRODUCTION

In 2007, the Dutch Cabinet installed the Second Delta Committee, named after its famous predecessor, the Delta Committee, which was established after the dramatic storm surge of 1953 that killed 1835 people. The Second Delta Committee, chaired by the former Minister for Agriculture, Cees Veerman, was asked to formulate recommendations for strategies for long-term flood protection and freshwater management and issued its advice 'Working together with water; A living land builds for its future' in 2008 (Veerman, 2008). The committee's main recommendations were that the Dutch government

should prepare and implement a second Delta Programme aimed at maintaining and improving water safety and freshwater availability, establish a Delta fund to provide the necessary resources for implementing the second Delta Programme, and appoint a Delta Commissioner to supervise the programme's implementation. The committee has contributed much to the awareness of the potential impact of climate change on Dutch water management, and the Dutch Cabinet accepted all the main recommendations. The report was also warmly accepted by politics and in the media (Anonymous, 2008; van Kalles, 2008a, 2008b). We will substantiate this claim later in this paper, but for now it is important to note that, unlike the closure of the Zuiderzee after the 1916 sea flood (Peys and Koetzier, 1985; Bosch and van der Ham, 1998; van der Ham, 2007), the first Delta Programme, drafted after the dramatic storm surge of 1953 (Meijerink, 2005), and the new 'Room for the Rivers' policy issued after the 1993 and 1995 (near) river floods in the Rhine and Meuse rivers (Meijerink, 2005; Roth et al., 2006), the Second Delta Committee did not draft its advice in the aftermath of a disaster. There had been no flooding when the committee was installed or when it presented its report. The committee itself is aware of the rather unusual circumstances in which it had to issue recommendations: "[o]ur Committee's mandate is therefore unusual: we have been asked to come up with recommendations, not because a disaster has occurred, but rather to avoid one" (Veerman, 2008).

This raises the question of how the committee managed to be successful in influencing the public agenda and changing governmental policies in the absence of a shock event, which would have clearly demonstrated a need for change in governmental policies. This paper sets out the hypothesis that the committee's success is attributable, at least in part, to its use of specific framing strategies. The central question of this paper is *Which framing strategies did the second Delta Committee employ to set the agenda for changing the climate adaptation policy?*

We define 'framing strategies' as strategies aimed at managing perceptions and creating awareness and possible support for a particular presented frame. Presenting a frame in a certain way can create awareness, recognition, acknowledgement and support. Therefore, change agents try to connect or link issues or topics that are part of the problem or solution, and fit them within their frame. Schön and Rein point to the way in which public policies rest on frames that supply them with underlying structures of beliefs, perceptions, and appreciation (Schön and Rein, 1995). In their view, therefore, a frame is understood as a normative-prescriptive story that sets out a problematic policy problem and a course of action to be taken to address the problematic situation. It provides conceptual coherence, a direction for action, a basis for persuasion, and a framework for collecting and analysing data – i.e. order, action, rhetoric and analysis. Frames also determine what actors consider the facts to be, and how these lead to normative prescriptions for action. According to Entman (1993), frames define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies. Thus, frames help to define problems, state a diagnosis, pass judgment, and reach a conclusion in a specific social context (Fischer, 2003).

In this paper, we show how the Delta Committee presented its frame by using several framing strategies. But, before we come to a discussion and the operation of framing strategies, we first explain our methodological approach. The core of this paper is a discourse analysis of the committee's report and of media communications, such as the press release and a short video that support the report. In addition, we looked at newspaper articles on the committee and selected articles containing the Dutch word 'deltacommissie' (meaning, Delta Committee) from LexisNet (a digital database for Dutch newspapers). These were 179 articles published after the presentation of the report in September 2008 until October 2010. We checked these articles to see whether the report was being accepted or not. Since it would take at least ten years to fully assess the degree of (policy) change (Birkland, 2004; Sabatier and Weible, 2007), we were only able to make a preliminary assessment of the committee's impact. Primarily, we looked at the committee's output, its report, video and press release, and thus neglected the committee's throughput. We did not account for the differences between individual members of the committee, or the process leading to the selection of the committee's members, but instead regarded the whole committee as one single change agent. The paper by Boezeman et al.,

(forthcoming) does try to open the black box regarding the way the Second Delta Committee members dealt with scientific knowledge to build their report. Based on our analysis, we will show that the committee successfully used various framing strategies to develop and communicate a coherent and powerful frame.

Instead of framing strategies, the committee could (also) have explored other types of strategies such as networking (Rhodes and Marsh, 1992; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Kickert et al., 1997; Klijn and Koppenjan, 2000; Fischer, 2003; Compston, 2009; Brouwer and Biermann, 2011), coalition building (Sabatier, 2007a, 2007b; Sabatier and Weible, 2007), venue exploitation (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Pralle, 2003; True et al., 2007; Meijerink, 2008), and many more. However, we focus on framing strategies because we clearly observed this type of strategy in our case. This does not mean that other strategies were not employed, but rather that we limit ourselves to gaining a better understanding of this particular type of strategy.

### **FRAMING STRATEGIES**

The framing perspective is part of the so-called discursive turn in the social sciences at large, that gained momentum since the mid-1990s (Hajer, 1995; Dryzek, 1997; Fischer, 2003; Hajer and Versteeg, 2005; Dewulf et al., 2009). Whether based upon ideational, discursive, cognitive or interpretative ontologies, all these approaches do (re)affirm the constitutive role and pertinence of discourses and frames. While a Foucauldian approach emphasises the structuring character of largely hegemonic discourses, framing theories rather focus on the use, performance and effectiveness of deliberate discursive strategies of agencies. The latter is mainly the case in policy sciences, where framing is looked upon as one of the strategies agencies, or coalitions of agencies that can be employed to either fix or alter frames. In our analysis we apply the notion of policy frames and framing. To frame "[i]s to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman, 1993). We regard it a means for actors interpreting events, their causes and the responsibilities and lessons involved in ways that suit their political purposes and visions of future directions for policy making. Thus, we are not so much interested in ontological discussions on cognitive or interpretative ontologies, discourses or frames, but in the way an agent tries to strategically promote a certain policy frame – including meanings given to a problem, its causes, moral evaluation, and suggested solutions – while pursuing policy change. A thorough deconstruction and discourse analysis of a policy frame, as we will do in our case study, can bring to light the way a change agent frames. We discuss below the framing strategies we discerned.

### **The use of narratives and storylines**

Stone (2002) distinguishes two types of policy narratives or stories. The first focuses on the story of 'decline or crisis'. The second addresses human helplessness and the need for 'social control'. In the first type, things are getting worse while in the second, that which has previously seemed to be a matter of fate or accident is now portrayed as an issue for change through political or policy action (Stone, 2002; Stone in Fischer, 2003). Creating alternative and new stories or storylines, which in fact are still linguistic constructions, helps to convince an audience of the necessity of political action or policy measurements. Or, as Fischer (2003) says, stories "help to identify both the responsible culprits and the virtuous saviours capable of leading us to high ground", and a storyline is "a generative sort of narrative that allows actors to draw upon various discursive categories to give meaning to specific or social phenomena" (Hajer, 1995 in Fischer, 2003). The primary function of narratives and storylines is that these suggest a unity on which people can rely. One can voice narratives and storylines through the use of rhetoric, symbols and artefacts and crisis exploitation. These strategies, which we discuss in the next sections, help to spread the policy frame in an appealing way and to raise support.

## The use of rhetoric

Rhetoric is the art of persuading, influencing or pleasing people through the use of spoken or written speech.<sup>1</sup> As such, rhetoric consists of structuring and presenting the arguments made. The arena in which rhetoric is used most obviously is political debate. There, it can be important in forging or disrupting (political) coalitions. Rhetoric used by politicians can resemble political manipulation, which has negative connotations. But, in itself, the art of rhetoric is a way of telling your story or making your point, regardless of any moral judgement. You could say that it depends on the verity of the content, the reliability of the storyteller and on his intended objective, whether or not the rhetorical strategies are used to inform and persuade, or deceive and manipulate. Howarth (2009) describes rhetoric as follows:

[P]oliticians use a variety of strategic devices to bring about favourable outcomes. (...) [I]nventing new actions and political practices that circumvent existing ones; framing and reframing the evaluation of outcomes by others so that actors can improve their prospects of achieving goals; altering the perceptions and character of individual preferences by various rhetorical operations and interventions; and so on.

Examples of rhetoric include metaphors (an implied comparison; understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another, which can also be made visual), trade-offs (any situation in which one thing must be decreased for another to be increased), or paradoxes (statements that appear contradictory or absurd, yet in fact may be true). As mentioned in the previous section, rhetoric can support narratives or storylines in spoken or written speech.

## The use of symbols and artefacts

Symbols and artefacts may be helpful in communicating and gaining support for a specific problem frame. A symbol can be defined as anything that stands for something else. A symbol's meaning is not intrinsic; meaning is invested in a symbol by those who use it – its meaning is created collectively. An important feature of symbols is their potential ambiguity because they can refer to more than one thing at the same time. Or as Yanow (1996) says: "[t]he power of symbols lies in their potential to accommodate multiple meanings. Different individuals, different groups, may interpret the same symbol differently". Symbols unite those who share the meaning and create distance from those who do not. Artefacts are physical objects that represent a frame or (problem) perception by a specific group. They are recognised by both supporters and opponents. A country's flag is an artefact, for example, because it represents similarity and unity but at the same time creates a difference between countries. Hajer (1995) analysed the politics of the acid rain controversy and noticed that the physical phenomenon of dead fish and dying trees were developing into a symbol for the state of the environment and pollution of the environment around the world. The acid rain controversy also became emblematic for the discussion between the ecological modernisation discourse and the traditional paradigmatic discourse, both of which framed the acid rain issue differently (see also Fischer, 2003). These examples illustrate that symbols and artefacts can be subject to discussion between advocates of different narratives or storylines.

## Exploiting crises and focusing events

Crises or focusing events are some of the most successful opportunities for advancing policy ideas. Crises are "events or developments widely perceived by members of relevant communities to constitute urgent threats to core community values and structures" (Boin et al., 2009). A focusing event is "an event that is sudden, relatively rare, can be reasonably defined as harmful or revealing the possibility of potentially greater future harm, inflicts harm or suggests potential harm that are or could be concentrated on a definable geographical area or community of interest, and that is known to policy

<sup>1</sup> The Free Dictionary: [www.thefreedictionary.com/rhetoric](http://www.thefreedictionary.com/rhetoric)

makers and the public virtually simultaneously" (Birkland, 1997, cited in Birkland, 2004; Birkland 1998; see also Lowry, 2006). A crisis or focusing event can create or trigger a 'window of opportunity' by dramatically highlighting policy failures (to which government or other institution might respond) and provide opportunities for policy learning, or for issues to gain attention and move up the agenda (Kingdon, 1984, 2002; Boin et al., 2009). This opening of windows creates an opportunity for change agents to link problems and solutions and to advance new policy plans. Change agents that seek change try to exploit the opening of a window and stimulate institutional attention for an issue when no other actors are exploiting the event to raise attention. Foreseeing the opening of windows of opportunities can play a crucial role in changing policy because focusing events can only create opportunities when the timing is right.

As Kingdon (1984, 2002) explains, windows of opportunity opened by focusing events do not automatically equate to policy change. If an event is not picked up by agencies (to highlight policy failures, for instance) and no pressure is put on the current policy frame, it is not likely that any actual change will occur. In this situation, a possible strategy is to use the crisis as part of rhetoric persuasion or as a symbol that supports your story or narrative. For that reason, crises and focusing events are also prone to rhetoric. Crises often generate a contest between frames and counter-frames concerning the nature and severity of a crisis, its causes, the responsibility for its occurrence or escalation, and implications for the future (Boin et al., 2009). Contestants manipulate, strategise and fight to have their frame accepted as the dominant narrative in response (or in our case, prior) to the crisis, because a crisis always entails some disturbance of 'governance as usual'. As stated in the introduction, the Second Delta Committee was not commissioned in response to a crisis or focusing event, but in anticipation of one. This differs in regard to most literature on crises exploitation. We therefore need to find out how the committee tried to create awareness in the absence of a recent crisis, focusing event or a window of opportunity.

### **CASE STUDY OF THE SECOND DELTA COMMITTEE**

Before going deeper into the case study it is good for the reader to understand that the Dutch have a long tradition in dealing with water problems and the changing climate. This led to well-experienced public authorities like Rijkswaterstaat (the Directorate-General for Public Works and Water Management) and the Waterschappen (Regional Water Authorities), and to world famous knowledge institutes, both public and private (Bosch and van der Ham, 1998; Wiering and Immink, 2006). The aftermath of the earlier-mentioned storm surge of 1953 reinforced, with the Delta Works, the technocratic approach carried out by Rijkswaterstaat and, in addition, strengthened its role and autonomous position in the field of water management. The following decennia dikes were strengthened and new dams were built to close the estuaries in the province of Zeeland. The Delta Works became the nation's proudest major public work on its defence against water. However, during the 1970s, we witnessed an 'ecological turn' within Rijkswaterstaat and the field of water management in general (Disco, 2002). Ecology was taken into account during the building of the last dam, the Eastern Scheldt storm surge barrier, which became half-open for the estuary. The near flooding of the major Dutch rivers in 1993 and 1995 also contributed to the idea that a new approach to water management was needed, like giving room to the river next to strengthening the dikes. The Dutch 'fight against water' paradigm shifted towards a more adaptive approach labelled as 'living with water'. The last decade, with Al Gore's documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth* and the IPCC's reports, the awareness for climate change grew. Together, this growing awareness of climate change, the diversity of approaches to water management and the extensive knowledge of the Dutch and experience with water

management may explain the demand, by the Cabinet, to Veerman to come up with a coherent new vision for the future of our Delta (Boezeman et al., forthcoming; van Rijswoud, 2012).<sup>2</sup>

In this section, we discuss and analyse the Second Delta Committee's framing strategies. We noticed that many framing strategies overlap in practice and gain power and influence when used together. We now discuss the way in which the committee's framing strategies were used in practice.

### **Adherence to the climate adaptation narrative**

According to the committee: "The Netherlands delta is safe, but preserving this safety over the long term involves action now" (Deltacommissie, 2008b). We call this story, to which the committee adheres and contributes, the 'climate adaptation narrative'. There is a stream of research and literature emerging on the need for adaptation to climate change, from the global to the local (Driessen et al., 2009, 2010; Klostermann et al., 2009; Termeer et al., 2009; Gupta et al., 2010; Vorosmarty et al., 2010). The logic is that the climate is undeniably changing and that we should adapt to these changes. "Climate change is now forcing itself upon us: a new reality that cannot be ignored" (Veerman, 2008). Even if the international community were to meet the goals set down in the Kyoto Protocol, and its successors, and even if greenhouse gas emissions worldwide were to be cut down drastically tomorrow, global warming would continue for centuries (Veerman, 2008). "The predicted sea level rise and greater fluctuations in river discharge compel us to look far into the future, to widen our scope and to anticipate developments further ahead" (Veerman, 2008). In the committee's view, the best opportunity for both people and nature to stay abreast of changing conditions involves working with natural processes, and building with nature, where possible:

The best long-term strategy to keep the Netherlands safe and a pleasant place to live is to develop along with the changing climate. Moving with and utilising the natural processes where possible leads to solutions that allow humans and nature to adapt gradually. This further affords better opportunities for combined, multifunctional solutions for functions such as constructing infrastructure, reserving land for housing and business parks, using land for agriculture, recreation and nature (Veerman, 2008).

By using the climate adaptation narrative as its starting point, the committee succeeded in raising awareness for their problem definition and solutions. This story unites the Netherlands and the global community, because climate change is evident both globally and locally. The strength is that the story is presented as if it cannot be denied and that we, therefore, need to take action.

### **Using the story of our delta identity**

The proposed measures for adapting to climate change are backed by a relatively implicit story of the historical legitimacy of our delta identity. Throughout the report, the Delta itself, with its dikes, dams, mounds, sluices and pumping stations are the symbols and artefacts of which the Dutch are told to be proud, because they defend us against water and show that we have been able to 'live, work, invest and recreate' in a once vulnerable delta, for centuries. Our entire delta system, which is said to be the safest in the world, is presented as a success story, a symbol of which we can be proud, and which sets us apart from other countries. Veerman (2008) states: "[o]ne cannot conceive of the Netherlands without water. Through the centuries, and still today, the inhabitants of our delta have made great efforts to struggle from the grasp of the rivers and the sea, and it is this that sets our country apart".

At the same time, this symbol of our Delta is used to remind us that we also depend on it. In some sense, the committee is trying to communicate a double message. On the one hand, there is no reason for panic but, on the other, we should feel the urgency of taking action. The dike, as a symbol of our

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<sup>2</sup> Sceptics might argue that the Second Delta Committee was installed to give new life to the Dutch water sector, also concerning competition internationally, and accommodate employment for the future (Huisman, 2008; Verbeek, 2008). We find this a tentative and interesting idea; however, do not dare to validate this claim based on our current analysis.

defence, is used to tell us these two messages; the dike is safe (as are we), but not safe enough. This corresponds with Stone's descriptions of the 'story of social control' and the 'story of decline and crisis'.

The 'story of social control' is that we have always been able, in our interaction with water, to ensure the country is a safe place to live: "in our interaction with the water, we, the country's residents, can ourselves shape the Netherlands of the future – just as our forefathers have always done throughout the centuries" (Veerman, 2008). Based on our long tradition and experience with living in a Delta, we manage. Since we "master the long-term challenge of keeping the Netherlands a safe, attractive country" (Veerman, 2008), we are able to "keep the Netherlands a prosperous, safe country with sufficient clean water for humans and livestock: we have the time, the knowledge and the means" (Veerman, 2008). So, even though the undeniable force of climate change is upon us, it may also offer us new prospects, chances and opportunities. If we cleverly combine multiple functions, such as water safety, energy production and nature development, we will be able to strengthen our defence system, create new energy, and create new forms of nature.<sup>3</sup> The committee wants us to have this mentality of control and future prosperity: "[i]t is for an attitude like this that the Committee is pleading; let everybody dare to form a clear picture of what we can expect and think ahead to the way we can cope with these challenges. Even better: how can future opportunities be created"? (Veerman, 2008). Like our forefathers, with their challenging creations (such as the world-famous Eastern Scheldt storm-surge barrier), we will be able to secure the Netherlands, create new space for living and, in addition, put the Dutch on the map again. The committee hopes to open the door for engineering enterprises, energy production companies to showcase their innovative products and solutions and, at the same time, boost the Netherlands' image and economy.

The committee also tells a 'story of decline and crisis' alongside its story of control. The historical disasters in 1916 and 1953 help us to remember that taking good care of our water defence system remains our responsibility: "the disastrous floods of 1953 are still etched into our collective memory" (Veerman, 2008). The Netherlands is home to a rich natural environment and has a wealth of history and culture, which we must not run the risk of losing (Veerman, 2008). In the committee's 18-minute video that supports the report (Deltacommissie, 2008a), this story of decline is promoted and backed up with an explicit use of symbols and artefacts. The film recalls and frames the flooding in 1953 to warn us of the threats of climate (change). The film includes original black and white footage of the flooding, with ominous background sounds. Next, the voice-over moves directly to the measures taken by the Dutch government to prevent that flooding from recurring. At the same time, the images smoothly change from black and white into colour images. Then, the video switches to the present day and informs us about today's global warming and climate change. The (near) river floods in 1993 and 1995 in some parts of the Netherlands are recalled to link climate change and the current threat of flooding. While showing the high level of water next to the dikes at that time, the voice-over says: "fortunately it didn't come to a catastrophe, but the message was clear [silent for 2 seconds]". Then, the film quickly moves to the commissioning of the Second Delta Committee in 2007. The remainder of the film is devoted to explaining the committee's 'frame'. This is also backed up with images of the storm in 2005 in New Orleans. The voice-over tells us: "[i]f we don't anticipate the future, if we do nothing, floods *just like this one* [emphasising voice], could also hit the Netherlands, causing enormous damage and suffering, and years of disruption of our society". Then, a map is shown of the Netherlands with potential flooding impact if we were to do nothing. It explains and shows all the critical problems this will cause. The next step is to tell us that water also offers significant opportunities, before moving on to the recommendations the committee deems necessary. The video ends by repeating the committee's main objective: "[h]ow can we create the conditions that will make this country an attractive place to live, work, invest and recreate, for many generations to come? As far as this committee is concerned, we can start realising those conditions, today".

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<sup>3</sup> Examples of these are multifunctional dikes, tidal systems and ecologically robust river banks (Anonymous, 2010a).



We see that the use of symbols and artefacts, in this specific order, support the story and image of our delta system that is under threat. The disasters, examples, footage, the 'facts' of climate change, ominous sounds and the warning pictures serve to make us aware of the urgency and necessity of taking action. The committee aims for us to accept this frame by using a certain climate change and threat rhetoric, vocabulary, argumentation and language, to convince people that we should turn the tide of this 'story of decline and crisis'. On the other hand, in the last few seconds of the video, we see that the committee wants to close with a positive message of 'control'. There we see, as the quotation above shows, that the committee wants to assure us that we have the means available to make this country an attractive place to live, work, invest, and recreate for many generations to come.

This story of our delta identity has been what has bound us together in the Netherlands throughout the centuries. Apart from the crisis anticipation, we *are* able to exert control. History has shown that we need to adapt and have always been able to do so. The strength of the committee's framing is that it was able, both in the report and in the video, to support this compelling story. The delta becomes part of our own identity. We all live in this delta and we all share the same identity: "[t]he sea and the rivers have shaped our identity and the country itself: its nature and landscape, its prosperity and economy, and the way it is governed (water boards; the polder model)" (Veerman, 2008).

If we want to uphold our identity we cannot lose our delta system to climate change. The delta symbolises our identity. It is as if the committee is saying that no self-appreciating nation or human being would want to lose grip of its identity, and that we therefore need to join forces to keep the spirit of our delta identity alive: at least over the coming decennia, but preferably throughout the coming centuries. The committee's own recommendations are presented as 'the logical next step' in our history of living with water. We should collectively embrace the urgent challenges we face in the future.

### **Creating a sense of urgency and collectiveness**

The title of the Press Release was indicative of one of the main conclusions that the committee wants to communicate: "wide ranging intervention for water security urgent: Decisiveness and investment needed" (Deltacommissie, 2008b). At the moment, the Netherlands is, according to the committee, unprepared for climate change because, "the flood risk will increase and the freshwater supply will come under pressure if no extra measures are taken" (Veerman, 2008). The committee seems to know very well that, in order to press forward drastic and very costly measures, a sense of urgency and collectiveness is needed, especially in times of financial crises. Therefore, the committee keeps reminding us that the Netherlands faces an urgent, but not acute, threat: "for us, the Second Delta Committee, the threat is not acute, but our mandate is nevertheless urgent. There is absolutely no reason for panic, but we must be concerned for the future" (Veerman, 2008). This is included in the report several times. The Netherlands must:

(...) accelerate its efforts because, at present, even the current standards of flood protection, which are even out of date, are not being met everywhere. In the meanwhile climate is changing rapidly, the sea level is probably rising faster than has been assumed, and more extreme variations in river discharge are expected. In addition, the economic, societal and physical stakes in the Netherlands are great and growing still. The committee warns that a breach in a dike has seriously disruptive consequences for the entire country (Veerman, 2008).

Veerman also states: "[f]lood risk management is a pressing issue right now in a large number of places and will only become more urgent as the sea level continues to rise, river discharges fluctuate more and more and as interests that need protection increase in value".

In the report, we see that the committee chose the worst-case scenario caused by climate change (including full societal damage and dislocation) by taking the highest-end calculation concerning temperature and sea-level rise in the future as the basis for its policy recommendations. However, by taking all climate change as a driving force for the problems the Netherlands as a whole faces in the

future, the committee has broadened its assignments and, accordingly, their recommendations. The committee was appointed by the Cabinet as a Committee of the State, called the Sustainable Coastal Development Committee. Its mandate was to formulate a vision for the long-term protection of the Dutch coast, not the Netherlands as a whole. In the report, we see that the committee does take a broad view of the coast and proposes an integral approach for the Netherlands as a whole:

The Committee takes a broad view of the coast: it includes the sea and the coastal zone as well as the low-lying hinterland, the interaction with the rivers and the IJsselmeer lake, and the cross-border aspects of the rivers and the coastal zone. This broad interpretation is necessary because, to a great extent, the system forms a single hydrological, ecological and economic entity (Veerman, 2008).

By broadening the scope, and viewing the challenges the Netherlands faces as a whole, the committee succeeds in making the report and the task at hand a matter of national interest of utmost priority.<sup>4</sup>

First, this gave them room to connect issues and make trade-offs. One example is the recommendation to raise the water level of the IJsselmeer because of the growing need for freshwater in the future, while proposing to return part of the freshwater delta to the ocean at the Krammer-Volkerak Zoommeer in the southwest (recommendation 8, 10 and 11). So, on the one hand, the proposal is to strengthen the hard line between freshwater and salt water to maintain and enlarge the freshwater basis of the IJsselmeer, while on the other, the committee suggests a salinity gradient (a natural transition between freshwater and salt water) to create new ecological opportunities. The only way to ensure people support this is to create a sense of collectiveness and matter of national interest, whereby regional, local or individual interest has to take a back seat.

Second, this approach gave the committee room to make the challenges the Netherlands faces an exceptional matter of national interest of utmost priority, and to state that money may not, and cannot, prevent us from taking action. The committee says that "money must not be an impediment". We need a 'national frame of reference' to provide money, and take action: "[t]he Delta Director keeps the Delta Programme on course, creates a national frame of reference, facilitates, and encourages (nationally and in the regions) and, where necessary, is the one to take decisions" (Veerman, 2008).

According to the committee, a special Delta Commissioner, Delta Act, Delta Programme, and Delta Fund are needed to support the implementation of the recommendations. In addition, a ministerial steering committee, chaired by the Prime Minister, should be made responsible for the implementation, and a permanent Parliamentary Committee must be installed to keep it 'at arm's length' from the national budget and other funds. According to the committee, this will guarantee the resources needed to guarantee flood protection and the security of the freshwater supply, while avoiding trade-offs and competition with short-term policy agenda topics (Veerman, 2008).<sup>5</sup>

In this respect, we see that the committee links the huge expenses to the costs and benefits of the Zuiderzee Works (which resulted from the flooding in 1953). In that case, there were also complaints regarding the finances of the public works. In fact, both the costs and the benefits were many times greater than predicted at the inception of the Zuiderzee Works (Veerman, 2008). By pointing this out in the report, the committee seems to imply that the exceptional goals legitimise the great expenses needed to implement the proposed measures. Because nowadays, who can honestly say that the costs of the Zuiderzee Works were not worth the effort?

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<sup>4</sup> One of the interesting choices made by the committee was to use the word 'Delta', which seems in the Netherlands to be becoming synonymous with matters of 'national interest and urgency'. We saw the word 'Delta' being used in other policy domains as well. The Dutch Green party (GroenLinks) and Labour Party (PvdA), for instance, suggested the development of a Delta Plan to address the problems we face with the unemployment of our youth. The Green Party leader said: "It really is time for a comprehensive approach, a Delta Plan" (Doorduyn and Herderscheë, 2008). Claire Boog, in her inaugural speech, made a plea to develop a Delta Plan against infectious diseases like SARS, Ebola and Q-Fever (Rosenthal, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> The finance for the proposed Delta Fund can be supplied through a combination of borrowing and (part of) the natural gas revenues. Creating a link between natural gas revenues and water safety links fossil fuel consumption (such as natural gas), climate change, the rising sea level and the committee's recommendations (Veerman, 2008).

## Creating a crisis narrative

In the introduction, we stated that prior to the commissioning of the Second Delta Committee, there had been no disaster, which made it additionally tough to create the sense of urgency and collectivity required for such drastic measures to adapt to climate change. The committee is well aware of this and says the following:

The Committee realises that its message is a difficult one: after a disaster, there tends to be a widespread feeling of urgency that something must be done to prevent a repetition of events. (...) The general public takes it for granted that government guarantees its protection against flooding, but the public does not see the matter as urgent, or of high political priority. The people of the Netherlands are not apprehensive of a natural catastrophe; the risks of climate change are only gradually becoming manifest and there is a general feeling that effects will only be felt in the distant future (Veerman, 2008).

Therefore, the committee exploits several crises and focusing events to create its own crisis narrative. First, it recalls a number of historical examples. Second, recent examples elsewhere are named. Third, it points out possible future disasters due to current climate change trends.

*Historical examples* – To create a sense of urgency and urge people to take action, the committee tries to recall past focusing events. The floods in 1916 (Zuiderzee) and 1953 (southwest Delta) are recalled to show the impact of such flooding. The floods are also recalled to highlight the positive influence the measures had in response to those events. The 1916 and 1953 floods led to radical policy measures to shorten the coastline: construction of the Afsluitdijk (the IJsselmeer's sealing dam) and the Delta Works. Nowadays, the Wadden Sea and the Western Scheldt are the only two natural systems that remain open to the influence of currents, tides and waves. Implementing these measures, which were multifunctional and integral, provided major benefits for the freshwater supply (via the IJsselmeer), agriculture (vast tracts of new land) and flood protection (up to and including Amsterdam). The committee continues that the measures also resulted in the islands in Zeeland being connected to the mainland and each other, and to the development of recreation, water sports and nature reserves (Veerman, 2008).

*Recent examples* – Apart from recalling historic focusing events, we see in the report that the committee also makes a connection to recent disasters around the globe. Although it is almost 5,000 miles away from the Netherlands, New Orleans is mentioned as a focusing example of climate change worldwide and how that lower delta region was unprepared for climate change (Veerman, 2008). In 2005, hurricane Katrina caused a tropical storm to which at least 1,464 people lost their lives in the actual hurricane and in the subsequent floods (Anonymous, 2010b). The Delta Committee focuses on the severe economic damage this hurricane caused. Prior to the hurricane Katrina disaster, potential damage in New Orleans was estimated at US\$16.8 billion. Following the disaster, direct damage to dwellings, government buildings and public infrastructure alone was estimated at US\$27 billion (Veerman, 2008).

*Future disasters* – After recalling historical and recent disasters in its report, the committee moves on to the possible harm caused by flooding and climate change in the future. They state, for instance, that an estimated 65% of national wealth is located in flood-prone areas, so that the wealth potentially under threat is in the order of €1800 billion. This gives an impression of the capital that needs to be insured against flood risk (Veerman, 2008). We are warned that future flooding in the Netherlands could result in more severe damage than past and recent disasters.

In this regard, it is important to emphasise that the committee exploits potential disasters as a means of introducing a combination of measurements that need to be implemented in the Netherlands. The fundamental premise also adheres to the risk management approach that the first Delta Committee raised, whereby flood risks are managed by a combination of measures that reduce the *probability* (such as high and strong flood defences) and those that limit the *consequences* (such as regulating spatial planning, or zoning, compartmentalisation, early warning, crisis management and

contingency planning). The committee states that the combination of measures is adjusted to the nature of the potential disaster and the characteristics of the relevant dike-enclosed area (Veerman, 2008).

We see that, by exploiting historical and recent crises and anticipating future disasters, the committee succeeds in creating a sense of urgency and collectiveness.

### SUCCESSFUL POLICY ADOPTION

What is remarkable about the dissemination of the committee's report in politics and the media is that it was accepted warmly (Anonymous, 2008; van Kalles, 2008a, 2008b). In newspapers we found discussions on the scenario of the sea-level rise that the committee uses in telling the story of climate change. Some sceptics claim that the committee exaggerated the numbers and purposefully neglected the uncertainties that surround predictions about climate change (De Koning, 2008; Hazeleger, 2008; Huisman, 2008; Knip, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c; Rijcken, 2008; Tamboer, 2008). However, these discussions were instigated and led by academics and not so much by politicians or civilians (Schreuder, 2008a; Warner, 2008; Warner and Vink, 2008; Leroy, 2009). An aspect that elicited greater opposition was the financing of the Delta Programme by the Delta Fund, but not so much whether a Delta Programme was really necessary (Chavannes, 2008). In addition, there was some critique about the need to improve the safety level for all dike-enclosed areas by a factor of at least 10 (Chavannes, 2008). Furthermore, some warned that the committee's focus was too much on preventive measures instead of on consequence-reduction measures or crisis management (Warner and Vink, 2008). However, apart from these 'minor' points, we saw that, in terms of the 'frame' the committee presented, the problem definition, diagnosed causes, moral judgments and suggested remedies were (in general) accepted relatively easily and quickly (Anonymous, 2008; van Kalles, 2008a, 2008b).

The Prime Minister at the time said: "[t]he government takes on the challenge",<sup>6</sup> after which he announced the establishment of a Delta Act and Delta Fund: "[i]f we take on the challenge wisely, the Netherlands will emerge from this fight stronger against water (...) [The report] forces us to face facts about what must be done in the Netherlands to maintain water safety".<sup>7</sup> The Secretary of State for Transport and Public Works agreed with the message the committee presented: "[w]e are from after the flood. Therefore, we must take action now and not wait for the next disaster. Let 2008 go down in history as the year in which the future of this low country was placed high on the agenda".<sup>8</sup> The opposition in the lower chamber also accepted the policy frame of the committee (Anonymous, 2008).

In contrast, we saw no opposing dominant coalition of actors trying to raise attention for an alternative frame. The only recommendation by the committee that elicited practical discussion concerned raising the water level of the IJsselmeer due to the immense impact this would have on the region and surrounding municipalities (Schreuder, 2008b). It is possible, therefore, that once the implications of the policy advice become clear to the public with the implementation of the Delta Programme that the public will join forces and oppose the change.

In the next section we conclude our argument.

<sup>6</sup> Original quote in Dutch: "Het kabinet neemt de handschoen op" (Anonymous, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Original quote in Dutch: "Als we het verstandig aanpakken komt Nederland uit deze strijd tegen het wassende water opnieuw sterker tevoorschijn. (...) [Het rapport] drukt ons met de neus op feiten over wat er in Nederland moet gebeuren om de waterveiligheid op peil te houden (Anonymous, 2008)".

<sup>8</sup> Original quote in Dutch: "Wij zijn van ná de watersnood. Daarom moeten we nú actie ondernemen en niet wachten op een volgende ramp. Laat 2008 de geschiedenis in gaan als het jaar waarin wij de toekomst van dit lage land hoog op de agenda hebben gezet" (Anonymous, 2008).

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

We conclude that, even though no actual crisis or focusing event occurred, the committee, by employing the discussed framing strategies, succeeded in achieving three things. First, the committee managed to create awareness and set the agenda for climate change adaptation and the issue of safety in Dutch water management. Second, the committee managed, to a large extent, to get the media, the public and politics to accept their frame and framing of the problems, causes, moral judgments and suggested remedies. Third, the committee has, to a certain degree, already succeeded in having its recommendations translated into policy programs.

Regarding the first point, we notice that climate change became a topic of discussion and elicited a great deal of media attention even though no actual flooding occurred. We saw that connecting narratives, symbols, rhetoric and crises helped to push forward a coherent frame in which water safety has high priority.

Concerning the second point, we argue that the absence of strong dominant opposing frames and framing, which we did not find, helped to gain wide acceptance of the committee's framing. The committee succeeded in making water safety issues a matter of national interest that should be protected, at arm's length, from daily politics.

Regarding the third point, we see that the committee's recommendations have been translated into policy plans. The National Water Plan 2009-2015 follows the recommendations of the committee almost entirely. We also see that while the Delta Programme and a Delta Commissioner became operative at the end of 2009, they, together with the Delta Act and the Delta Fund, have only become legally grounded and effective on the 1st of January 2012 (*Deltawet waterveiligheid en zoetwatervoorziening*, 2011). The Delta Commissioner is explicitly trying to gain public support and civic engagement for short- and long-term actions. In November 2010, for example, the Delta Commissioner organised the first National Delta Congress to which he invited the Dutch Prince Royal, the new Secretary of State, representatives from business, municipalities, provinces, water boards, ministerial departments, scientists, and numerous actors from society. There was significant consensus between all parties that there is urgency for joining forces, taking action, and 'working together with water'. Not surprisingly, this is also the title of the Second Delta Committee's report.

Still, we need to see whether the water safety issues and effects of climate change will remain on the policy, political and public agenda. In part, due to the financial crisis and cabinet shift, no final decision has been made regarding the finances, implementation and institutionalisation of the recommendations by the Delta Committee for the long-term vision. At the same time, the sense of urgency and the impact of climate change are not felt significantly anymore. At the time of writing, educational reform, healthcare, employment and other domestic affairs are now being discussed within the public and political domain. We have said already that from a 'long-term' policy perspective, it would be too early to reflect on the real policy change induced by the Delta Committee. To do so, we would need additional research in about ten years' time on the further implementation and institutionalisation of the committee's recommendations.

Based on our analysis we come to two more theoretical conclusions, regarding crisis exploitation and the framing perspective. First, to our understanding of crisis exploitation we can add that it is not necessary for a crisis to have actually occurred for change agents to gain attention and change policies. Framing a possible crisis, or severe problem, can be enough to raise awareness for an issue. As long as it corroborates with people's imagination, it has potential power. We can all picture that the flooding of large parts of the Netherlands will lead to major disruptions and crises because we have experienced flooding in the past and recently saw the flooding in New Orleans. We expect that, for policy themes without clear links to concrete or actual threats, it will be more difficult to call on people's imagination (such as the ageing of population). Likewise, it would be more difficult to raise attention and set the agenda for policy change.

Second, with regard to the current literature on framing, we conclude that scholars are preoccupied with discussions on ontology, cognitions and interactions and therefore tend to overlook the actual use and power of framing through strategies like storytelling, rhetoric, symbols artefacts, etc. So instead, we argue that more attention is needed on the power of framing strategies, especially when skilfully aligned with public sentiments and larger narratives. Future research could focus on conditions and circumstances under which framing strategies are constitutive and effective or not.

We would like to wrap up by giving five practical recommendations to those in search for policy change:

- Find a recent crisis, or frame the risk of future crises based on earlier crises, and try to exploit it;
- Exaggerate, magnify or enhance the problem and negative consequences if no policy measures are taken;
- Present your priorities as if they are common sense and true;
- Support the frame with images, symbols and artefacts;
- Exploit fully the persuasive power of rhetoric and try to create a strong storyline or narrative that nobody can really oppose (nobody is against water security and a safe delta, for instance).<sup>9</sup>

If a change agent manages to do this successfully, he will raise his chance of changing perceptions, frames and policies.<sup>10</sup> However, the agent still depends on the receptiveness of the public, policy and political community to see whether his frame is implemented and institutionalised for a proper period of time.

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<sup>9</sup> See Molle (2008) for a discussion on what he calls 'nirvana concepts', 'narratives or storylines', and 'models'. He says: "Nirvana concepts underpin overarching frameworks that promote or strengthen particular narratives or storylines – i.e. simple, causal, and explanatory beliefs – and legitimize specific blueprints or models of both policies and development interventions". This is exactly what the committee succeeded in doing. They presented an ideal image and vision of a 'horizon' that individuals and the society should strive to reach. Nobody is against nirvana. We see this also in regard to the Second Delta Committee that presented their goals, narratives and storylines as if they were common sense.

<sup>10</sup> Pralle (2009) discussed the way in which an agency *could*, and according to her *should*, place climate change in the forefront of government decision agendas. There is much overlap between her suggested 'strategies' and the strategies employed by the Second Delta Committee in our case i.e. the emphasis on scientific consensus and knowledge; the emphasis on growing public concern; the moral and ethical issues related to the problems; and the emphasis on the cost of doing nothing.

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