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Adapting to climate change: the introduction of water retention in Dutch and Hungarian water management

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This paper analyses a transition in the Dutch and Hungarian water management. For centuries water management was dominated by actors aiming primarily at flood protection and river regulation, serving mostly the interests of large-scale agriculture. About fifteen years ago the opposition started to grow. Water retention and floodplain rehabilitation was introduced into water management to replace or complement the prevailing flood levee dominated engineering approached. In this paper we try to explain what happened in Hungary and the Netherlands in the period leading up to the breakthrough and in the following years when actors had to deliver on the new direction taken in water management. The paper looks specifically at the role of individuals and the strategies that they –consciously or unconsciously- used in bringing about policy change. Five strategies are explored: to develop new ideas, to build coalitions & sell ideas, to create and use windows of opportunity, to play multiple venues and to orchestrate and manage networks. We discuss the importance of each strategy and what individuals are behind it. Our analysis emphasises the importance of recognition of a new management concept at an abstract level by the responsible civil servants and avocation of the concept by a credible regional coalition. The recognition of a new approach, political attention following a number of major (near) floods and a new government coalition after national elections, provided a clear window of opportunity for changing water management and including climate change considerations. The paper concludes with a discussion of the difficulties faced when trying to mainstream adaptation and implement a new water management plan that runs counter to a nation's long-established traditions. Ambiguity about the practical implementation of new concepts and the responsibility of different actors facilitated reaching consensus on a new water management plan but seriously hampers implementation in recent years.