

# DUTCH WATER AUTHORITIES ACTIVE ACROSS THE BORDER: 'WHY AND HOW?'

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■ The 21 regional water authorities in the Netherlands joined their forces internationally in 2014 as Dutch Water Authorities. They have been active in other countries for many years. They may have different motives for doing so but, most importantly, they feel a responsibility to help communities in other countries to better control their water problems. The French would call this *noblesse oblige*, the obligation that comes with a prominent position in society. We call it 'socially responsible governance'.

■ Another reason to be active internationally is that regional water authorities want to be attractive employers. Offering the opportunity to gain international on-the-job experience attracts talented young professionals and encourages your highly admired personnel to stay. Young people are keen to feel that they are helping to make a better world and talented employees sometimes need trust, new challenges and inspiration to remain loyal to an employer in the long term.

Dutch Water Authorities also increasingly wishes to wish to learn from other countries. That goes further than simply gaining experience abroad; they want to import new technologies and methods. We see regional water authorities acquiring international knowledge not only from developed countries but also from transitioning and developing countries. Emerging countries are sometimes at the forefront of developments, for example in digitisation and mobile technology. And there is also much to learn from other societies in the areas of participation, gender and water awareness.

## NOOT VAN DE REDACTIE

In editie 02/2018, het themanummer Internationaal van dit tijdschrift, stond een artikel over de Blue Deal. Helaas is hier het gedeelte met toelichting op de rol van Dutch Water Authorities weggefallen. Bij deze publiceren we het gehele artikel alsnog. Onze excuses voor het ongemak.

Dutch Water Authorities is more and more aware that a strong international position reflects positively on its position at home. When countries, ministries, businesses and others see the added value that regional water authorities can bring to international projects, this too will have a positive effect on the authorities' position in the Netherlands.

## What do water authorities bring to the table?

When Dutch Water Authorities is asked to participate in international projects or set up long-term partnerships to solve water problems, they of course focus on water management methods such as operating wastewater treatment plants, building dikes, establishing an ecologically stable water system, structural management and maintenance, etc. But, more than that there is a growing demand for knowledge on water governance. How to secure structural financing for water management, including maintenance? How does the Dutch Water Authority model work and how to set it up? How to raise water awareness and – following on from that – achieve participation and balance all interests? How to ensure that the chosen governance structure represents those different interests? Experience in working abroad shows more and more that an institutional framework that takes account of relationships between the various stakeholders is equally as important as knowledge of water management technologies and methods.

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## Signing the Blue Deal between Dutch Water Authorities and The Dutch National Government



### What exactly does Dutch Water Authorities do in other countries?

Water authorities create long-term partnerships, which are founded on mutual respect for each other's situation. Dutch Water Authorities forms partnerships with decentralised water management organisations, meaning that they do not impose preconceived blueprints, but always try to adapt our knowledge to suit different governance structures, and social and cultural contexts. Within a new partnership, they try to explore ways to improve water management by brainstorming on an equal footing, through coaching, providing inspiration, sharing experiences, working together, strengthening the partner's position and exchanging staff and knowledge. Dutch Water Authorities contributes their knowledge of how to coordinate and direct water management, with a focus on the long term and the principle of 'interest-payment-participation', and by being an institutional 'buddy' (supporting the partner). Dutch Water Authorities also brings in its work processes, knowledge and expertise (on monitoring, management and maintenance, financing, etc.) which is about their core business being flood protection, water quality and quantity management.

### Why are we united in Dutch Water Authorities?

Dutch Water Authorities' unique selling point is entering into long-term partnerships with water management organisations in other countries to guide them to better water solutions. We have come to realise that we have more impact when we work together. By combining the limited capacity and resources of

individual authorities, we can enter into longer-term relationships, because we can then complement and relieve each other to distribute the workload between the Dutch regional water authorities. We have also chosen to maximise our impact by focusing on a number of countries. And we feel the need to make our projects more professional, for example by learning from others who have already been active internationally for a longer period, like VNG-International (the international branch of the Association of Netherlands Municipalities) and VEI (the international water operator set up by two Dutch water companies). And also by learning from regional water authorities experiences between themselves.

The twenty one existing regional water authorities in the Netherlands who have united themselves in Dutch Water Authorities (DWA) for their international projects have become much more visible and an attractive partner, nationally and internationally. As DWA, we have greater 'critical mass'. This development and our increased visibility has been crucial in the signing of the Blue Deal with the National Government.

The presidents of the regional water authorities in the International Affairs Committee of the association of Dutch Water Authorities (in Dutch: Unie van Waterschappen) wanted to speed up the organically growing international efforts of the water authorities and invest in a more structured form of cooperation. They therefore took the initiative to draw up a joint 'Dutch Water Authorities' Vision 2019'. The vision, approved by the regional water authorities, specifies at first the ambition to be recognised and acknowledged

as an important player, both nationally and internationally. Secondly the aim for regional water authorities is to see for themselves the organisation benefits from deploying staff internationally. Their own organisations will benefit by motivated returning staff and this will contribute to achieve their own goals better, faster and cheaper.

A former Dutch Water Authorities Taskforce has developed a large number of activities to achieve these two goals. These activities are intended to maximise the impact of international projects and to show that impact more clearly. That requires improving communication on Dutch Water Authorities' added value and managing our projects more professionally.

The activities include setting up learning circles, and collecting best practices, distilling success factors from them and sharing them with partners. And developing a corporate story, a video and a corporate presentation. They have also established a smooth-running DWA front office which helps businesses, organisations and ministries with their queries on water expertise and international projects. And to make sure we don't have to rely on a card index system, we have put processes in place which give potential access to 11,000 Dutch water managers, and so fulfil our ambition to be attractive employers.

A prominent activity of the Taskforce has been the signing of the Blue Deal, which is based on the aspiration that all activities undertaken by the Dutch Water Authorities will contribute to the national government's International Water Ambition and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. The development of the Blue Deal has been a big step towards becoming a recognised and acknowledged player.

### **The Blue Deal: clean, sufficient and safe water for 20 million people**

If we look at the Earth from space, it is clear to see: the planet is literally covered in water. Yet, there is never enough of it – and often too much. In recent decades, water-related disasters have affected increasing numbers of people, animals and businesses. We can

make a greater contribution to finding solutions to these problems if we work together better and more often in the Netherlands, too. The Dutch water authorities and the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and of Infrastructure and Water Management are therefore joining forces and launched a new international programme. The new programme, known as the Blue Deal, will run until 2030.

The Blue Deal has one clear goal: to help 20 million people in 40 catchment areas around the world gain access to clean, sufficient and safe water. The focus is on providing help, but also on creating opportunities for businesses and on learning from other countries so as to keep improving our own work in the Netherlands. The Blue Deal is setting the bar high. To achieve its ambitious goal, the programme will facilitate the establishment of long-term partnerships between water managers in the Netherlands and abroad. Together with their local partners, the water authorities will explore what is required to improve water management step by step, and will implement projects.

### **Good governance as the basis for change**

A Theory of Change (ToC) has been drawn up for the Blue Deal. A ToC is a theoretical model that describes how projects and activities can help improve water management for 20 million people. The model is based on the 'Building blocks for good water governance' (2016), developed by the Water Governance Centre, and the twelve principles identified as key to good water management by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). According to both these theories, water management will improve if the Blue Deal supports and strengthens local partners on three crucial components:

- Sufficient knowledge and expertise;
- A well-functioning organisation with a clear mandate;
- Cooperation with key stakeholders.

The model assumes that these three components will ensure that the partner becomes aware of the water-related problems in an area (step 1), draws up plans

and policies to address them (step 2) and implements the plans (step 3). The Blue Deal only starts counting once a partner actually implements the plans. The programme will be a success only if 20 million people see concrete improvements in water management in their areas. The programme will contribute to achieving Sustainable Development Goals 6.3 – 6.6, the International Water Ambition and the vision of Dutch Water Authorities.

### Unique chance

The Blue Deal is unique because it gives the water authorities and ministries the opportunity to support regional and national water management with more resources than are available now and for a longer period. By joining forces, they hope to achieve more together than they currently do individually. Five themes will receive extra attention: innovation, climate, sustainability, gender and poverty reduction. The first three are by their nature already part of the water authorities' approach and will require little extra effort. Gender and poverty reduction are, however, new. Gender is about ensuring that women are treated equally within the Blue Deal. That of course applies to the role of women in the local partners' regions, but just as much to their position in the water authorities in the Netherlands. That could also be much better than it is now.

### Launch in 2019

The Blue Deal programme is being prepared at the moment and will start in 2019 on World Water Day. It will be implemented in three phases: 2019-2022, 2023-2026 and 2027-2030. The Blue Deal is a programme that will grow. The first phase will largely be implemented through partnerships in which the water authorities already participate. In the years that follow, more and more new partnerships and projects will be added.

In the preparatory year that the Blue Deal is in, the water authorities and the two ministries are examining together with local partners whether a partnership is suitable for the Blue Deal. Together with the partners, they will draw up proposals for the first phase of the

Blue Deal. The first phase of the Blue Deal will be festively launched on the 2019 World Water Day.

### The Blue Deal: the success factors

After almost two years of preparation, the Blue Deal was signed at the 2018 World Water Day. We – the authors of this article – looked back and asked ourselves what we could learn from the Blue Deal process and came up with a top five factors contributing to its success.

#### 1 TURN IT INTO A PROJECT

After a year of talking about the Blue Deal (2016), we had still not managed to conclude an actual deal. So, at the start of 2017, we came together with the ministries to decide whether to go on or to stop. Fortunately, everyone wanted to continue, but we decided to use a different approach. The Blue Deal became a project with a deadline, a project leader and a plan of action.

The 2017 World Water Day saw the launch of Waterworx, the international programme of the Dutch water companies and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At the launch, Deputy Director-General for International Cooperation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Reina Buijs called on the water authorities to launch the Blue Deal on the same stage exactly one year later. All of a sudden, we had a deadline and the clock was ticking.

To meet that deadline, we drew up a plan of action with milestones and divided the year up into five manageable steps. This gave us some breathing space, because we could work towards the next step without having to worry too much about what came after. We also appointed a project leader to coordinate the process on behalf of all organisations involved. She was given the time to devote herself entirely to the task, became the point of contact for all organisations and kept sight of the big picture. And that helped: someone was now responsible for the process and could take everyone else along with her.

#### 2 DRINKING LOTS OF COFFEE

The Blue Deal could only be successful if the water authorities and ministries could identify with it. It



had to become *their* programme for it to work in practice. It took a lot of coffee to achieve that. We spent as much time as possible talking – and especially listening – to all the officials and managers involved. How could the Blue Deal generate more impact? What did they consider important? What should be included and what left out? Sometimes, they gave their input at joint work sessions or meetings, other times in one-to-one conversations. The discussions were critical at times, but that made them hugely valuable – and made the Blue Deal into a better programme.

### 3 LEARNING FROM OTHERS

Developing a new programme is exciting, and there is no handbook to tell you how to do it. Thankfully, other organisations had done something similar. The experiences of the Dutch water companies with Waterworx and NGOs with the SDG programme were invaluable. Both are running one year ahead of the Blue Deal and were a great source of inspiration on how to choose the right approach.

It is always enjoyable to brainstorm with people who are going through a similar process. We are keeping up this knowledge sharing and will regularly meet up with the other two programmes to help each other out. Gender, for example, is a topic in which NGOs have broad experience but which is new to the water authorities and water companies. Water authorities, on the other hand, know how to make water management sustainable and we can help the other programmes with that. Furthermore, the three programmes sometimes work in the same countries and we can generate even more impact if we can link up in practice.

### 4 CELEBRATING SUCCESSES

Setting up a large international programme with so many organisations is a process of trial and error. Making sure everyone stays committed is of crucial importance. Celebrating successes is a good way of doing that. At the Amsterdam International Water Week, for example, all the organisations involved in the Blue Deal signed a declaration of intent. That may not have been necessary but it helped to keep us motivated and made us all feel: 'We can do this!'

### 5 DEVELOPING YOUR OWN STYLE

We learned a lot from similar programs, but the water authorities have their own organizational culture. So not everything that other programs do, fits us. Thanks to the ministries giving us the space to do so, we have given the programme our own style. We aren't very keen, for example, on fancy-sounding concepts like 'inception phase'. In the Blue Deal, we simply call it a preparatory year. Moreover, Blue Deal is an action programme, with some activities already starting in the preparatory year. Through pilot projects, we are going to develop all products, such as formats, in practice. This approach fits the mentality of the water authorities: they like to get on with the job.

### What dreams do we still have?

Dutch Water Authorities is still far from having achieved all of its goals. Further professionalising our international projects through knowledge exchange remains one huge challenge.

Another challenge is to make businesses see the added value of the water authorities in international projects. Dutch Water Authorities would like to attract more requests for information from the business community. DWA is certain that, while businesses are very capable of teaching people about water governance, partnering with a government body to do this in other countries brings added value, and that water authorities can contribute unique knowledge and expertise. By entering into long-term partnerships, water authorities can achieve more with their international counterparts, and businesses eventually reap the benefits.

The dream that remains is to unite the water authorities even more closely, nationally and internationally. That will enable us to use each other's expertise and skills to create a broad-ranging water sector that can present itself even more strongly on the international stage. *Water problems? Bring in the Dutch!*

Would you like to know more about the work of Dutch Water Authorities or the Blue Deal? See [www.dutchwaterauthorities.com](http://www.dutchwaterauthorities.com) or send an email to [info@dutchwaterauthorities.com](mailto:info@dutchwaterauthorities.com) ■