

# SPRAAKWATER

## THE NETHERLANDS AS A GLOBAL HYDRO-HUB

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■ On 1 November 2021, Prime Minister of the Netherlands Mark Rutte delivered a speech at COP-26 in Glasgow, Scotland. He stressed the history of the Netherlands in “battling the elements for centuries. From North Sea floods to Caribbean storms” (GoN, 2021). He further stated that “(climate) adaptation is in our DNA” and stressed that sustainability innovations carry economic opportunities. He finished the speech with a statement that the world “can count on the Kingdom of the Netherlands”, in other words, that the Netherlands is open for business.

This speech fits perfectly in the policy of the Netherlands in the past 12 years – to present climate change as a set of business opportunities for the Dutch water sector and to position the Netherlands as the ‘world champion’ in this field. An image of a small, yet mighty country with a world-class water sector is founded on impressive domestic technological and governance achievements. Jan Tinbergen, the first winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics, wrote prophetically in his 1969 cost-benefit analysis of the Delta-works that “the reputation and the goodwill of the Netherlands in the world will increase” thanks to the Delta-works, which would in turn provide opportunities to recruit new business projects (cited in van Der Ham, 2018, 375). However, such reputation has not arrived automatically. It has been the product of decades-long careful cultivation through government policy, branding and political maneuvering (Minkman and van Buuren, 2019; Mukhtarov, et al. 2021b; Hasan et al. 2022).

The Netherlands has explicitly aspired to an international profile of excellence in water resources management (e.g. Government of the Netherlands, 2016; 2019; Mukhtarov et al. 2021b). Merrill Lynch and The Bank of America estimated the annual global water industry market at USD 800 – 1000 billion (Ahlers and Merme, 2016). The Netherlands hopes to expand in this lucrative area. Its

exports of water-related infrastructure and services have grown steadily since the early 2000s onwards; for example, from 4,1 billion EUR in 2004 to 8,1 billion EUR in 2019 (Panteia, 2020). The Netherlands aspires to be viewed as a “Global Hydro-Hub” (or a GHH-NL) – a center of excellence in water engineering, management and governance (Mukhtarov, 2020; Mukhtarov et al., 2021a). To achieve this, it has sought to present itself as a capable, reliable, results-oriented and neutral partner in international water affairs.

As a response to aggressive branding and various international activities of GHH-NL, an increasing number of voices in journalistic, scientific and professional circles question the economic logic that largely drives its climate resilience efforts (e.g. Kuijpers and Muntz, 2016). An influential Dutch TV pundit Arjen Lubach remarked jokingly in 2017 that “even the destruction of the planet is nothing less than a business opportunity” for the government of the Netherlands (HP De Tijd, 2017). In reference to self-promotion of the Dutch water sector, Chris Seijger of Wageningen University was quoted in 2018 saying that “we could be a little more modest...It is horrible how we think that we have the wisdom” (Stravens, 2018). This is an important debate about how GHH-NL engages with other countries, especially from the Global South, in order

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to advance the Netherlands' trade aspirations, achieve geopolitical objectives and promote climate resilience at once.

Critical voices at home and abroad have already harmed the global reputation of the Netherlands as it risks to acquire the image of a “climate-profiteer” (e.g. Corder, 2017; Colven, 2017). It is hence imperative in our view to have an open and inclusive conversation on how the Netherlands has engaged in climate resilience efforts internationally and where improvements are necessary.

Building on our recent work with regard to international branding, transfer and translation of water governance expertise from the Netherlands to countries in the Global South such as Bangladesh, Indonesia and Vietnam, we have identified six key narratives that actors engaged in branding GHH-NL have created and persistently repeated across various venues. These narratives are as follows:

- 1 ‘GHH-NL offers **unique** historically contingent expertise that is not available elsewhere’
- 2 ‘The past and present domestic achievements of GHH-NL avail it with expertise that is **universally relevant**, also in diverging socio-economic, cultural and geographical contexts’
- 3 ‘GHH-NL provides well-articulated **technocratic and apolitical** solutions’
- 4 ‘GHH-NL can secure **win-win outcomes** where client needs and Dutch interests complement each other’
- 5 ‘The **demand** for GHH-NL expertise is **natural** as countries approach the Netherlands for help themselves’
- 6 ‘The Dutch water sector is **a tight homogenous community** with the same goals, vision, and approach to solving water challenges.’

These key narratives serve the creation of a hegemonic discourse of the Netherlands as a “water country” capable and willing to engage internationally and that seeks its own benefits. These statements are carefully crafted, strategic representations of the Netherlands. They are discursively and linguistically constructed by marketing and communications experts, repeated and advanced in various venues domestically and internationally, and carry significant material effects in a myriad of water-related projects where GHH-NL works. These narratives matter – they legitimize an industry that has collectively earned 8,9 billion EUR in gross added value in 2019 (Panteia, 2020).

### Some Points for Discussion

Our research points to the dangers of “over-selling” the Netherlands globally as a GHH. In lieu of conclusion, we

would hence like to advance a few suggestions that may encourage the debate among water professionals on the pages of this magazine and broader.

- 1 The Netherlands can be more nuanced in branding itself and should avoid claiming universal relevance of its water management expertise;
- 2 The Netherlands should cultivate long-term trust and relationships and avoid short-term pursuit of profits solely based on commercial bottom-lines;
- 3 The Netherlands should listen to local partners from client-countries, including communities they serve. At the same time, the policy-makers in The Hague may benefit from open dialogues with experts from the Netherlands and abroad on the ground, in the embassies and at the operational level of private companies engaged in water projects internationally;
- 4 The Netherlands should acknowledge its interest and avoid the language of “neutrality”. In cases of conflicts between client-interests and commercial interests of GHH-NL, some procedure should be in place to regulate actions;
- 5 Revisit, rethink and re-brand what the GHH-NL understands and promotes as positive impacts of its expertise internationally. There is growing evidence of a mismatch between perceptions of climate resilience and development by the by the actors from the Netherlands and those of the governments and local communities in the Global South. A deeper and more open conversation on these fundamental issues is required for a sustained success.

The topic of this essay is sensitive as it touches upon both national and professional identities of the Dutch, expertise in water management, money, and different framings of climate change and resilience. There are many good-hearted and highly competent professionals working in the sector, who seek to achieve real and sustained impact for a better world. Making the work of diplomats, managers, communication experts and politicians explicit in branding, negotiations and management of GHH-NL's activities is very important (Hasan et al. 2019; 2020). At the same time, it is important to resist the temptation to see this often altruistic work in separation from advancing political and economic agenda of the Netherlands (Raev & Minkman, 2020; Mukhtarov et al. 2021b). How to combine multiple objectives, motivations and impacts remains an important question. We hope than an open debate will follow on the subject on the Netherlands as a preeminent global water policy actor and its roles and responsibilities globally.

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