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## **A Review of Water Policies on the Move: Diffusion, Transfer, Translation or Branding?**

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**ABSTRACT:** This review provides a fresh look at the strengths and weaknesses of four distinct generations of research on water policy travels. Studies on *policy diffusion* explicate patterns of adoption across large-*n* units and are interested in tipping points, early and late adopters, and which policies spread more easily. Diffusion research privileges structural forces such as globalisation and competition over diffusion agents and national-level politics. *Policy transfer* scholarship is based mainly on small-*n* case studies and interrogates the 'what' and the 'who' of policy transfer as well as asks into what conditions a policy is transferred. The key premise of this school of research is that transfer decisions are made rationally based on voluntary learning, coercion, or some negotiated motivation. *Policy translation* scholarship developed as a critique of diffusion and transfer studies. It posits that policies undergo significant transformation when moving through various settings and that this process is intensely political and power-laden. *Policy branding* is an offshoot of policy translation research. It focuses on branding of policies and policy agents by establishing an explicit link with places and projects. The key focus is on the power of ideas and neoliberal underpinnings of policy travel. These four generations of research are based on contrasting premises about what travels, how and why it travels, and to what effect. The review offers an appraisal of this large and diverse literature and proposes potential complementarities.

**KEYWORDS:** Water policy, diffusion, transfer, translation, branding, review

*We know how to transfer resources, people and technology across cultural borders. But well-functioning public institutions require certain habits of mind, and operate in complex ways that resist being moved. We need to focus a great deal more thought, attention and research on this area.*

Francis Fukuyama (2004: 17)

### **INTRODUCTION**

Throughout human history, knowledge and innovations in water management have spread through conquest, trade and science. The heritage of Roman water infrastructure and civil law alike can be found across most of Europe and the New World (see, for example, Wescoat, 2009). Nowadays, with 20th century advances in technology and intensified globalisation, every development in water policy and management inevitably draws on the knowledge, experiences and experiments from other places. The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) is a charismatic example of such interconnectedness. Founded in 1933

in the United States, it has influenced the developments of the Mekong, Danube, Senegal, Zambezi and Volta rivers and has had an impact on the national plans of dozens of countries (Ekbladh, 2002; Molle, 2008). The TVA symbolised more than technical prowess; it stood for regional planning, efficient use of natural resources, and grassroots democracy. Thanks to its normative appeal, the former US president John F. Kennedy referred to it as "the best ambassador that the United States has ever had" (Mukhtarov, 2009). The travel of water policy models is thus closely intertwined with diplomacy, politics and economics.

The ubiquity of the policy travel and its importance in our globalised world has resulted in a large and diverse literature with hundreds of case studies, comparisons and conceptual pieces that attempt classification and synthesis (Wescoat, 2002; Mukhtarov and Daniell, 2018; Pacheco-Vega, 2021). Publications have reported on the spread of individual water policies through single or multiple case study analyses. Examples of this include the spread of policy models such as integrated water resources management (IWRM) (Mollinga, 2006; Allouche, 2016), water user associations (Rap, 2006; Molle, 2008), and river basin organisations (Mukhtarov and Gerlak, 2013; Gerlak and Schmeier, 2018). There is a large field of grey literature published by think tanks and international organisations on how best practices get implemented internationally (see, for example, UN-Water, 2018; OECD, 2018; Gaddis et al., 2019; SIWI, 2022).

Reviews and syntheses of the field also exist. Wescoat (2002: 9) suggests three social science approaches for studying water policy travels: "diffusion of innovation", "social learning" and social movement theories, and "legal transplant theory". Wescoat does not, however, review the empirical literature. De Boer et al. (2013) provide a review of water policy transfer case studies in a number of empirical contexts including Mexico, Canada, Europe, India, Vietnam and Kazakhstan. Their ambition was to understand the fit between a policy model and a policy context and their book covers a range of mechanisms, actors and motivations of policy travels. Vinke-de Kruijf and Özerol (2013) offer a review of the water policy transfer literature and examine the gestation and transfer of models such as IWRM, good water governance, and public participation. This is a task that is further developed at a later time by Allouche (2016) in explicating the global influence of IWRM. Mukhtarov and Daniell (2018) survey the literature on the diffusion and transfer of water policies and criticise it for assumptions of linearity and rationality of the travel process. Pacheco-Vega (2021) reviews policy transfer instances of environmental policies, including from the water sector.

These studies offer insightful conceptual discussions of various ways of approaching water policy travel; however, there is still no review that showcases the achievements and shortcomings of the various approaches. Such a review would position each new approach in a dialogue with the earlier ones and would base its conclusions on empirical case studies and their findings. We attempt this task in this review. A few clarifications are in order before we embark on the actual review.

Policy, as Cairney (2011: 22) writes, "is one of many terms in political science (...) that are well known but difficult to define". Much debate in the literature on policy travel boils down to disagreements on what a policy is and what it does (for a discussion of this, see Freeman, 2009; Howlett and Rayner, 2008). For the purposes of this review, we understand 'policy' broadly as a set of codified and prescriptive statements on how to manage water resources; such statements may be more or less complex, controversial or technical. We bracket this important debate and take a broad and inclusive view of policy. We also refer to the phenomenon of policy movement as 'travel' in order to distinguish it from approaches to studying policy travel that use the specific vocabularies of 'transfer', 'diffusion', 'mobility' or 'translation'.

This is a narrative review that is not exhaustive or systematic in its data collection procedure. We conducted a search for articles in major academic databases and by following works of key authors in each generation of research, and we searched on the basis of key works. We followed the advice of applying the 'making strange' tool as developed in critical discourse studies (see Gee, 2011; Gasper,

2022). This tool advocates "defamiliarization, so that we view both texts and social realities in a fresh independent way and start to discern better their blindspots, and our own" (Gasper, 2022: 1). We consciously searched for studies that contradict familiar judgements about different generations of research produced by earlier surveyors. If, for example, policy diffusion literature has been criticised for being too vague on 'what' gets diffused, we intentionally searched for empirical studies that addressed this issue. Table 1 illustrates how we conceptualised and applied the categories. We may have missed work that was eligible for inclusion; however, as illustrated by, for example, Dobbin et al. (2007), in doing a narrative literature review a scholar must always strike a balance between what is necessary and what is feasible.

The following section introduces the typology used to organise the literature review. The next three sections review publications that fall under 'diffusion', 'transfer' and 'translation' respectively. We then turn to a presentation of the emerging work on global hydro-hubs as a form a 'branding' before offering a conclusion.

#### **FOUR GENERATIONS OF WATER POLICY TRAVEL STUDIES**

Graham et al. (2013) reported 104 terms associated with the travel of policy models (de Oliveira, 2021). Examples of these labels include: *policy transfer* (Dolowitz and Marsh 1996, 2000); *lesson drawing* (Rose 2001; de Jong, 2009; Benson et al., 2012); *policy diffusion* (Tews, 2005); *institutional isomorphism* (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983); "*systematically pinching ideas*" (Schneider and Ingram, 1988); and *policy convergence* (Bennett, 1991; Radaelli, 2000). Given the hugely diverse and prolific literature and the fact that in the social sciences there are dozens of different ways to refer to the same phenomenon, a reliable and sufficiently broad system of classification is required for a review.

To this end, we distinguish four generations of research based on the different traditions of research and on their distinct historical evolution. The term 'generation' is not in any sense a value judgement; as with human generations, it simply signifies an historical trajectory of approaches that overlap and gradually replace each other (Howlett and Rayner, 2008: 386). We borrowed this typology from broader debates on the travel of policy ideas in political science, public policy and human geography (for example, Lendvai and Stubbs, 2009; Stone, 2012; Clarke et al., 2015). Table 1 presents the major differences between the generations.

We define generations through an ontological lens and on the basis of research design, methodological choices, and primary focus. In some cases, we override the self-identification of authors if there is a mismatch between their use of terminology and their approach. If, for example, an author uses the terminology of 'diffusion' but is interested in small-*n* case studies and the politics of it, we refer to it as a 'policy transfer' approach. In the many cases where studies fall into more than one category, we discuss their hybrid nature.

#### **DIFFUSION OF WATER POLICY MODELS**

Policy diffusion can be defined as, "the process by which policy innovations are communicated in the international system and adopted voluntarily by an increasing number of countries over time" (Busch et al., 2005: 149). The voluntary aspect is relative, that is, it means there is no direct coercion such that can occur with donor conditionality or through implementation of legal conventions. Strong pressures may apply even so, such as pressures to relax regulations in a competition for foreign direct investment (see, for example, DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), or ideational pressures to adopt policy tools that are generally seen as modern and desirable. This research asks *causal* questions about why policies diffuse and what patterns they follow.

Table 1. Four generations of policy travel research.

| Generation  | Ontology of policy travel   | Research design                                 | Methodology                                | Independent 'variables' that drive policy travel  |
|-------------|---|---|--|---|
| Diffusion   | Positivist; a policy diffuses if there is a formal adoption of a law or policy across jurisdictions   | Large- <i>n</i> comparative studies             | Mostly quantitative                        | International norms and forces; national-level systems; characteristics of policy innovations                                     |
| Transfer    | Positivist/realist; transfer takes place if there is exchange and if there is an impact of policy knowledge in place B that has come from place A or from multiple places                 | Small- <i>n</i> single or multiple case studies | Qualitative                                | Policy agents (transnational and national); coercive vs voluntary or negotiated transfers; capacity of nations to adopt new ideas |
| Translation | Interpretivist; policy changes as it gets translated; outcome in place B develops independently from the original policy in place A and from the multiple places through which it travels | Single or multiple case studies                 | Qualitative, ethnographic                  | Politics of meaning; contestations of scale and power struggles rooted in both rational and symbolic motivations                  |
| Branding    | Interpretivist; branding mobilises and promotes policy travel; outcome in place B is independent from the original policy in place A and from its 'brand'                                 | Single or multiple case studies                 | Qualitative, visual and discourse analysis | Politics of meaning; the power of ideas and images (unconscious and conscious); discursive effects of narratives on policy        |

Policy diffusion research in the water sector developed on the basis of earlier research in political science and international relations (Rogers, 1962, 2003). The key premise of this school is that national policies do not emerge independent from international context and that governments form some sort of a *world polity*, which is to say an interconnected system within which policies can diffuse freely (Dobbin et al., 2007). Building on the seminal work of Rogers (1962, 2003) on the diffusion of agricultural innovations, policy diffusion scholars have focused on three distinct areas within the spread of policies: (1) the dynamics of the international system, (2) national factors, and (3) the characteristics of a policy. The first strand of diffusion studies is largely interested in the international system – the norms, laws and donor funding – that encourages states to adopt particular policies. Busch et al. (2005: 68) demonstrate that water and soil protection laws, 'soft instruments' such as environmental reporting by private companies, and various administrative and planning tools get more popular as they gather normative force in international networks of scholars, policymakers and politicians. Metz and Fischer (2016) use network analysis techniques to investigate whether the Swiss policy on management of micropollutants in the Rhine basin – a novel issue in water quality protection – had spread to other riparian countries of the basin. They find that policy diffusion had, in fact, taken place and that it was driven by both transnational

networks of policymakers and by the features of the policy in the context of the respective national domains.

A large body of literature in water policy and politics does not explicitly adopt the terminology or approach of diffusion studies; instead, it is concerned with the international policy system and with the global networks that package and promote water policies. This research addresses the structural forces of diffusion; however, it does not research individual cases of adoption, nor does it try to explain patterns therein. Kramer and Pahl-Wostl (2014), for example, discuss the diffusion of IWRM in order to understand how this policy has emerged as a globally hegemonic and desirable policy model. Allouche (2016) provides another detailed examination of the intellectual history of IWRM and of the global policy networks that advance it globally; they also refer to the process as 'diffusion'. Both of the above-mentioned studies have leaned on earlier examinations of international networks of experts and executives who promoted IWRM, on public-private partnerships, and on river basin organisations (for example, Conca, 2006; Mollinga, 2006; Molle, 2008). Varady et al. (2008) do not refer to 'diffusion'; rather, they review global water initiatives such as conferences, programmes and organisations that have propelled the globalisation of water policy and management. Regardless of the language they use, these studies examine how policies acquire global visibility and how they are subsequently promoted for diffusion across individual nation states or subnational jurisdictions.

Reviews often indicate that national-level politics is not a focus of diffusion research and that it represents an important blind spot. We found that Metz and Fischer (2016) provided an extensive discussion of the political and governance characteristics of the Rhine riparian nations in adopting water regulation and that they paid as much attention to agents in individual countries as to those who coordinated international collaborations. Similarly, Zuin et al. (2019: 2), who studied the spread of a sanitation approach in rural areas, underline the importance of local agents as well as of national and subnational governance features. They explain diffusion as being a result of, among other factors, having an "absorptive capacity" at the national level that amounts to a strong political demand for quick wins in the sanitation sector. Neither Metz and Fischer (2016) nor Zuin et al. (2019), however, discuss the politics of adoption in individual nations. Zuin et al. (2019: 11) acknowledge this gap by stressing the need for future research to try to understand such features as "high level political leadership [and] the integration of sanitation into broader public health, housing, and hygiene improvement programs" (Northover et al., 2016; cited in Zuin et al. 2019). This assessment is in line with earlier criticism of policy diffusion research for its neglect of national-level governance and politics (see, for example, Busch et al., 2005; Howlett and Rayner, 2008; Pacheco-Vega, 2021).

The third key aspect of policy diffusion focuses on the features of a policy that make it more or less suitable for diffusion. Almost all diffusion studies focus on such policy features. Scholars have argued that policies dealing with, for example, long-term water degeneration diffuse more slowly than those that address acute crises such as floods and droughts (Busch et al., 2005). Similarly, policies are found to diffuse more slowly if they deal with problems for which no standard technical solution is available, such as land use, groundwater pollution, or aquatic biodiversity (Jänicke and Jörgens, 2000). King et al. (2006) investigated how well scientific models diffused across 220 watershed management councils in the US; they found that councils that employed management consultants were more likely to use scientific models and that the spread of models is thus linked to technical know-how available at watershed councils. Zuin et al. (2019) found that community-led total sanitation (CLTS) successfully diffused to dozens of countries thanks to its "attractive characteristics"; these included its perceived delivery of quick results, the behavioural approach to policy that was popular at the time in the international community, and the policy's compliance with hegemonic governance models of decentralisation and participatory governance.

The concept of policy diffusion is useful for understanding the global architecture that promotes the travel of policy models (Wescoat, 2002; Conca, 2006; Allouche, 2016). These studies have made important contributions to a nuanced appreciation of which policies are more likely to travel than others;

in some cases, they have made an explicit link between the global political environment and patterns of diffusion (see Zuin et al., 2019). This generation of research has been less successful in establishing a set of causal mechanisms for diffusion (see Howlett and Rayner, 2008); it has also been critiqued for its lack of attention to national-level political dynamics. Diffusion research acknowledges the importance of 'what gets diffused', but it tends to assume that a policy remains unchanged as it travels; it also tends to reduce policy to a single label, whereas in reality most policies are complex combinations of policy tools and policy objectives (Howlett and Rayner, 2008). Diffusion research, even so, remains popular with researchers of water policy, and many continue to use the term 'diffusion' even though in most cases such authors are not interested in large-*n* studies that look into the timing, patterns and features of (non)adopters.

### TRANSFER OF WATER POLICY MODELS

A number of new approaches emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s as a reaction to the shortcomings of policy diffusion research and as a response to more intense integration projects such as Europeanisation and regional integration around the world. These new approaches paid more attention to national-level politics and departed from quantitative methodology to embrace qualitative case studies. Dolowitz and Marsh (1996, 2000) have drawn a general framework of heterogeneous concepts under the umbrella of policy transfer (see reviews by Evans, 2004, and Benson and Jordan, 2011). Dolowitz and Marsh (2000: 3) define policy transfer as "a process by which knowledge of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political system (past or present) is used in the development of similar features in another" (cited in Benson and Jordan, 2011: 366). They also developed an appealing analytical framework based on six clear questions that guided exploration of the actors, processes, motivations and impacts of policy travel (Benson and Jordan, 2011). This approach has become popular with policy scholars interested in policy mobility.

Water policy transfer scholarship offers multiple accounts as to why policies travel and how they may have impact on the ground. The first reason for policy transfer is coercion as, for instance, where they are a condition for development funding. Examples of such coercion include the imposition of water policy innovations in Kazakhstan through UNDP funding (see Mukhtarov, 2013); and the imposition of water users associations (WUAs) in Uzbekistan (Veldwisch and Mollinga, 2013), Turkey (Özerol, 2013) and around the world (Rap, 2006: 1319). Direct coercive policy transfers may also occur between levels of governance. This occurs most commonly when central governments impose water policies on lower jurisdictional levels and where, for legal or financial reasons, these levels have little room for negotiation; such was the case in river basins in Australia, China and Bulgaria (Daniell et al., 2014).

Second, policies may be transferred in a negotiated and less forced manner, such as through the European Union's Water Framework Directive (EU-WFD). EU member states are obliged to implement the policies but they are free to adapt them to their own context (Thiel, 2009; Daniell et al., 2014). In the case of Turkey – an EU accession candidate member since 1999 – the EU-WFD has also had a sizeable influence on water policy. Demirbilek and Benson (2019) analysed the transfer of eight principles from the WFD to Turkish water law and policy. They found that while at face value, emulation was evident, there are critical differences in how institutions operate in the EU and Turkey's political systems. The EU-WFD, for example, compels member states to embrace transboundary river cooperation, as in the basins of the Rhine and Danube, but in Turkey this does not occur due to various historical and geopolitical conflicts with riparian nations. There are also significant differences between the EU and Turkey in the interpretation of particular policy tools such as privatisation and cost-recovery pricing. This finding is in line with Mukhtarov (2009), who reports that IWRM in Turkey has a different meaning and function than it does in the UK. In Turkey, IWRM takes the form of infrastructure-driven projects involving the construction of many dams and irrigation channels, whereas in the EU IWRM also includes a strong participatory and governance mechanism.

The third category is voluntary transfers. This refers to when countries that are otherwise not bound by any framework agreements or conditionalities come together to exchange knowledge and ideas and to undertake policy transfer projects (Fritsch and Benson, 2020). Such projects may seem fully voluntary; however, there is often an element of branding and marketing, of facilitation, and of some power differentials between countries. Minkman (2021), for example, undertook a study of how the Netherlands advised Bangladesh, Vietnam and Indonesia in water management; in the process, Minkman was able to illustrate the active work of Dutch policy actors to secure collaboration. Hasan et al. (2019) reached a similar conclusion in their analysis of the Dutch efforts to advise Bangladeshi policymakers in preparing the national development plan. Rap (2006) reviewed the transfer of a policy called irrigation management transfer (IMT)<sup>1</sup> to Mexico and argued that a policy model's success is created by the concerted efforts of donors and recipients and has often little to do with the reality on the ground. In the water sector, there have been many twinning projects among countries, cities, regions and organisations (Hermans, 2011; Demirbilek and Benson, 2019; Pow, 2014); guidelines on best practices have also been prepared by international organisations for uptake by individual nation states (GWP-TAC, 2000; GWP, 2005; UN-Water, 2018; OECD, 2018); and multiple initiatives have been undertaken on the promotion of North-South and South-South transfers through aid, trade and cultural exchange agendas (Hasan et al., 2019; Minkman et al., 2018; Mukhtarov et al., 2021). These initiatives stimulate free exchange of knowledge and ideas on how to manage water, however they are often motivated by the economic and geopolitical agendas of donors.

Policy transfer research continues to develop its scope and depth. Recently, there has been more attention to the role of private consultants in the transfer of water policies (for example, Newave, 2022). This development has been linked to the expanding influence of management consultancies in public policy (Prince, 2010, 2014; Pow, 2014; Stone et al., 2020, 2021). There is also emerging research on policy transfers of 'failures', that is, research that looks into how specific policy failures have discouraged actors in other localities from pursuing a particular policy reform. Lovell (2017, 2019), for example, discusses how the policy of advanced metering infrastructure (AMI) failed in its original setting of the State of Victoria in Australia and how, as a result, AMI acquired a negative reputation across Australia and internationally. Studying the transfer of policy failures and of worst practices offers a new view on how the travel of knowledge may prevent change rather than facilitate it.

In policy transfer research, as in the diffusion generation (Allouche, 2016), there is significant pluralism in the use of terminology. Demirbilek and Benson (2019), for example, make heavy use of the term 'policy transfer' (93 counts) rather than 'translation' (6 counts). This is the case even though, due to their focus on assemblages and on the interpretative nature of policy innovations, their findings fit both policy transfer and policy translation research approaches. In later work, they make extensive use of the term 'diffusion' to refer to the travel of water policy tools from the EU to Turkey; however, the research design and focus fit more with policy transfer generation as it focuses on political environment and on policy transfer agents and processes, and not on diffusion patterns across large-*n* countries (Demirbilek et al., 2020).

Policy transfer scholarship is a highly successful and influential generation of research that continues to inspire scholars. Its initial pioneering work offers a broad space for all kinds of processes and mechanisms through which policies move – the so-called 'dimensions of policy transfer'. The policy transfer literature typically refers to three processes of transfer: voluntary, negotiated, and directly coercive (Evans, 2004: 1). This was a major innovation as it suggested that there was a wide range of motivations for policy travel. Policy transfer research also underlined the politics in policy travel; this was in stark contrast to the apolitical 'mechanisms' of globalisation and competition that are prominent in diffusion research.

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<sup>1</sup> IMT often implies the establishment of WUAs and the gradual transfer of responsibilities to them.

At the same time, policy transfer literature has been criticised on multiple fronts; this includes some self-criticism from one of its founders, David Dolowitz (2017, 2020). Various scholars have agreed that policy transfer is not political enough in the way it addresses power differentials in policy processes. It has been further criticised for not focusing on small-p politics, that is, who mobilised the policy, and where, when, how and why was it mobilised. The criticism can be summed up in three major elements: (1) policy transfer research assumes a largely linear and rational process, whereas the reality is more contingent and uncertain; (2) policy transfer research assumes the immutability of policy models as they travel, whereas in fact they mutate significantly and can be interpreted in widely divergent ways by stakeholders; and (3) policy transfer research has been insufficiently attentive to the politics of scale by taking the existence of multiple levels of governance, such as international, national and local, for granted (Benson and Jordan, 2011; Mukhtarov, 2014; Clarke et al., 2015). That said, policy transfer scholarship has not taken a back seat since the 2010s; it continues to evolve and to inspire young scholars to produce empirical and conceptual work. This is well illustrated by the recent handbook on policy transfer, diffusion and circulation edited by de Oliveira (2021).

### TRANSLATION OF WATER POLICY MODELS

Policy translation has emerged as a reaction to the transfer and diffusion literature. In the water sector, Mosse (2004) and Mosse and Lewis (2006) were among the first to report the importance of studying development projects as *translations*. Rap (2006) is among the first studies to have illustrated the politics of producing and disseminating 'best practices' and 'success stories' with the example of IMT in Mexico. Mukhtarov (2014) provided a programmatic review of the field and formulated three categories that made it different from policy transfer; these categories of difference were: (1) the modification of meaning in the process of travel; (2) the politics of scale during policy travel; and (3) the contingency of policy processes and outcomes during travel. During translation, knowledge is not only reinterpreted; new meanings are also created in the space between the sender and the receiver (Lendvai and Stubbs, 2009; Freeman, 2009; Minkman, 2021).

Much research in that vein followed Mosse (2004) and Mosse and Lewis (2006), with an emphasis on assemblages and bricolage (Sehring, 2009; Merrey and Cook, 2012). A foundational tenet of policy translation is that the context matters in terms of how policies travel and what becomes of them. Contrary to what is argued by institutionalists and proponents of policy transfer, it is not a simple process of adaptation (Dolowitz, 2017, 2020); rather, a very complex process of interaction and transformation occurs between a policy model and a policy context at the end of which both are changed. Policy translation scholarship thus takes root in broader interpretivist and contextualist accounts of policy that emphasise the contingency and nonlinearity of the transfer process and its essentially contested nature, all of which makes the politics of meaning-making and meaning-breaking essential (Yanow, 1996; Clarke et al., 2015).

A notable study in this tradition is by Mehta et al. (2014), who critically reviewed the transfer of IWRM policies to South Africa, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. These authors investigate the implementation of IWRM in recipient countries and explicitly engage with the politics of meaning, power relations and contingency – the foci that we consider to be typical of policy translation studies. Yates and Harris (2018) study the 'human right to water' in terms of its translation from the global water discourse to Cape Town, South Africa and Accra, Ghana. Their research emphasises the importance of context in terms of how the principle of the human right to water intersects with neoliberal logics in the textured landscape of policy experimentation, transfer and adaptation.

Another instructive contribution comes from Hasan et al. (2019, 2020) and from Minkman (2021) and Minkman and van Buuren (2019); all of which focus on the process of translating the carefully created brand of the 'Dutch Delta Approach' to Vietnam, Bangladesh and Indonesia. Hasan et al. (2020) set out to understand how the Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100 had been created with the assistance of Dutch water-

sector actors. These authors claim that the Plan's adoption by the Government of Bangladesh in 2018 is commonly viewed by Dutch policy actors such as Deltares and the Embassy in Dhaka as a testimony to the success of the Dutch model of delta management. The argument of the Dutch actors is that once the world discovers Dutch know-how and the effectiveness of the practices developed in the Netherlands, their model will automatically diffuse. Hasan et al. (2020: 161), however, counter this argument by demonstrating that the travel of the 'Dutch Delta Approach' cannot be solely explained by its pragmatic virtues; instead, the "transfer entailed an active process of engagement, negotiation, and contestation" and the politics and power struggles thereof. Hasan et al. (2020) discuss three episodes: (1) the hard work of Dutch policy actors to create demand for their knowledge in Bangladesh; (2) the strategic choice of collaborators in Bangladesh; and (3) key use of international networks and study visits to win over reluctant policymakers and bureaucrats. Their work illustrates how the policy translation lens allows for the illumination of the policy work of multiple actors not only at the stage of policy design, but also in implementation, adjustment and reporting. By shifting the focus away from the actual features of a policy and towards the process of policy-making, policy translation research discounts the idea of the inherent transferability (or lack thereof) of a policy. It contests the argument that some characteristics of a policy make it spread more easily and it thus also discounts the research strand that investigates those characteristics, a strand that is central to policy diffusion research. Policy translation research, instead, takes the approach that the travel is mostly a function of what happens when a policy meets a new context and of the ensuing complex and largely unpredictable interplay of factors.

To sum up, the third generation of policy travel studies has engaged critically with the shortcomings of the previous generations of diffusion and transfer. Translation researchers have further developed the agency orientation of policy transfer researchers and focus on small-p politics. They have introduced new ideas such as the primacy of politics, the hybridity of scale, and the transformation of meaning in policies, assemblages and policy practices. Policy translation literature mostly comprises case studies that accentuate the context; it includes in-detail qualitative studies that focus on 'donor' or 'sending' countries (Minkman and van Buuren, 2019; Mukhtarov et al., 2021) and on implementation in 'recipient' countries (Hasan et al., 2020; Zegwaard et al., 2019; Laeni et al., 2021; Tutusaus, 2019; Ley, 2016). Some research in this tradition investigates the work of both senders and recipients (Hasan et al., 2019; Richter, 2020).

Dolowitz has recently published a few responses to criticisms of the transfer approach and suggests ways to move the approach further (Dolowitz, 2017, 2020). One such suggestion is that the study of water policy travels should include a more explicit definition of social constructivism. Another suggestion is to attempt to generate some patterns and qualified rules in discussing the politics of policy travels. A new generation of researchers is engaged in this research direction through working to bridge divides between the transfer and translation prisms (Minkman, 2021; Minkman and van Buuren, 2019; Minkman et al., 2018; Hasan et al., 2019; Hogendoorn et al., 2018; Büscher, 2019).

Some gaps, however, persist. The current research on translation often fails to seriously investigate the normative global-level discourse of international organisations that enables policy travel and translation (Conca, 2006; Molle, 2005). For example, the Netherlands branding of itself as a global centre of excellence routinely makes references to documents and statements from global forums such as the World Water Week in Stockholm, the Singapore Water Week, and World Water Forums, venues where the Netherlands actors have a strong influence. In a similar vein, the OECD (2014) report – which discussed the Netherlands water sector in detail – was extensively referenced in the Dutch Water Sector's international promotion material, the report being cited as proof of its expertise, currency and international reputation. Such connections between global discourses, the actions of donors/senders, and the resistance of recipient countries require more attention in future.

## BRANDING OF WATER POLICY MODELS: GLOBAL HYDRO-HUBS

This section focuses on the fourth and final generation of policy travel studies. It is associated with a novel phenomenon in the global water arena: the rise of so-called global hydro-hubs (GHHs). GHHs are nations and cities that brand themselves as centres of excellence in water engineering, management and governance and, by implication, as the natural choice of future clients with water-related problems (Joo and Heng, 2017; Mukhtarov et al. 2022). In an effort to be seen as GHHs, a number of countries have made efforts in a gamut of water-related forums and activities; they include among others the US, the UK, the Netherlands, Israel, China, South Korea and Singapore (Mukhtarov et al., 2021).

The branding of water technology, management and governance expertise is happening against the backdrop of an intensifying climate emergency (Richter, 2020). With climate change on the rise, demand for water governance expertise is soaring around the world. GHHs hope to expand in a potentially lucrative area. Merrill Lynch and the Bank of America have estimated the global water industry market to be worth between US\$800 and US\$1000 billion annually (Ahlers and Merme, 2016). With the immense importance of water within the Sustainable Development Goals, GHHs must balance three potentially conflicting goals: they must help achieve a more sustainable world, they must expand into new water markets, and they must secure reputational and geopolitical gains as crucial developmental partners. This section attends to both the rise of GHHs and the studies that have so far systematically addressed them.

Three features set GHHs apart from earlier efforts to disseminate best practices in the water sector: 1) state-driven efforts, 2) close association of aid and trade activities, and 3) aggressive and multi-level branding campaigns. On the first point, older forms of water policy travel have mainly been propelled by multilateral institutions such as international conventions and regimes and donor-funded projects; contemporary forms of global water governance, on the other hand, have demonstrated the renewed importance of the state actors (Biermann and Pattberg, 2012). Individual nation states seek to promote their foreign policy objectives through their own networks rather than through multilateral organisations. European Union member states, for example, provide over 75% of their foreign aid bilaterally (Hoekman, 2011: 13). The EU states seek to promote the interests of their domestic private sector in public-private partnerships (PPPs) that may also include quasi-public organisations such as water companies or regional water authorities. These bilateral efforts take place in a transnational policy environment that stimulates private sector financing in the water sector through tools such as blended finance and PPPs (OECD, 2022).

Second, GHHs make use of the new trend in development cooperation, that is to say, the integration of development aid with trade promotion. Development cooperation donors have traditionally balanced developmental motivations in giving aid with self-interest (Büscher, 2019). The most recent emphasis on self-interest is the so-called 'aid for trade and investment' agenda within which development aid is coupled with grooming a recipient country to become a trading partner. GHHs seek to mobilise development aid in the water sector in order to, in part, access new markets and achieve economic spin-offs (Minkman and van Buuren, 2019; Zeitoun et al., 2020; Mukhtarov et al., 2021).

Third, there is an increasingly strong emphasis on extensive branding of GHHs in such venues as global water conferences, major media outlets, international meetings of decision-makers, expos and seminars. The private sector's role now extends far beyond programme implementation; it has become involved in lobbying its own governments, forming private sector companies and partnerships, and actively participating in the shaping of global policy and discourse on water governance through, for example, participation in, or organisation of, mega-events and conferences such as the World Water Week, Amsterdam Water Week, and Singapore Water Week. This close association between nation states and the private sector in branding and merchandising water governance expertise is qualitatively new and requires scholarly and policy attention.

The concept of GHHs can be seen as an empirical manifestation of the new public governance trend of 'branding'. Branding is prominent in the literature on global urbanism and 'policy boosterism', the latter referring to a research strand that investigates how cities engage in place-making through their

policy efforts and marketing (McCann, 2013; Eshuis and Klijn, 2012). In the water sector, nation states and cities now compete with each other for adaptation markets using state-supported ideational campaigns that involve branding, project acquisition and implementation (see Mukhtarov et al., 2021). Below, we briefly review some empirical research from this strand.

Joo and Heng (2017) have identified Singapore's branding strategy as a key example of intensive nation/city branding. They argue that Singapore makes use of urgent international water issues to project an attractive image of a seasoned consultant eager to share its experiences with other states (ibid). Through mega-events such as the Singapore International Water Week and through funding various climate change related UN initiatives, Singapore aspires to cultivating an image of an engaged and competent global partner. Singaporean actors "brand themselves as problem-solvers aiming to mitigate common urban challenges" (ibid: 223). Carefully crafted and promoted imaginaries of a thriving present and of a fantasised successful future suggest a good commodity as Singapore showcases its "supposed expertise in housing, environmental services and water technology and speak(s) to the 'worlding practices' of the Singapore model" (Pow, 2014: 293).

Branding is not, however, limited to Singapore. The UK Flood Partnership (UKFP), in a press release on the occasion of its 2017 founding, stated that, compared to the Netherlands, "the UK has a much stronger sector but needs to improve in five key areas – ideation, connectivity, leadership, technology and partnerships" (Büscher, 2019: 814). Effectively, the UKFP is calling for a coordinated multi-actor effort to create a GHH. Such efforts extend well beyond flood protection: Zeitoun et al. (2020: 109) write that "[w]ater diplomacy is increasingly seen as a way for countries to advance national and often military interests rather than simply reach agreement about a transboundary resource".

Scholarship on the Netherlands branding of its water sector illustrates emerging directions in this generation of policy travel research (Minkman and van Buuren, 2019; Büscher, 2019; Mukhtarov et al., 2021). Three angles can be discerned from this current scholarship. The first is illustrated by Büscher (2019), whose article examines, "elements of the Netherlands' water history, geography, agential configurations, and the water infrastructural and conceptual inventions that serve as selectivities in the DWS [Dutch Water Sector] imaginary" (ibid: 814). This author demonstrates the savviness, intensiveness and ubiquity of DWS self-branding, which combine to make it a pre-eminent global player. The second angle of the branding aspect of policy travel research is illustrated by Minkman and van Buuren (2019: 114); they take a narrower approach, examining the creation of the Dutch Delta Approach (DDA) as a "Dutch trade-mark for exporting knowledge about adaptive delta management". The strength of the DDA brand came from its strong national networks of stakeholders, including public and private actors, universities and the diplomatic network of embassies and international organisations; it was further supported by an abundance of resources with which to create and push the brand in multiple forums. Hasan et al. (2019, 2020), in a similar vein, researched how DDA lands in Vietnam and Bangladesh and what happens to policy after it has been branded. These authors bring together the three hitherto disconnected bodies of literature: policy mobility, branding and implementation. Finally, Mukhtarov et al. (2021) look at the different discursive tools that are used in an early-2010s policy report that was commissioned by the Netherlands government to inform its water diplomacy efforts. They demonstrate how the report manages the tensions between two seemingly conflicting goals of water diplomacy, that is, helping build peace in conflict-ridden transboundary basins and securing economic profits for the Netherlands.

Policy branding research is very much in development across various strands of public management including environmental and water policy. This research builds on ideas from policy transfer and translation studies; it also generates insights into the new forms of governance as the private sector becomes more prominent. This research illustrates an important reversal of the trend that characterised much of the 1980s and 1990s, that is, the retreat of the state in favour of building multilateral and global institutions (see Varady et al., 2008). The return of the state and its branding of its own private sector

companies marks a new epoch in global water governance arrangements. The research is entirely based on case studies, however, and it is too nascent to be evaluated for its strengths and weaknesses.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Water policy travel research is prolific, diverse and eclectic. It builds on different research strands in the fields of public policy, urban studies, human geography, international relations and environmental governance. This review shows the literature to have two major trends. First, there is much conceptual development as new concepts emerge, partly as a response to established policy concepts, and conceptual development of approaches is constantly ongoing. The second trend is the dynamic change in the actual practice of policy travel; from being driven by donors and international organisations in the second half of the 20th century, policy travel is taking on new state-driven and bilateral forms as nation states reclaim their space in the global governance arena and promote their own private sector companies. These developments require new perspectives, which have fortunately been emerging, as demonstrated by the burgeoning literature on water policy translation and branding.

The diversity of studies is not surprising given the complexity of the subject matter and the long intellectual tradition within the social sciences of studying water policy in general and policy travel in particular. This review was guided by our categorisation of the four generations of policy travel research, which we used to compare and contrast the various approaches (Table 1). It does not, however, capture the entire diversity of the field. A great number of studies draw on various frameworks, terminologies and insights. Such 'hybrid' studies (see Mehta et al., 2014; Yates and Harris, 2018; Allouche, 2016; Minkman and van Buuren, 2019) are important in the pursuit of conceptual and empirical innovation. They bracket difficult discussions of ontology and epistemology and pursue empirically driven research that does not seek to promote a theory, but rather to understand a real-life problem. When authors use terms such as 'transfer', 'translation', 'diffusion', 'learning' and 'mobility' interchangeably, it may be confusing for commentators who seek to make sense of the field in terms of generic approaches and frameworks. At the same time, such research enriches innovation as various ideas mingle and mix, unconstrained by dogmas or theoretical battles around how policies travel.

It may nevertheless be useful for researchers to consider 'what' travels and whether the object of policy travel is mutable as it crosses boundaries. Such an exercise may help researchers and readers to distinguish studies that are more or less essentialist in their take on water policy processes. When IWRM, for example, is defined as a set of conditions that is necessary and sufficient for the advancement of a policy change, then a project to study how it travels may check the similarities between where it originated (for example, a blueprint) and where it landed; however, if IWRM is defined as a prototype and not a concrete set of principles, there is much more room for interpretation, and it no longer makes sense to analyse and compare the 'host' and the 'recipient' of the policy. Such clarifications may help remove confusion and facilitate dialogues across schools and generations.

A final observation from this review is that despite the huge diversity of approaches, one feature seems to connect all schools studying this process: the challenge of dealing with the tension between a desire to find patterns of policy mobility on the one hand, and the necessity to ground explanations in specific contextual circumstances. Future studies would do well to embrace both ambitions. In the process, they may find workable, even if temporary, patterns of policy travel that are based on particular boundary conditions and contextual variables and help generate research propositions. The point must not be to create and canonise a single approach to a field that is too dynamic and changing to be definitively captured. The aim, rather, should be to engage in an ongoing dialogue between different research communities in order to embrace the diversity of ways by which policy travel can be studied.

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