

**Making room for water.**  
**Managed-retreat as local practice.**

Silvia Bruzzone

c/o Bracque 5, Square du Perigord 75020 Paris, France

Climate change increasingly represents a central issue on public agenda and represents a leading sector for scientific production. Despite the proliferation of scientific works, little research is still done on the modes in which this issue enters concrete collective actions and organizational practices. Major efforts are being done to create any sort of indicators, highly sophisticated modelling systems, predictive analysis to build future scenarios and to contribute in decision-making. While a certain understanding has been reached on the existence of a global warming, little research is still addressed on the ways on which local interventions are actually structured on this issue. This is the point I raise in this article and the analysis I propose tries to give a contribution to such a lack.

By taking into account major events linked – to a certain extent - to climate change such as desertification, climatic migrations, inundations, landslides, one can make the hypothesis that one of the main implications of climate change is a reconfiguration in land organization and management.

Though climate change appears rather a new issue, it does not happen on a *tabula rasa*; it affects on “traditional” policy sectors. This implies a shift in socio-political configurations, modes of governance, vocabularies, power relations and represents a challenging perspective for organization studies. If it is so, the question is then how this “new issue” interacts and takes shape in already established organizational processes? How climate change is “operationalised” in local practices? In other words, what are the challenges posed by this issue in the definition of local interventions? Beyond indicators and future scenarios, what policy makers should take into account in the definition of adaptive public policies? And more importantly, as practices of land-use reconfiguration linked to transformation in climate conditions are likely to spread in the future and it is at local level that the major effects will be produced, the crucial question is what kind of theoretical and empirical tools the analysis should adopt to give account of the multiple actors, types of knowledge, artefacts, socio-technical organizational systems, discourses and governance configurations, and sectors engaged in such practices.

In this article, I claim that the theoretical tools provided by the sociology of translation and Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2006) might be a helpful guidance for the analysis in this particular research domain. The focus of this literature on processes of *ordering* and associations rather than actors and organizations suggests focusing on climate change reconfiguration practices not as taken for granted data but the objects themselves of the analysis.

The study explores a case of “managed retreat” or “dépolderisation” (Goeldner-Gianella, 2008; 2009-10) and in particular an example of “flood controlled area” in Flanders. In literature “managed retreat” is increasingly acknowledged as adaptation measure to climate change. It has acquired relevance especially in countries affected by coastal erosion: England in particular but also Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and, more recently, France. This is the core idea: as the scientific community has proved that the sea level is rising as a consequence of global warming, in the long term traditional coastal defences will not be a sustainable solution to coast protection, both in terms of costs and effectiveness. “Managed-retreat” may represent then an alternative solution (or part of the solution): wherever possible, dikes are breached, or lowered, to let rivers or sea overflow once arable/cultivated land. The land which is then submerged works as damper to water (whether inundations, storms, tidal floods), while acquiring a great ecological value. This anthropologically interesting practice reverses the ever long process of conquest of man over sea – by creating polders for human activities and for living – to let instead the sea regaining space. “More room for water” is the guiding concept which is spreading in coastal and river management facing the threats posed by climate change.

Until now, the research has mainly investigated the (certainly relevant) economic implications of “managed retreat” or it has proceeded in comparative surveys on public opinion’s acceptance in different countries (Goeldner-Gianella, 2008). In this sense, studies have mainly concentrated on the consequences and effects of the implementation of such a practice, as taken for granted solution or as *fait accompli*.

My interest is rather amount and focuses on the process through which managed retreat is performed and takes specific configurations in the local context. The suggestion in this paper is to consider the adaptation measure not as having a priori effects and or as being a standardized top-down solution. It is rather seen as process emerging from the local context and the result of specific connections among different actors, materials, discourses beyond the boundaries of formal organizations. The analysis proposes to take into account local

narratives in the definition of adaptation policies and in the end to consider implementation practices as distributed knowledge.

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