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# STEPHAN FARIS

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## Climate change: fighting water with water

A few [posts back](#), I told [davidlosangeles](#) that I would post my story on [how to adapt to rising sea levels](#), published in this week's Time Magazine.



Image via Wikipedia

It turns out the Netherlands is one of the few countries with a concrete plan for dealing with the consequences of climate change. With something like 2/3 of the population living below the level of the waves, the Dutch are very aware of how difficult it is to deal with rising waters. After a disastrous flood in 1953, they built what they call the Delta Works — a megalithic series of dikes, dams, locks and storm surge gates — for a total cost of about 5 billion Euros (roughly \$7.5 billion).

But climate change means the Delta Works won't be enough. This summer, following up on a report that estimated that the North Sea could rise by as much as 1.5 meters by the end of the century, the Dutch government declared it will spend 1 billion euros a year for the rest of the century to adapt the the effects of the globe's emissions. Put purely in spending terms, it's as if the Netherlands has to rebuild the Delta Works every five years.

The fact that the Dutch are planning so far ahead gives them the space to adapt in innovative ways. They're using the ocean currents to spread sand and bolster their coastlines. They're experimenting with water storage and floating houses. One of the big challenges is finding a solution for the IJsselmeer, a large inland lake created in the 1930s. Officials project it will need to rise by a meter and a half if it is to continue to drain into the ocean and provide the country with a reservoir of fresh water. Proposals to refurbish the dike that separates it from the sea include adding a transportation corridor, including new green space, integrating energy storage in the form of water tanks, or even experimenting with the generation of power through osmosis where the fresh water meets the sea.

Of course, what works for the Dutch might not be right for New Orleans or Bangladesh. Every country will be challenged by climate change in different ways, and many will face problems that have nothing to do with rising waters.

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But what the Dutch experience shows is [the importance of planning](#): of exploring for solutions and making sure there's money to pay for them:

The secret to the Netherlands' success isn't the strength of its barriers. "It looks like science and engineering," says Piet Dircke, an urban-water-management consultant at Arcadis. "But the main lesson to learn from the Dutch is funding." The country is divided into water boards, elected bodies with the ability to levy taxes whose sole responsibility is to provide safety from the waves. First formed in the Middle Ages, the water boards are the country's oldest form of representational government and a major factor in its flood-proofing prowess. "The value of a dike is only seen when it fails," says Huizinga. "The water boards mean that there is always the money to maintain them."

That's the significance of Dutch history for the talks in Copenhagen, where the allocation of adaptation funding for the poorest countries is shaping up to be a major point of contention. While the Netherlands can afford to keep its citizens dry, countries like Bangladesh — equally threatened by global warming — simply can't. The World Bank has estimated an annual cost to developing countries of \$75 billion to \$100 billion to adapt to rising sea levels. But rich countries have been reluctant to commit the funds. In the run-up to the talks, the Dutch were among the first to stress the importance of adaptation. They, more than anybody else, should know what that will take.

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