

Public Money & Management

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rpmm20

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**To cite this article:** Jannes J. Willems, Michael Duijn, Stéphanie IJff, Jeroen Veraart, Nienke Nuesink, Gerald Jan Ellen & Arwin van Buuren (2021): The lifecycle of public value creation: eroding public values in the Dutch Marker Wadden project, Public Money & Management, DOI: <u>10.1080/09540962.2021.1896557</u>

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2021.1896557

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Published online: 27 Apr 2021.

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# The lifecycle of public value creation: eroding public values in the Dutch Marker Wadden project

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the durability of public value coalitions in the Dutch Marker Wadden project: an internationally acclaimed water project. The paper compares public value creation by coalitions before and after project appraisal. Activities before project appraisal mainly worked towards the integration of values and interests, while activities after project appraisal facilitated disintegration. The findings underscore the difficulty of delivering a broad conception of public value, potentially leading to a hollowed-out result compared to the original interpretation.

#### **KEYWORDS**

Building with nature; coalition building; frames; project management; public–private partnerships (PPPs); public value; water management

#### IMPACT

Parties involved in public–private partnerships (PPPs) should be aware of the lifecycle of public value creation. The broad conception of public value as defined in the early stages, which is needed to ensure co-financing, often disappears during the implementation, as projects become bound to tight frameworks. Coalition building focuses more on securing project approval than on ensuring a full representation of values in the implementation stage. This dynamic can result in unsatisfied partners. Parties should therefore build in more checks and balances to prevent opportunistic behaviour.

#### Introduction

Joint public value creation has increasingly become the norm in international water management projects. Recent research on water management projects demonstrates how a broader set of goals and stakeholders is incorporated, leading to innovative public-private partnerships (PPPs) (Grotenbreg & van Buuren, 2018; Willems et al., 2018). In these cases, water projects not only manage flood prevention and water quality, but also extend to recreation, ecology and renewable energy generation. These newer water management projects are not managed by a single stakeholder but involve a wide range of stakeholders representing the different interests (Stoker, 2006).

So far, research has predominantly focused on how public value coalitions are set up and how such partnerships are created (Crosby et al., 2017). Less attention has been paid to the 'lifecycle' of these coalitions (Béland & Cox, 2016, p. 442) and, similarly, to the lifecycle of public value creation (Beck Jørgensen & Vrangbæk, 2011). Understanding this lifecycle is important, since the actors involved embody competing values and logics (Bryson et al.,

<sup>2017).</sup> Sustaining hybrid, integrated projects therefore becomes challenging, as authority and resources have continuously to be (re-)assembled (Alford et al., 2017). The literature on project management shows that, while initially a project needs to appeal to a broad audience, later on the stated objectives have to be obtained within a certain project scope expressed in terms of time, budget and guality (Koppenjan et al., 2011). Adopting a more constructivist understanding of public value creation (Meynhardt, 2009), we expect that public value will be differently interpreted over the lifecycle of a project. For example, public value may be deliberately defined in an ambiguous way in early project stages in order to appeal to actors with different interests (Béland & Cox, 2016). Later project stages, in contrast, may require a narrowed-down, unambiguous definition of public value that can be translated in contractual requirements of PPPs with private actors responsible for realizing the intended project. These more clear-cut definitions may be at odds with the interests of the initial, broad coalition of stakeholders and therefore may end up in clashes between stakeholders about the public value actually created (Van der Wal & Van Hout, 2009).

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This paper examines the durability of public value coalitions over time—before and after project appraisal—and how this impacts public value creation. Our research question was: How do key actors define public value in integrative water management projects, and what explains changes in these definitions over time?

In order to answer this question, we take a discursive analytical approach which argues that public values are continuously contested (Sharp & Richardson, 2001; Metze & Dodge, 2016). From this viewpoint, actors will strive for power, which could both challenge the configuration of existing public value coalitions and lead to the rise of new coalitions. We analysed the coalition dynamics in a case study of the Marker Wadden project (The Netherlands): a project that has been described in the international media as a frontrunner in integrative water management (Shimer, 2018; Boffey, 2019). The project involved the construction of small islands in a freshwater lake that would contribute to ecological restoration. The project was originally initiated by an NGO and subsequently adopted and pursued by the Dutch government (Grotenbreg, 2019). The project was managed by a PPP of the NGO and the national government; the PPP commissioned a private consortium led by a dredging company (Boskalis). Also, various research institutes were involved because of the experimental nature of the project. The project was delivered late 2020. This case study is a perfect example for studying the differences of public value coalitions over time, and how public value is interpreted. Moreover, The Netherlands is often considered an international frontrunner in regard to water management (OECD, 2014), so the lessons learnt here could be valuable for other contexts.

#### **Theoretical framework**

### Public value creation: an inter-subjective process of sense-making

Public value creation tends to be a new kid on the block for analysing the 'why' and the 'to what' of governmental action. While New Public Management (NPM) considers public value as something objective and measurable (Moore, 1995), the literature on public value creation adopts a more inter-subjective understanding (Meynhardt, 2009). From this perspective, actors construct their own, contextuallybound accounts of what public value might be. Consequently, public value follows from the deliberation of the actors involved and follows a dynamic, learning-based approach (Stoker, 2006). In the words of Crosby et al. (2017, p. 659), public value creation arises 'through dispersed efforts and distributed leadership in which much of the enabling work can be performed by agents without formal authority in the government system'. Public managers have to assemble authorization and resources for their value propositions from other stakeholders, so public value creation is not reserved for public professionals, but affects a much broader group of stakeholders and citizens (Alford et al., 2017).

These stakeholders jointly make sense of ongoing events in our social environment in hindsight, while simultaneously trying to find order in this sequence of events that evolves around us (Weick, 1995). This process not only leads to a definition of the issue in question, but also provides a course of action. Sensemaking leads to the formulation of frames and action strategies that can bring together a different set of stakeholders, which may have different goals. Together, these actors can form coalitions, bound together by the same frames (Hajer, 1995). Sensemaking is an ongoing process that will lead to continuous readjustments of either the frames or action strategies.

## Detangling public value as inter-subjective process

As the inter-subjective understanding of public value creation is our unit of analysis, we need to identify the ways that the actors involved make sense of their environment, formulate actions and create support for their ideas and actions. Based on a literature review, we detangled public value into four components:

- The frames developed: what public value?
- The actor coalitions: whose public value?
- The actors' motivations: why this public value?
- Activities: *how* public value is pursued by actors.

These components are highly intertwined and mutually shape each other—we only discuss them separately here for analytical purposes.

First, frames, or ideas, play a central role in defining public value (Schmidt, 2008). Frames consist of several central concepts and events that are sequenced in such a way that they become a coherent story (Weick, 1995). For example, events are 'loaded' with interpretation in order to fit the storyline. According to Béland and Cox (2016), frames that are more ambiguous or polysemic will appeal to a broader audience, and thus may bring actors together more easily. Moreover, attractive frames will also be more likely to be considered legitimate and to be enacted (Béland & Cox, 2016). Second, frames are supported and shared by actor coalitions that may have different individual interests, but find themselves in a shared storyline and thus a shared conception of public value. Frames may resonate with actors

because of similar belief systems and interests. Actor coalitions can be loosely-coupled groups of actors, but also highly institutionalized alliances (Hajer, 1995). Third, the motivations of actors to become part of a coalition and to pursue certain public values may differ. Motivations refer to the objectives of stakeholders and their underlying values. Coalitions can unite actors with different motivations, such as long-term growth (private interest), public legitimacy (public interest), or developing a grassroots initiative (societal interest). Finally, discursive activities explain how actors form coalitions, and how they develop and propagate shared storyline. These activities can be divided into either coupling or decoupling (Metze & Dodge, 2016). Actors can bridge perspectives by linking frames together, or demarcate perspectives, thus explicitly disconnecting one frame from another (Winkel & Leipold, 2016). In addition, these dynamics can occur both within established coalitions and between coalitions. The different types of discursive activities (coupling or decoupling; and between and within coalitions) form a typology of strategies that actors can follow to claim authority and impose their views on others.

#### Detangling public value as dynamic process

Research rooted in an interpretive, discursive paradigm states that frames are continuously challenged by actors, highlighting the power struggles behind sensemaking (Sharp & Richardson, 2001; Van Hulst & Yanow, 2016). Similarly, sense-making is a continuous process, so coupling activities may lead to actor coalitions that 'continuously reinvent themselves, break apart and reform' (Metze & Dodge, 2016, p. 367). The reconsideration of actors to either continue or break with an actor coalition can be considered frame reflection because reconsidered frames may lead to actors not wanting to be linked to specific coalitions anymore (Dudley & Richardson, 1999). The dynamic nature of sense-making is mirrored in the different rounds that projects go through (Duijn et al., 2016). In each round, stakeholders decide implicitly or explicitly if, and how, to continue with the project-reflected in either coupling or decoupling behaviour. Thus, we can observe our four components of public value in each round.

The literature on project management suggests that the major difference exists between rounds before and after project appraisal. Before project appraisal, two factors affect discursive activities (Béland & Cox, 2016). First, the degree of attractiveness matters: a likeable, urgent, storyline will lead more easily to a coalition that supports the idea. Key stakeholders may strategically misrepresent a storyline in order to attract more stakeholders required budgets being estimated too low, while the benefits are exaggerated (Flyvbjerg, 1998). Second, ambiguity can help to realize consensus and to connect actors with different frames and underlying values, but such a consensus can also be a form of 'negotiated nonsense' (Van de Riet, 2003).

After project appraisal, the execution of the project lead to discursive activities, which are not helped by ambiguity. Projects often adopt a 'predict and control' implementation style that positions the project scope as leading (Koppenjan et al., 2011). Ambiguity is considered a risk and is omitted as much as possible. This is even more necessary when it comes to the contract phase with private operators. 'Scope creep' should be prevented at all times, as this could obstruct the implementation. Increasingly, projects are shifting towards more adaptive implementation styles that are more receptive to uncertainties, so projects can better anticipate unexpected developments (Rijke et al., 2014). Here, some ambiguity is accepted and embraced, but only within the boundaries of the project mandate and formal assignment.

If we bring together the four public value components and the two different dynamics for public value creation (i.e. before and after project appraisal), we can create a conceptual framework that helps to understand the lifecycle of public value in integrative water projects—see Table 1.

#### Methodology

We followed a single case study approach. The Marker Wadden project in The Netherlands was chosen because it has attracted international attention as a frontrunner in the 'Building with nature' approach (Shimer, 2018; Boffey, 2019; Barciela Rial, 2019). It is a good example of joint public value creation. An NGO, the Dutch Society for Nature Conservation

Table 1. Conceptual framework.

			Before project appraisal	After project appraisal			
1	Frames	What?	A degree of frame ambiguity is preferred, so actors can relate their interests to this frame	Ambiguity narrowed down and specified into a detailed scope			
2	Actor coalitions	Who?	Broad array of stakeholders, as the frames are appealing to many	Smaller group of stakeholders because of the small scope			
3	Motivations	Why?	Integrating individual interests into the scope, connecting wider developments to the project	Securing the project scope, preventing 'scope creep'			
4	Activities	How	Coupling: oriented towards connecting stakeholders and interests	Decoupling to ensure scope delivery: internal confirmation and external demarcation			

Table 2. Introduction to the Marker Wadden project (Duijn et al., 2018; IJff et al., 2018).

	Stage	Timeframe	Description
Before project appraisal	1. Exploration	2004–2012	Studies and plans developed by national and regional governments about the future of the Marker lake. For example, national and regional governments formulated the ambition to create a 'future-proof ecosystem' in the Marker lake (2009)
	2. Planning	2012–2016	Plans developed by the NGO, Natuurmonumenten, which attracted initial funding from the national lottery. This started negotiations between the NGO and national and regional governments, leading to four contractual agreements between public and private stakeholders to realize 1,148 hectares of islands in the Marker lake
After project appraisal	<b>3. Implementation</b> 2016–		The project was delivered by a PPP consisting of the NGO Natuurmonumenten and the national water authority: Rijkswaterstaat
	4. Operation and maintenance	2020–2030	Managing the national water bodies is a responsibility of Rijkswaterstaat. The day-to-day operation of the islands is assigned to Natuurmonumenten

(Natuurmonumenten), initially launched the idea and then co-developed it with the Dutch national government. A broad coalition of stakeholders was formed consisting of public governments, private sector, and research institutes.

#### Introduction to the case study

Fake islands bring a Dutch lake back to life', reported the *New York Times* in 2018 (Shimer, 2018). New islands in the 'Marker lake' (in Dutch: Markermeer) were created to collect sediment and attract birds and other wildlife. The construction of these islands is one of many international examples that have embraced a Building with nature approach. Building with nature works with an ecosystem and is a more sustainable, adaptive and innovative compared with traditional, more engineering-driven approaches (De Vriend et al., 2015). The Marker lake is a large body of water (70,000 hectares; see Figure 1) that had a

low water quality, due to an accumulation of suspended sediment. The lake was closed off in 1976 to be reclaimed, but its future was contested for decades. several The national government, responsible for the water management in the lake, was developing new plans in order to improve the water quality and improve the lake's ecological conditions, and to comply with European legislation. Many of the proposed interventions were considered too expensive. For example, the national and regional governments opened a call to private parties in 2012 to restore the native flora and fauna in the Marker lake, but did not procure any of the plans (which ranged between 282 to 1194 million euros; see Grotenbreg, 2019).

Budget cuts in the Dutch administration after the economic crisis in 2008 led to a weakened priority for nature conservation by the national government. In 2012, Natuurmonumenten jumped into this void by developing a new plan that complied with

Table 3. List of interviewees.

Group	#	Function	Organization
Project team Marker Wadden	1	Project director Marker Wadden	Natuurmonumenten
(Natuurmonumenten and Rijkswaterstaat)	2	Stakeholder manager	Natuurmonumenten
	3	Strategic advisor	Natuurmonumenten
	4	Director, chair of steering group Marker Wadden, and member of executive committee Marker Wadden	Natuurmonumenten
	5	Project manager Marker Wadden	Rijkswaterstaat
	6	Project controller	Rijkswaterstaat
	7	Contract manager	Rijkswaterstaat
	8	Director product and project management, member of executive committee Marker Wadden	Rijkswaterstaat
	9	Co-ordinator Knowledge & Innovation Programme	Rijkswaterstaat
Contractor (private sector)	10*	Team manager	Boskalis
	11*	Project manager	Boskalis
	12*	Aquatic ecologist, co-ordinator Knowledge and Innovation Programme	Witteveen + Bos
	13*	Team manager ecology	Witteveen + Bos
National and regional governments	14	Senior policy advisor	Province of Flevoland
	15	Co-ordinator Large Waters	Ministry of Infrastructure & Water Management
	16	Senior policy advisor	Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality
	17	Director Water Safety, chair National Knowledge Programme Water and Climate	Rijkswaterstaat
Knowledge institutes	18*	Co-ordinator Knowledge and Innovation Programme	Natuurmonumenten
5	19*	Professor in aquatic ecology, project leader scientific research Nature in Production	The Netherlands Institute of Ecology
	20	Programme manager	EcoShape
	21*	Current co-ordinator Knowledge and Innvation Programme	Deltares
	22*	Previous co-ordinator Knowledge and Innovation Programme	Deltares

\* Duo-interview.



Figure 1. Location of the Marker Wadden islands in The Netherlands (Grotenbreg, 2019).

national and European frameworks (in particular the European Water Framework Directive and Natura 2000). The long-term plan consisted of the creation of about 6,000 to 10,000 hectares of man-made islands leading to more wildlife in the Marker lake. Natuurmonumenten would also use the project to attract new members. The islands would be constructed from sediment collected from the lake (an innovative water engineering approach) and, when built, the islands would provide recreation opportunities. Natuurmonumenten secured funding (15 million euros) from the national lottery (Nationale Postcodeloterij). The national and regional governments saw the potential of this unsolicited plan and decided to contribute as well. This led to a PPP with the aim of constructing 1,000 hectares of islands (Figure 1), with a project budget of 76.5 million euros. The project implementation started in 2016 and the project was delivered late 2020. Four project stages can be defined (Table 2).

#### Data gathering and data analysis

In order to reconstruct the four components of public value, we gathered three sets of data. First, a round of 18 interviews with 22 key stakeholders was held in 2019 (see Table 3). We included all perspectives: government, businesses, NGOs and research institutes. The perspective of government included both policy and practice at national and regional level. The business perspective was represented by the executing contractor and engineering consultancy. The NGO-perspective was represented by Natuurmonumenten and the knowledge perspective was represented by three research institutes. Interviews centred on the development of the project, the role of the organization the interviewee represented, and their perceptions on the collaborations.

Second, a reflection session was organized in 2020 with 10 stakeholders in which the main findings were verified. The 10 stakeholders were chosen in order to represent the breadth of viewpoints.

Third, documents, such as policy documents, contracts, internal documents and media coverage, were collected and used to verify findings mentioned in the interviews.

The analysis followed a linear, chronological path, in which 'the researcher stands outside the process and seeks to understand its contour backwards' (Langley & Tsoukas, 2016, p. 8). Consequently, we conducted a systemic analysis of the processes unfolding in our case (Collier, 2011). Interviews were analysed through the use of Atlas.ti (qualitative research software) and followed a three-step approach:

- Identifying the four elements of public value per project stage (see Table 2).
- Identifying the similarities and differences between the project stages.
- Looking for factors that explain changes between phases.

#### Results

#### Public value before project appraisal

Natuurmonumenten developed a broad and appealing frame about the project in order to attract additional funding. A private consultant representing the NGO explained: 'Nature is a topic that people usually pay lip service, but they do not want to invest an amount of money in it. You need other reasons as well. That's why I have constructed a story about the silt, water quality, recreation, and economic development' (#5). This story can be characterized as the creation of a multi-layered frame that encompasses three different public values. First, the frame emphasises the need for ecological restoration. The closure of the Marker lake led to very low ecological values. European habitat and water directives further increased the need for ecological restoration and water quality improvements. New islands would create a more dynamic system of landwater zones that would become, according to the plans, a 'birding paradise'.

Second, the frame incorporated opportunities for recreational use of the lake, which could attract visitors from across the country.

Third, the new islands would be created using the problematic silt in the lake. As a consequence, the project contributed to innovative water engineering practices. The use of silt in land reclamation and island creation is currently in its infancy. It is interesting for dredging companies to explore the feasibility of using this resource to create business opportunities where sand is in short supply or is too expensive to use. The Marker Wadden project offered private companies the opportunity to explore the use of silt. The three public values can be grouped under the umbrella term: Building with nature. This frame has a high ambiguity and can encompass both preservation and development opportunities, so it easily relatable to other actors.

Because of the appealing frame, the actor coalition became very broad. The developed story resonated well with national and regional governments, that wanted to improve the ecological conditions of the Marker lake but did not have adequate funding to do so. Also, the Dutch water engineering sector, including the national public water authority Rijkswaterstaat and the private sector (dredging companies such as Boskalis), was very interested in the plans. They regarded the project as cuttingedge engineering, ensuring that The Netherlands remained competitive in the international water sector.

The broad actor coalition demonstrates that the underlying motivations of the actors differ, which can be split into four motivations that build further on the frame. First, the national and regional governments and Natuurmonumenten were highly motivated to improve the ecological conditions in the Marker lake (see IJff et al., 2018). For example, a national plan (2009) mentions the need for a largescale and dynamic land-water zone northern part of the Marker lake. A national government official explained:

For quite some time, we had been discussing the possibilities of creating islands in the Marker lake, but we were afraid of the major financial investments required. Natuurmonumenten intersected our explorations by saying: it is possible with a small first step, which is financially manageable and for which we already have the first funds secured from the National Lottery (#16).

A second motivation for public parties to embrace the NGO's plan was triggered by the aftermath of the financial crisis in 2008, which allocated more responsibilities to private initiatives. A provincial official describes the context: 'You had the national cutbacks on nature ... and private parties had to take up their responsibility in nature preservation. So when Natuurmonumenten initiated this, nobody could say "no" anymore' (#18). The fact that Natuurmonumenten had already secured initial funding was considered a benefit by national and regional governments, so they also contributed.

Third, national and regional parties were motivated by the Building with nature concept because it might stimulate wider regional development. A national

Table 4.	The	public	value	lifecy	/cle	in	the	Marker	Wadden	project.
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		Before project appraisal	After project appraisal
1.	Frames	A multi-layered frame consisting of water quality, ecological restoration, recreation/spatial development, and innovative engineering	Frame of ecological restoration prevails (for example the creation of a birding paradise); other frames receive less attention
2.	Actor coalitions	NGO Natuurmonumenten with national and regional governments, private sector (dredging company, consultancies) and research institutes	<ul> <li>Core project team: Natuurmonumenten and executive agency Rijkswaterstaat (part of national government), with a steering group at a distance</li> <li>Construction team consisting of a contractor and an engineering consultancy</li> <li>Parallel coalition of research institutes</li> </ul>
3.	Motivations	<ol> <li>Overall need to upgrade the Marker lake's hydrological and ecological values (NGO, national and regional government)</li> <li>Facilitating private initiatives because of government reluctance (national and regional government)</li> <li>Spatial development along the lake and creating a new landmark (regional government, NGO)</li> <li>Innovative engineering in order to remain on top of the game (research institutes, private sector, national government)</li> </ol>	Because of a need for more funding, showing the evidence by constructing the islands quickly became central for the project team
4.	Activities	Mainly coupling through the creation of the multi-layered frame and co-financing structures	Mainly decoupling because of the more narrowed-down focus on constructing the islands as guickly as possible

official said: 'The area needs investments in ecology, in infrastructure and in urbanization. There was consensus that these elements should be developed in a balanced way' (#16). For example, regional governments saw opportunities in the proposals for recreation and urban development along the Marker lake's shoreline. Likewise, Natuurmonumenten hoped that the new islands would become a landmark that would attract new members.

The fourth motivation relates to the positioning of the project as innovative and experimental-most notably in regard to the water engineering component of building with silt. The existing silt in the Marker lake was going to be used to create the new islands, which required innovative forms of water engineering. Rijkswaterstaat styled itself as a 'launching customer' (#11) and promoted the project ---so the national government was willing to contribute more resources. The private sector and research institutes could both learn from this innovation and wanted to participate. These parties united themselves in the 'Knowledge and Innovation Programme Marker Wadden' and presented the project as a 'field experiment' for 'building with silt', emphasizing learning and innovation (IJff et al., 2018).

With regard to discursive activities, our analysis primarily found instances of coupling in order to build a broad actor coalition. First, Natuurmonumenten invested in the creation of the appealing Building with nature frame as discussed above. Natuurmonumenten had hired the consulting company, Royal HaskoningDHV, to conduct risk assessments and their reports convinced investors and politicians that the Building with nature frame was workable.

A second important discursive activity was the cofinancing of the project. The project had been framed by Natuurmonumenten as a multistakeholder project so each partner only had to contribute only a small amount. Natuurmonumenten told the national government that if it contributed 30 million euros, they would attempt to match that amount from either European subsidies or the private sector. The national government was attracted by this offer and confirmed its contribution. The regional governments joined with another 6.5 million euros. In negotiating the contracts for the project, the national government brought its executive agency, Rijkswaterstaat, to the table because of its extensive experience with the management of water infrastructure projects.

Meanwhile, Natuurmonumenten went ahead and commissioned a private consortium to deliver the project. Although Natuurmonumenten had not secured the full budget, it believed that by starting, and being able to show the impact, more funding would be received. The project initiator explained: We would need about 75 million euros, but we only had about 50 million euros. We were very open about that to the contractors. We decided to create a cut between what we could commission and what we would like to commission. We created a completely unexpected incentive for both parties. Usually a client does not want to commission additional work because that is very expensive, while a contractor would love to have additional work. With this cut, both sides benefit from additional work (#1).

This resulted in a shared interest in attracting additional funding because the NGO made its contractor co-responsible for attracting additional resources. Furthermore, the national and regional partners were eager to find more resources, to ensure that the full project would be delivered.

This opportunistic approach, however, resulted in decoupling. The absence of new funding led to polarization within the actor coalition. As water management is considered a public task in The Netherlands (OECD, 2014), the private sector was unwilling to invest. Also, European funding was not forthcoming. The national government considered that Natuurmonumenten was the lead for attracting resources and had failed to live up to their promises. However, Natuurmonumenten did not consider themselves solely responsible. To overcome the shortfall in budget, Natuurmonumenten proposed that the four parties in the coalition-Natuurmonumenten, the national government, regional governments, and the National Lotteryshould together make one more contribution in order to meet the required 76.5 million euros (7 million euros each). The government partners were not pleased but, eventually, they made their contributions. Financing pressured the actor coalition, but did not result in it disintegrating.

To conclude, the four components of public value were defined in a broad way in order to incorporate as many interests as possible—and therefore appeal to multiple investors (Table 4). On the one hand, an appealing frame (Building with nature) was deliberately ambiguous, while delivering strategic policies for the area. On the other hand, the search for a broader definition of public value was accompanied with a set of activities that made stakeholders jointly accountable for obtaining this value through co-financing.

#### After project appraisal

The stage after project appraisal followed quite a different rationale compared to the previous stage, reflected in a disintegration of public value. Four components of public value emerged from the data analysis (see Table 4).

Concerning frames, the multi-layered Building with nature frame was narrowed down to the creation of a birding paradise to show the ecological benefits of the project to attract additional funding. As a result, a discourse of getting to results became dominant. Other elements of the initial broad frame received less attention, such as the innovative engineering. For example, the experiment with building with silt was delayed, and the project team and its contractor Boskalis made pragmatic choices in order to create the islands in an efficient manner, for example using sand from another nearby project the company was involved in. Some interviewees were critical about this choice, as some partners, such as Rijkswaterstaat, had contributed funding in order to foster innovative water engineering practices.

Despite these pragmatic choices, the project was described as innovative and successful in the Dutch and international media. Natuurmonumenten was eager to show evidence of ecological restoration in order to keep all stakeholders happy and tie the actor coalition together. All actors profited from the publicity given to the project: contractors hoped to receive new work as a result, public stakeholders like to emphasise the future potential of PPPs and cofinancing, and the NGO can appeal to its members. For the outside world, the multi-layered frame of Building with nature is still very much in place; however, insiders are increasingly questioning this frame. Because these insiders are likely to profit from the positive image, they may well never articulate their concerns publicly.

The broad coalition of actors established a decisive project team, consisting of the NGO Natuurmonumenten and the public agency Rijkswaterstaat. Rijkswaterstaat is known for its cando mentality, while Natuurmonumenten wanted to show tangible results for its members, stakeholders and constituents. Once the scope for the project was defined, the other elements of the Building with nature story faded into the background. Other parties received a seat in the steering group, which monitors the project team from a distance and await the first results after project delivery. Interviewees warn that some elements of the public value may not be achieved in the project and that the steering group lacked checks and balances to influence the course of the project. In addition, the project was 'handed over' to the contractor who was keen to build this eye catching and novel project, not being concerned with the fact that 'the how of the project' was one of the public rationales to start and fund it in the first place.

In terms of motivations, the project team was driven by securing the project scope. In the project definition, ecological restoration targets were translated into the construction of new habitat, for which new islands needed to be created. Therefore, the project team became occupied with the construction of the islands as quickly as possible. This was further motivated by the need to attract additional funding. By being able to show results (the islands), preferably with ecological improvements, investors may be more willing to contribute.

Actors that had different goals, such as stimulating regional development and water engineering innovations, did not always recognize themselves in these more narrowed-down goals. This became most clearly visible in the knowledge programme. Research institutes were planning to start a research programme, in which the development of the islands would be monitored, leading to new scientific knowledge on ecological restoration, building with silt and sand, and governance. However, these parties failed to attract sufficient research funding in the first instance. When the project was up and running (after 2016), the Knowledge and Innovation Program Marker Wadden was started in parallel (2018). The project team, however, felt that this programme did not fall within the project scope. The project team considered the construction of the islands a unique field experiment, producing new knowledge on how to construct new islands. The team was less willing to invest in more scientific research activities that would not directly benefit the project. Meanwhile, participants from the research institutes thought that, although the project was framed as a 'field experiment', it lacked academic rigour. Whereas the public value to be created was initially broadly defined, it fell apart in disconnected tracks.

The fourth and final component of public value, discursive activities, predominantly contains decoupling activities after project appraisal. The framing of 'getting to results' and the creation of a 'decisive' project team that could deliver results quickly led to a break-up of the multi-layered frame. This more focused scope related to the ambitions of the initiator of the project, Natuurmonumenten, and the other actors' motivations were less recognized. This led to public value conflicts, for instance the field experiment of building islands with silt.

The phase after project appraisal was driven by pragmatic choices in order to construct the islands and demonstrate the potential compared to the previous phase. In the day-to-day execution of the project, the multi-layered frame developed earlier narrowed down to a more mono-centric aim (Table 4). This results in an underrepresentation—or even misrepresentation—of some public values. Nevertheless, to the outside world, the project team still communicates the multi-layered frame. Therefore, some interviewees question to what extent the public value stated beforehand will be delivered in full.

#### **Conclusion and discussion**

This paper has analysed the lifecycle of public value in water management projects, i.e. from the initiation stage to the implementation stage. Our research question was: How is public value defined over time in integrative water projects, and what explains changes in the definition?

Our case study has shown that the way public value creation is formulated, sustained and communicated evolves over time. All four components of public value (frames, actors, motivations and activities; see Table 1) changed significantly between the two project stages. Discursive activities before project appraisal mainly worked towards the integration of values and interests, while activities after project appraisal enhanced disintegration (see Table 4). Broad coalition building, supported by an allthat encompassing frame enabled different motivations for endorsement, resulted in a variety of discursive activities that coupled public, private and societal interests. After project appraisal, the coalition slowly fell apart, and the frame and the motivations shrank to just 'getting the project done'. This led to an erosion of public values because some promises made in the earlier stages could not be delivered. Formal contracts played a pivotal role in the definition of public value: elements that did not return in these agreements were dropped during the implementation stage, so individual interests started to prevail, replacing the collective intentions behind the project. The multiple values that were included in the initial project specification were not all visible once the project was realized, for example building with silt.

These findings underscore the difficulty of guaranteeing a broad conception of public value from planning to implementation (Bryson et al., 2017). Public value is inter-subjectively constructed, but becomes tangible once the groundwork starts. Before project appraisal, the need for co-financing of the project brought parties together under the umbrella term: 'Building with nature'. After funding was secured, individual interests took over and parties started to 'cherry pick' from the mutually developed frame. The project team wanted to show results as quickly as possible, which was pursued with more traditional forms of project steering and traditional contract forms that did not allow for the variety of public values initially discussed. This led to an erosion of public values in the stage after project appraisal.

Despite the reduction of public values in the later stage, most actors held on to their original interpretations. Moreover, the initial definitions of public value were still being used in some external communications. Since all parties had invested substantially in the project, the stakes were too high for them to publicly acknowledge the shortcomings and raise this discrepancy. So the coalition was polarized internally, but not as far as the external world was concerned.

The implications of our research for public value creation in integrative water projects are twofold. First, it is crucial for initiators to get parties committed, so they cannot bail out at later stages without losing face. Project initiators can strategically make use of this, while investors should build in checks and balances to safeguard their interests. The deliberate ambiguity of public value in the early stages of a project can otherwise lead to misinterpretations; or even polarization, in later stages, once stakeholders start to realize their value is not being represented as they thought it would be. A limitation of our study is that it is only partially longitudinal, so these effects cannot yet be fully included in the analysis. Second, while public value management principles were important in the initial stages of the project, the implementation phase was driven by New Public Management ideas, with a focus on realizing results within fixed frameworks of time and budget. Steering groups that represent all public values may operate too much of a distance to be effective. Future projects should therefore create construction teams in which the breadth of public values is better represented, thus involving both governments, private companies, NGOs and research institutes.

#### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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