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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Making ripples or waves? A critical analysis of a Dutch youth water vision

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Abstract

As the climate crisis continues, the question of who gets to shape the future, and how, has become increasingly urgent. Visions of the future are the building blocks of the futural public sphere; spaces where futures are imagined, deliberated and pursued. Desirable, alternative futures and pathways for their realisation reveal whom a group considers to be important social actors and what they believe are the necessary political levers for enacting change. Youth, although often marginalised in futural and environmental politics, are no different. In this paper, we ask how a future vision created by a Dutch youth environmental advocacy group seeks to intervene in the futural public sphere of water governance in the Netherlands. We employ techniques of close reading, thematic content and critical discourse analysis, and concepts of protagonists, antagonists and victims and of the future. Our findings reveal that the vision primarily extends existing governance frameworks into the future, reflecting dominant beliefs in Dutch political culture about pursuing change, and point to a potential gap between the politics of participation and politics of imagination in this instance of participatory futuring.

Keywords Future visions, Water, Netherlands, Critical discourse analysis, Futural public sphere, Social actors

Introduction

Often considered to “have the largest share of any future” ([17], p. 370), ‘youth’ are emerging as an important social demographic in environmental politics. They, and their future kin, will ultimately have to live in the futures we are seeding in the present. As climate change compounds inequality around the world [29, 31], these futures become more precarious and the question of who gets

to shape the future, and how, becomes urgent. Young people are a heterogeneous and dispersed constituency, engaging in diverse activities and using varied strategies to participate in environmental politics [53, 54]. One such strategy is that of creating future visions [3, 17, 59].

Futures exist as shared mental models and socio-cultural imaginaries. They are evoked and envisioned in cultural artefacts such as policy documents, political speeches, popular media, and more overtly futural objects like predictions and scenarios [23]. Scholars of Futures Studies, Anticipation, and the Sociology of the Future, have long argued that such visions, images and ideas about futures motivate and orient action in the present [44, 56–58]. As a strategy for shaping public discourse, creating explicit ‘future visions’ is generative and offers ways to critique the status quo while expanding “the repertoire of ideas about the future available for public deliberation” ([23], p. 14).

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Thinking with and through futures draws attention to intergenerational responsibility, foregrounding how present actions shape future worlds [69]. The application of futuring methods like statistical forecasting and scenario planning to environmental concerns has arguably expanded the temporal and spatial scales of public imagination [41]. Today more creative, qualitative, and participatory futuring approaches promise to make diverse and marginalised publics active participants in sustainability transitions and environmental politics [24, 67]. Armed with visions made on and in their own terms, such groups can better orient actors towards their cause and intervene in public discourse about the future, what Goode and Godhe [23] term “the futural public sphere.” In the face of “monopolize[d]” ([22], p. 114, [23], p. 127), “colonise[d]” [47] or otherwise “captured” futures [27], greater involvement of (marginalised) publics, like young people, is often seen as central to pluralising and democratising ‘the future’ [7, 39, 66]. Including them, it follows, may help challenge the future imaginaries and futuring practices that have created our increasingly precarious presents and threaten desirable futures.

In this paper, we consider how future visions may seek to act as interventions in the futural public sphere by considering a case that presents itself as a call to pursue an alternative, desirable future. The *Youth Water Vision* was created in 2023 by the *Jonge KlimaatBeweging* (translates to Youth Climate Movement, hereafter abbreviated to JKB), an environmental youth advocacy group in the Netherlands run by volunteers between the ages of 16 and 32. The vision paints “a picture of how we will deal with water in 2040 if it is up to Dutch young people” ([35], p. 2), and presents itself as “not only an invitation to conversation, but above all a call to action” ([35], p. 26). How, when, or even if, something will have an impact cannot entirely be predicted when it is created and released into the world [64]. But by examining this vision one can consider its potential readings or interpretations, the intentions of its creators, and the forces influencing them [19, 26].

We take the vision’s stated intentions as our starting point and ask, *how does the JKB’s Water Vision seek to intervene in the futural public sphere of water governance in the Netherlands?* Answering this question calls for an analysis of both the representation of social actors in the vision, and how this representation may reaffirm or contest current arrangements and assumptions in this context. In the following section, “**Future visions as tools to orient social actors**” we draw on literature from Futures Studies, Transitions and Systems Research, Sustainability Science and Social Psychology to explain how future visions can orient actors within the futural public sphere, and what is the value of taking social actors as a unit of analysis. In Sect. “**Method**”, we explain our choice and

use of methods. In Sects. “**Representation of social actors in the Water Vision**” and “**Considering context**” we analyse the vision text and context respectively, before contrasting them and returning to our research question in Sect. “**Contrasting text and context**”. We conclude in Sect. “**Conclusions**” by suggesting possibilities for future research.

Future visions as tools to orient social actors

All environmental, social, and political movements are futural in the sense that they hope to bring about change (or maintain stasis) in the later-than-now. However, some groups explicitly employ futures rhetoric or futuring techniques to rally support and intervene in the futural public sphere. Scholars argue that all futures and futuring processes can perform this social function [25, 56], but how they do so often depends on how actors approach ‘the future’ [44, 47]. Is it understood as predetermined and ‘closed’ or ‘open’ to influence? Is it approached through a lens of probability or preference? In the latter case, Muiderman et al. [49] assert that “visions, scenarios, and back-casted pathways are intended to mobilize collective action towards more desired futures” (p. 12). By linking desirable futures to “real utopias” that exist today [76], visions can also ‘thicken the present’ [63] with the possibility of things being otherwise, and reinforce motivations for action. In contrast, visions may also close down future possibilities if they reaffirm existing imaginaries [27].

In addition to prescribing a preferred image of the future, visions also assign preferred actions and roles for social actors. That is, they orient not just by *what* they imagine the future will look like, but also by *how* they imply these futures may come to pass [23]. For visions to be effective in sustainability contexts, Wiek and Iwaniec [74] argue they must have relevance for social actors, recommending a focus on “real people, their actions and activities, their roles and responsibilities, their motives and rules” (p. 503). Social psychology suggests that engaging in “imagined experiences” can build ‘self-efficacy’, the belief in one’s ability to “produce desired effects and forestall undesired ones”, which in turn may incentivise action ([5], p. 75, [1, 43]). It seems a vision’s motivational power lies in how it represents social actors and the capacity to act it attributes to them.

However, if the aim is to orient actors towards ‘transformative’ change, then these representations must also challenge existing roles and arrangements in any given context. Goode and Godhe [23] argue that, “Whether through explicit or implicit reference, or through silence on the topic, visions of the future are always premised on assumptions about agency and the politics of change” (p. 122). Such assumptions can include who has capacity or responsibility for action, who might support or oppose

a certain future, and what forms of action are seen as plausible or preferable for different actors within a given context. Future visions therefore shape the roles that societies cast different social actors in, both in the present and imagined futures, and as such form an important component of what scholars' call 'the politics of imagination' [13, 27, 50]. Wittmayer et al. [75] argue that societal problems often persist because "actions tend to build on 'old' role understandings, rather than explicitly questioning current ones" (p. 54, see also [74]). They suggest that shifts in roles can signal deeper changes in "the broader social fabric" (p. 46). Analysing the behaviour and arrangement of social actors in a vision and comparing their future roles to those in the present can reveal whether a vision calls for 'transformation', 'reformation', or 'maintenance' of the status quo [20, 23, 50], and, therefore, how it seeks to intervene in the futural public sphere.

Transitions Research provides several typologies for classifying social actors based on their positions in governance systems, sectors, institutions, or aggregated networks [4, 21]. Wittmayer et al. [75] make a distinction between "social roles" (e.g. citizen, policymaker, entrepreneur) and "transition roles", meaning the "roles through which actors support or hinder a specific sustainability transition" (p. 47). A similar distinction exists in analyses of youth climate activism, where researchers suggest youth position past generations, governments and media as 'villains' who created and have failed to address the climate crisis, and themselves as both 'victims' of this (in) action and 'heroes' who will bring about change [28]. While not widely used in transitions literature, 'victimhood' appears useful in participatory futuring. Organisers may position marginalised groups (including young people) as "victims of the future" to justify their inclusion, hoping that participation enables them to become "protagonists" who shape the future rather than merely suffer its consequences ([7], p. 6). In a similar vein, participatory design researchers advocate for casting children in 'the role of protagonist' within participatory practices as a way to oriente the process towards empowerment [32].

To understand how actors can pursue system change, Transitions and Systems Research often uses the concepts of 'levers' and 'leverage points'. Frameworks vary, but broadly, a system can be analysed via: (1) behaviours and practices actors perform; (2) rules and policies; (3) governance and organisational models; (4) values and worldviews underpinning the system; and (5) feedback loops between these elements (for review see [51]). Actors may intervene at any of these 'leverage points', but Meadows [46] argues that the most powerful interventions occur at the level of values and culture, which are also the hardest to change. Such typologies can help understand how future visions position certain actors to

intervene at certain leverage points, whether those positionings reinforce or challenge existing arrangements, and thus deepen an analysis of a vision's transformative potential.

Engaging with this interdisciplinary literature has led us to understand 'social actors' as both a vehicle through which futures are pursued and a site where assumptions about agency and change surface. As such, social actors provide a valuable entry point for understanding how future visions can orient actors and intervene in the futural public sphere. Before moving to our analysis, we briefly describe our approach.

Method

This research seeks to understand how future visions can act as interventions in the futural public sphere. This calls for interrogating how social actors are represented in a future vision, and how these representations may reaffirm or contest current arrangements and assumptions in the specific context within which the vision exists. Critical discourse scholars contend that language is a site where values and assumptions can be observed in action. While often associated with the critique of hegemony, Fairclough [19] argues that in times of crisis, "critical research should shift from critique of structures to critique of *strategies*— of attempts, in the context of the failure of existing structures, to transform them in particular directions" (p. 14, original emphasis). In other words, rather than continuing to simply diagnose what is wrong with the status quo, critical analysis should study the strategies employed by actors looking transform existing arrangements. Similarly, Goode and Godhe [23] argue that Critical Futures scholars should examine future visions that might otherwise remain marginal. Both advocate a form of 'positive' critique, for reflecting on and refining rather than dissuading efforts to imagine desirable alternatives. We understand the Water Vision as such an effort, an intervention aimed at shifting the status quo of Dutch water governance. By calling for systemic and cultural change, the vision clearly expresses its intention to motivate social actors toward an alternative, desirable future. That it is created by and in the name of youth, which means it is an intervention by a group generally marginalised in futural and environmental politics [7, 17]. This stands in contrast to the majority of visions and scenarios of Dutch water futures, which are generally created by governmental agencies and research institutes and primarily involve experts and institutional stakeholders (for example [6, 11, 14]). At the time of inception, the JKB's explicit concern with inclusivity and climate justice signals a desire to address issues of inequality and representation [36], making the Water Vision a unique case.

In conducting our analysis, we drew on techniques from close reading [55], thematic content analysis [60],

and critical discourse analysis [19, 42] to understand the Water Vision as a text that both seeks to shape and is shaped by the socio-cultural context of Dutch water governance. These interpretive forms of analysis are generally seen as distinct approaches that engage with texts in different ways towards different ends, and so it is worth elaborating a little on how we employed and combined these approaches to meet our own goals. Our analysis concentrates on the Youth Water Vision [35] but also includes sections of the JKB's Climate Agenda 3.0 [33]. The latter is the source material the former was developed from, and the Water Vision includes many references to the Climate Agenda. While connected, we treat them as different documents. Our analysis began with an initial close reading of the Water Vision for legibility and useability [55] followed by open coding of the Water Vision and relevant sections of the Climate Agenda to allow us to build an understanding of the text in and on its own terms, as well as refine our research aims and questions. In this early phase we also employed the technique of word counting from critical discourse analysis, whose sensitivity to the representation of social actors in texts also supported us in noticing that some actors dominated the Water Vision while others appeared to be absent.

After building familiarity with these texts and engaging with the literature reviewed in Sect. "Future visions as tools to orient social actors", we designated the Water Vision as our primary object of analysis, the Climate Agenda as a supporting document and social actors as our primary analytical unit. Both the Water Vision and Climate Agenda are written single scenarios, available in Dutch and English. While there are accompanying illustrations, these mainly represent the themes of the document, rather than the imagined future. As such, our analysis was primarily textual. All direct quotes in this paper are from the English versions. This more formal phase of textual analysis involved rounds of inductive and deductive coding to identify social actors, categorise them according to temporality (i.e. situated in past, present, or future), and connect them to levers for action. These steps enabled us to see who is doing what, with whom, in the future, and formed a basis for categorising social actors according to future roles. We combined insights from the literature to categorise social actors in the future as protagonists (actors who have agency and will support the vision), antagonists (actors who have agency and may oppose the vision), and victims (vulnerable actors, with little agency to affect the future who the vision advocates for).

Ideally, in critical discourse analysis [19] and historicist or contextual approaches to close reading [55], textual analysis is supplemented with interviews or ethnographic observations to draw connections between the text and

context. We contacted the JKB, but organisers communicated that the volunteer nature of the organisation prevents them from accommodating requests from researchers and other parties, and so we were unable to conduct interviews or observations to develop a nuanced understanding of the vision's intermediate, organisational context. Neas et al. [53] note such challenges are common when studying youth activism and suggests textual analysis "can be a way of engaging with young people on their own terms" when their participation proves difficult (p. 4). As such, our analysis of the contexts of production and reception relied on publicly available material about the Water Vision and JKB. Our understanding of the socio-cultural context of Dutch water governance is informed by literature review and five years of open-ended ethnographic engagement with the Dutch water sector. This allowed us to consider how the representation of social actors in the vision relates to their current roles in Dutch water governance, and form an argument about how the Water Vision as a text seeks to intervene in this futural public sphere. It is important to note that as an interpretive form of analysis, our reading of the vision should be evaluated against the coherence and plausibility of the argument constructed, rather than any external criteria. This includes how well the interpretation is grounded in textual evidence, how it is consistently applied, and how persuasively it is situated within the socio-cultural context in question. This interpretive approach enables us to make an argument about the vision's intentions and strategy for intervening in the futural public sphere of Dutch water governance, however it does not allow us to study the visioning process, nor consider how the process may have sought to shape Dutch water governance in 'less direct' ways (e.g. learning or networking of participants). While certainly interesting lines of inquiry, they are beyond the scope of this research paper.

Representation of social actors in the water vision

In the Water Vision social actors are represented through nouns, pronouns, descriptions in the written text and figures in illustrations. Not all actors are situated in a future context, as the vision moves between describing issues in a problematic past or present and depicting a preferable future. For example, "Because regional water authorities maintained low groundwater levels for the use of heavy agricultural machinery [...], we [now] involve the agricultural sector and farmers in the transition to sustainable agriculture" ([35], p. 15). Here, water authorities are situated in the present, while farmers are placed in the imagined future. Table 1 lists prevalent terms used to describe actors situated in the imagined future, grouped at sentence level. We also grouped terms referring to

Table 1 Most prevalent labels for actors situated in the future

Term	Occurrence
Governmental actors	18
- Regional water authorities	9
- The government	6
- Central/national/Dutch government	3
- Municipalities	3
- Provinces	3
- Ministries	2
- Dutch legal system	2
Farmers	9
Companies	6
Future generations	5
Polluters	5
Individuals	5
Residents	4
Humans	3
Stakeholders	2
Citizen	1

Table 2 Most prevalent personal and possessive pronouns in Water Vision

Pronoun	Occurrence
we	190
our	58
it	39
their	16
you	12
us	10

governmental actors. Table 2 shows the most prevalent personal and possessive pronouns in the document.

Actors are primarily described in terms of social roles [75], often in plural form, which collectivises and generalises them into types (e.g. “regional water authorities”) instead of specifying an organisation or person (e.g. The water authority of Delfland). The collective pronoun “we” dominates the document. In 129 sentences it is situated in the future, making “we” the most prominent future actor in the vision. Notably, while “young people” and “experts” are mentioned as contributors to the vision, they are not described as actors in the future. Illustrations represent people in occupations or interacting with water in their daily lives.

“We”

The most prominent actor in the Water Vision is a generalised “we” who are present in all levels of the social system. At the level of behaviour, “we” are imagined as adopting plant-based diets, practicing circular water use, and constructing nature-inclusive, water retentive architecture. “We” create and implement policies supporting sustainable water management and a National Water Strategy. “We” also pay the “true price” for non-essential

water as subjects of a tiered taxation system ([35], p. 7). When participating in governance and diplomatic processes, “we” are guided by ‘integrated’ and ‘multidisciplinary’ approaches and a new appreciation for water. The vision imagines “we are aware of the unique nature of the Dutch delta and [...] the role [...] governmental bodies” play in managing it ([35], p. 4). “We” sees water as something to “move” ([35], p. 14), and “live with” ([35], p. 11), and nature as something humans must “actively restore” not exploit for profit ([33], p. 13). This shift promotes organisational change like pursuing broad prosperity over economic growth, creating a circular economy and less consumerist society. These values drive long-term thinking and discourage shifting responsibility onto “future generations and [other] countries” ([35], p. 13).

This representation casts “we” as a virtuous and willing protagonist of the future, but the use of the collective pronoun creates ambiguity. Who is this “we”? The vision’s participants and authors? Young people in the Netherlands? Dutch institutions or populations? Actors outside the Lowlands? Critical discourse scholars argue that labelling actors with pronouns is a common strategy for positioning audiences. They note that “we” is a “slippery” term ([42], p. 84, cf. [18]) and warn analysts to interrogate any word that appears in abundance (known as ‘overlexicalization’) ([42], p. 37). The high prevalence of “we” in the Water Vision therefore warrants reflection: how may this lexical choice serve or undermine the document’s stated aims? While “we” may invite a range of actors to see themselves in the actions described in the vision and therefore rally them to respond to the call for action, this generalisation may also flatten differences between actors. It may create ambiguity around who is performing the practices or enacting the policies in the vision, and therefore who has capacity or responsibility for realising the desired future. Based on our analysis, we infer that when situated in the future, the pronoun refers broadly to Dutch society and its institutions. But this does not clarify which actors are envisioned to be capable of enacting change. For that, we turn to the named actors.

Government

Governmental actors are the most prominent of the named actors in the vision, both in terms of lexical occurrence and roles they fulfil. The vision imagines them coordinating and collaborating with ‘stakeholders’ (including citizens, nature organisations, river commissions, and the European Union) to create and enact policies and legislation for water and environmental management. The government also employs financial mechanisms such as taxes, fines and subsidies to steer the behaviour of large water consumers, polluters and farmers respectively. Notably, “fundamental rights for water bodies” are

introduced to provide a legal incentive against pollution and prioritise ecological interests over economic ones ([35], p. 13). Regional water authorities are also tasked with directly restoring and conserving nature by “creating nature-friendly banks and promoting biodiversity” ([35], p. 13), in addition to their conventional duties of managing Dutch water infrastructure. The vision imagines a paradigm of ‘protection’ will continue along the coast, while policies inland will be informed by a new appreciation for water and will result in ceding space to rivers, greening urban environments, and building amphibious and floating houses. The Room for the River programme and amphibious housing in Maasbommel are cited as existing examples of “how things can be done differently” ([35], p.26), which has the potential to bring the future into the realm of possibility. Given the key coordinating and regulatory functions governmental actors fulfil, we consider them to be the primary protagonists of the Water Vision.

Farmers

Farmers are imagined as central to the transition to sustainable environmental management, but their participation appears conditional. In the vision, the government offers farmers subsidies to experiment with regenerative practices which are also imagined to be “profitable and viable” due to fair pricing of food and the labour they perform for land management ([33], p. 39). While subsidies incentivise action by rewarding desirable behaviour rather than punishing undesirable actions, as is the case for fines, both levers share the assumption that an actor will not find the imagined future desirable based on their current, vested interests or support it of their own free will. Unlike large water consumers and polluters who are represented as continuing to engage in undesirable behaviour and are taxed or fined for it, the Water Vision imagines several affirmative incentives to persuade farmers to become protagonists of a shift to regenerative agriculture. Because the vision does not imagine farmers take on this role willingly, we categorise them both as potential protagonists and antagonists of the future.

Individuals, residents, and citizens

Individuals and residents are imagined as contributing to this future primarily through behaviour change, for example saving water, adopting a plant-based diet, buying locally, and adapting homes to climate risks. The latter example assumes actors have the means and autonomy to carry out renovations to their homes. The term citizen appears once in the Water Vision, in reference to clean water as “a basic right for every citizen” ([35], p. 7). In contrast, the Climate Agenda portrays citizens as active members of this “nature-inclusive society”, participating in policymaking and making environmentally conscious

decisions ([33], p. 6). Casting individuals, residents and citizens as protagonists in this way highlights lifestyle choices, and formalised, deliberative governance processes as the preferred courses of action available to publics. Collective forms of public action like protests or civil disobedience, as well as actors typically associated with these strategies (e.g. activists), are absent from both documents. Given the advocacy work the JKB perform and their self-fashioning as part of the global youth climate and justice movement, we find the lack of reference to such actors and levers striking.

Young people

Despite JKB's identity as a youth organisation, the term “young people” is not used in the Water Vision to describe actors in the future. It appears only in the introduction and conclusion, with the prefix “Dutch”, to describe participants in the visioning process and those whose perspective the vision claims to represent. It is possible that the vision imagines young people existing within the broader categories already discussed. None of these terms necessarily exclude young people. But they also do not highlight them as a demographic or foreground their potential to be protagonists – something one might expect of a vision and group that claims to advocate on behalf of ‘youth’ and ‘young people’.

In contrast, the Climate Agenda does use the term “young people” to describe future actors. It positions them as protagonists through their education activities but at the same time also casts them as victims, alongside future generations, “nature” and “people and countries that contribute almost nothing to climate change [but] are often the first and most impacted victims of [it]” ([33], p. 10). This dual positioning of the JKB as a “generation of climate victims” and protagonists who are creating a preferable future through advocacy work is also present in Dutch media coverage of the Climate Agenda [70]. However, as mentioned, this framing is absent from the Water Vision.

Financial actors

Finally, the Water Vision does not explain how the extensive water infrastructure it imagines will be financed. While financial incentives are acknowledged as a lever for influencing behaviour, financial actors like banks, insurers, landlords and housing associations are notably absent. While we could infer homeowners will fund adaptation measures made as part of private renovations, both visions overlook other actors who make decisions over residential properties or have financial capital and could provide much needed loans for large infrastructure projects.

Considering context

In accordance with contextual approaches to close reading and critical discourse analysis, we now broaden our scope to situate the Water Vision and consider the audiences it seeks to address, before comparing the representation of social actors in the vision to their current roles in Dutch water governance.

Production and reception

The Water Vision was created in early 2023 through a participatory process involving “young people,” “youth organisations,” “experts,” and “volunteers within JKB” ([35], p. 2). Beyond thanking these groups for participating in a “Water Dialogue” and co-authoring the vision ([35], p.2), the document offers little information about how the visioning process unfolded. In surveying vision documents, we have noticed they often avoid reporting on their production processes and do not describe the identity of participants in an intersectional manner. While the first claim remains rather anecdotal, barring a comparative study, previous research suggests those organising and facilitating participatory futuring processes often do not “attend to dimensions of identity like gender, race, and class – identity categories that historically served to marginalize” ([7], p. 9). Given JKB’s stated commitment to diversity and inclusion [36], it is fair to ask what other identity positions participants occupied and how this may have shaped the vision.

Beyond the visioning process, the Water Vision emerged from the organisational context of the JKB, which positions itself as “the voice of young people in the climate debate” ([37], n.p. author’s translation from Dutch). They explain that, “in our society, the world of tomorrow is in the hands of today’s politicians, policy-makers and businesses. [...] By entering discussions with [...] them on behalf of our supporters, we give young people a voice in their own future” ([38], n.p. author’s translation from Dutch). The JKB’s approach resembles a form of “dutiful dissent” [54] as the organisation seeks to work with the protagonists of the present rather than agitate them. In a news interview, JKB’s chairperson contrasts their approach with that of Extinction Rebellion activists, who regularly block the A12 highway in The Hague, the Netherlands’ political capital. They state, “You will not find me on the A12. [...] I do not want to keep harping on about the things that are going wrong, but would rather paint a picture of the world as I would like to see it and talk to politicians about how we can achieve that” ([16] p. 26, author’s translation from Dutch). However, in casting “politicians, policymakers and businesses” as protagonists, young people remain somewhat marginal. The JKB may be creating “a world where young people actively participate in *discussions* about their future” ([37], n.p. emphasis added, author’s translation from

Dutch), but not necessarily participate in the enactment of that future.

The Water Vision was launched in The Hague on the 13th of March 2023, in the presence of the Delta Commissioner and Director-General of Water and Soil at the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management [34]. We would argue that the presence of these two figures, the location of the launch, and the fact that the document emulates professional policy material, emphasises the role of government as protagonists who can enact the vision. These elements suggest that the Water Vision’s main audience are governmental actors, further supporting our interpretation that JKB aims to intervene in the futural public sphere of water governance in the Netherlands by primarily appealing to these powerful actors. In the same month, the Water Vision was also presented at the United Nations Water Conference hosted by the Dutch government in New York. In addition to “strengthening Dutch water policy”, when deployed in this international forum the vision gains a second intention, namely to “encourage other countries and youth organisations [...] to develop National Water Visions/Strategies” ([68] n.p.). Rather than motivating international audiences by portraying them as acting in a certain way in an imagined future, the JKB offers their experience as one that others can emulate in their own contexts. When approached through the lens of self-efficacy, we could say that for international audiences, the Water Vision constitutes a ‘vicarious experience’ – a real-world example to learn from – while in a national context it functions more as an ‘imagined experience’ – a fictional representation of actors engaging in desired action and achieving desired outcomes [43].

Water governance and politics in the Netherlands

Water has been an important part of Dutch national identity since the eighteenth century [48], and today is largely understood through a governmental lens. The national public works agency and 21 regional water authorities share a legal responsibility for managing water infrastructure, monitoring water quality and ensuring safety [15]. The general boards of the water authorities are elected by residents, however, historically they have been dominated by agricultural interests, and currently the political party BoerBurger Beweging (Farmer-Citizen Movement) holds the most seats across all boards [8]. The national government is responsible for declaring flood events as disasters, an important designation required for state-funded recovery since private insurers do not offer this coverage [71]. Recent policy of combining ecological, safety, spatial and financial concerns has encouraged public–private partnerships to finance projects [15, 52]. However, by framing water management as a matter of (national) security, the state can justify a more

centralised approach in which government maintains control and responsibility [61, 62, 72].

This centrality of government extends beyond water and constitutes a feature of Dutch political culture. Te Veld [65] explains there is both a “tradition of accommodating change” through depoliticisation and a kind of “taboo on loud politics and noisy demonstrations” in the Netherlands (p. 49). Fearing polarisation between social groups, governments respond quickly to new demands often by creating special working groups and absorbing activist initiatives. Prominent activists argue that rather than promoting a political culture of active participation, this response pacifies Dutch social movements and “affirms the government as the most knowledgeable about said issue and as the most qualified to envision and enact a solution” ([12], n.p.). This tendency has been amplified by recent centre-right governments who frame governance as a matter of competent management rather than ideology or vision, a practice known as ‘paternalist managerialism’ (see [65]). Such a framing enables these governments to dismiss ideologically motivated protesters as “unreasonable” (although growing populism is challenging this) ([65], p. 52). A form of political participation considered ‘reasonable’ is the ‘polder model’—a consensus-based approach to governance where ‘stakes’ or ‘interests’ in a region (originally a polder, which is an area of reclaimed land bounded by dykes) are represented by organised groups who negotiate with the state in institutionalised processes. Though inconsistently applied since the 1980s [2], it is a strong imaginary within Dutch politics and water governance, where a preference for working with organised interest groups persists [8, 61, 72]. In this context, JKB’s use of the label ‘youth’ can function as a “resource” – a way to signal their representational stake in governance processes ([75], p. 46).

Contrasting text and context

By and large, the Water Vision transports current governance models and beliefs about how to pursue change into the future. The prominence of governmental actors as protagonists and the emphasis on the levers of policy and legislation reaffirm current responsibilities in Dutch water governance. The special treatment given to farmers aligns with the historical dominance of agriculture in the water sector, and current concerns about their growing role in party politics. The absence of citizens and activists parallels the Dutch preference for pursuing change through official channels, and the ongoing cultural taboo on protest. The general absence of financial actors does not reflect the current role of companies and the private sector in materialising water infrastructure.

Researchers argue that to orient actors towards ‘transformative’ change the representation of social actors in a future vision must question existing arrangements

and assumptions within a given context [74, 75]. After contrasting the vision as a text to the context it seeks to intervene in, we conclude that the Water Vision reproduces the current “broader social fabric” ([75], p. 46) of water governance in the Netherlands more than it challenges it. The future may be informed by a new appreciation of water and nature and may expand emergent policy and practices, but social actors in the vision generally perform the same actions and occupy similar roles to the ones they occupy today. This means that the ‘system’ of organisation and governance in the future is largely the same to that of the present. Since the Water Vision “suppose(s) continuity at the level of structures” ([73], p. 2), we must conclude that while it employs transformational rhetoric and calls for “systemic change” ([35], p. 4) at best the Water Vision advocates for reformation of the status quo of water governance in the Netherlands, making ripples rather than waves in this context. Based on our analysis, we would further argue that the JKB seeks to intervene in this futural public sphere by appealing to governmental actors, and that this aligns with the preference in Dutch political culture to appeal to those in positions of power, rather than agitate them, or mobilise other (potentially more marginalised) actors.

On the surface this feels rather conservative, and in many ways it is. But we want to note that growing right-wing populism has weakened environmental policy in many jurisdictions [45], and that sustaining the transition to sustainable water management is likely to become harder under a government that does not prioritise action on climate change. We think it is possible the JKB may have anticipated a change of leadership when creating the Water Vision, that the impending provincial and water authority elections that took place in March 2023 may have been on the visioners’ minds, consciously or not. Having the privilege of hindsight, we can say such concerns would have been warranted in March 2023 and was confirmed in the snap general elections of that took place in November that same year, where The Netherlands shifted further to the right. Now, after yet another snap election in October 2025, the political context has shifted yet again, somewhat to the centre, with environmental and economic policy looming large. However, by reaffirming the central role of government in keeping the Netherlands habitable and framing emergent sustainable phenomena as economically viable opportunities for Dutch agriculture, the Water Vision may work to secure continuity of environmental commitments across changing administrations.

Conclusions

Public participation in futuring processes has been positioned as a means to expand imagination, pluralise and democratise ‘the future’ [7, 39, 66]. However, the findings

of this analysis suggest that greater inclusion and greater attention to the politics of participation in futuring may not be enough to adequately address the politics of imagination [13, 27, 50]. While initiated, organised, and owned by a group considered underrepresented in futuring, the vision largely reproduces hegemonic imaginaries rather than challenges them. We have argued that while the JKB is a group of young people, and the Water Vision was created by a group of young people, the vision was likely not created for young people, but rather for governmental actors associated with water governance in the Netherlands. Furthermore, we suggest that such an approach aligns with existing beliefs in Dutch politics about the centrality of government and how interest groups 'should' advocate for their constituents and causes within existing political structures. We acknowledge that appealing to those who currently hold power may be a reasonable strategy in this futural public sphere, but in doing so we also believe the JKB may have missed an opportunity to enhance the agency of young people as a distinct social-demographic group or political constituency. A Water Vision that casts young people as protagonists of the future could have enhanced the self-efficacy of the present generation of young people by highlighting the levers they can pull today. It could have built solidarity with future generations by asking the young participants not just what futures they want to live in as adults but to also imagine who will be the next to stand in their shoes. Rather than making an appeal on behalf of the powerless, it could have *demonstrated* the power this social group has in the present and oriented them towards their own goal [54]. While daring to challenge social and political norms can result in being excluded from formal decision-making processes, [26] notes that "social movements have often managed to change the dominant discourse by insisting on speaking on [and in] their own terms", and through this seed alternatives imaginaries and expand public imagination (p. 301; see also [40]).

The aim of this paper has been to consider how future visions can act as interventions in the futural public sphere, focusing on how their representation of social actors may foreshadow and (de)motivate action. As we have focused on the output of a participatory futuring process, we are unable to speak in detail to how procedural matters may have shaped and produced the Water Vision. This limitation is particularly relevant given growing recognition that the relationship between those who participate in futuring and the values ultimately expressed in future visions is neither straightforward nor fully understood [30], and that the methods and tools employed in futuring processes carry logics and values that may not align with that of diverse or marginalized publics [9, 10, 10]. We can then ask, other than the pervasive and dynamic nature of imaginaries, was there

something else about the design of this visioning process that supported the reproduction of these imaginaries? While in the instance of the Youth Water Vision we can only speculate, our findings point to the potential of looking beyond expanding participation in futuring as a means to expand the scope of futures imagined.

Because if creating future visions is to serve as a strategy for democratising environmental politics and maintaining a "rich futural public sphere" [23], futures researchers and practitioners alike need to consider how issues of power and the political dimensions of futuring can be addressed *during* visioning processes with diverse publics, so that they may result in more transformative outputs. It follows that without surfacing assumptions and building awareness of imaginaries during acts of futuring, those creating future visions run the risk of closing down rather than opening up space for imagination and action, thus reproducing rather than contesting undemocratic arrangements, and inadvertently maintaining systems that have led to our current 'polycrisis'.

Furthermore, future research may compare a vision's intentions with its actual impact on different audiences, tracing how it moves through and shapes the futural public sphere over time, or consider in more detail how the visioning process itself, rather than the vision it produces, can also be understood as an intervention in the futural public sphere. Such proposals would require more in-depth and longitudinal analysis of contexts of production and reception than we have provided here, but would also enrich the 'discursive-dramaturgical' approach emerging in futures scholarship [56], as well as support the development of critical participatory futuring practices.

Abbreviation

JKB Jonge klimaatbeweging

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