

# Disasters Avoided

## Making Space for the Dutch River Ijssel

*Revitalising Deventer through green engineering*

- Unexpected flooding incited a programme of 30+ 'green river engineering' projects on Dutch rivers to rehabilitate rivers while making them safer from floods.
- Many of those interventions became controversial, but the city of Deventer took its time and embarked on an extensive consultative and cooperative process.
- Those involved shared a common land-use planning background, which made for easy interaction but also runs the risk of groupthink.

Author: Jeroen Frank Warner, Wageningen University

Sandbags to contain high water in Deventer, 26 December 2023 (photo: J. Warner).



After unexpected flooding on main rivers in 1993 and 1995, the Dutch central government subscribed to a green flood defence programme. It laid down standards for peak flow reduction but left the initiative as to how to realise this reduction to lower-level authorities, a novelty in Dutch river management. As a result, the interventions were often seized on as an occasion to redevelop an area, promoting urban regeneration and resolving traffic bottlenecks. Unlike some other river interventions, Space for the River Deventer largely escaped conflicts over the project.

The adopted alternative for the historic Netherlands city of Deventer (population 105,000) not only widened the river with a set of segmented bypasses, but also sought to enhance its natural values, creating rewilded roaming areas for recreation, accommodating camping and water sports. Taking time to deliberate with stakeholders, restoring historic landscape elements, and excellent team chemistry were success factors. The majority of community representatives and project team members knew each other before the project started; some of them were (former) work colleagues. The resulting groupthink, however, was also expressed in a reluctance to consider alternative solutions to problems raised.

Further reading:

Warner, J.F., van Buuren, M.W., Edelenbos, J. (2012). *Making space for the river. Governance experiences with multifunctional river flood management in the US and Europe*, IWA Press.

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