

Knowledge policy at Foreign Affairs

Oiling the wheels of change

In the previous issue of *The Broker* we described knowledge management at the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We invited Rob de Vos, who has been responsible for knowledge management at the ministry since 2003, and Louk Box, rector of the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, to discuss the ministry's efforts to adapt its knowledge policy to the changing global environment.



Louk Box

Rob de Vos

By **Mariette Heres and Frans Bieckmann**

Within the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as in many other organizations, the importance of knowledge management has become increasingly apparent. Some significant steps have been taken to improve the relationship between policy makers within the ministry and external knowledge providers such as universities and think-tanks. The ministry has launched several initiatives to create a more knowledge-oriented organizational culture, but at the same time it is losing its internal capacity for strategic thinking by abolishing some important knowledge departments.

Rob de Vos and Louk Box are 'old boys' in Netherlands development cooperation. Before his recent appointment as ambassador to South Africa, de Vos was Deputy Director-General for Development Cooperation, and for four years was responsible for the ministry's knowledge policy. Box, who held a similar position in the early 1990s, is now rector of the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague. Although they have known each other for many years, they now represent the two sides of the 'gap' between research and policy in the field of international cooperation. *The Broker* asked them to discuss how this gap can best be bridged.

On one fact the two do not disagree: four years ago, when de Vos took up his position, there was certainly a great distance between academics and policy makers. There was also a need to make the organizational culture at the ministry more open and receptive to internal and external knowledge providers.

Since then, what has changed in the way the Ministry of Foreign Affairs manages and uses knowledge to inform its policies? 'A great deal, I hope, since that was my intention', says de Vos. 'If it later emerges that not much has changed, then that will be a black mark on my legacy'. De Vos describes how in 2003 the ministry showed little interest in accessing academic

knowledge or in developing its own knowledge to improve its policies. It relied mainly on the studies conducted by the World Bank. 'There was a feeling that Dutch universities were only interested in money, which was actually intended for the South. The policy theme departments paid hardly any attention to knowledge development, and the department concerned with research was completely isolated'.

The review of Dutch foreign policy in 1996 resulted in the integration of the various departments responsible to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and to the Minister for Development Cooperation. De Vos looks back on the reorganization with mixed feelings. 'One of the major mistakes was that the policy theme departments were given too much budget responsibility. Now, that takes up all their time, and they have no opportunity to reflect on what they are doing'. He is resolute that 'we need to make radical changes in that respect'.

Although much has been done since 2003, de Vos goes on, it is still not enough: 'It should be easier for ministry officials to go back to university for a while, for example. There are many young people working here who still have contact with their universities. If officials and academics have to solve problems together, they are more likely to show respect for each other and take interest in each other's work. It is important that they find a common language'. But this takes time. 'We are investing in a new generation of ministry officials, through initiatives such as the IS (International Cooperation) Academy. But the effects of that policy will only be felt after some time'.

Box disagrees with de Vos about the IS Academy. His own attempt to set up a cooperative relationship between the ministry and the Institute of Social Studies, within the context of the IS Academy, has come to nothing, he says. 'There is little incentive for ISS staff to come and work at the ministry for six months or a year. They feel that no one listens to them and that the work does not stimulate them intellectually'.

Nevertheless, Box emphasizes the importance of seeing the positive side of recent developments: 'I am not saying that the whole thing is a mess. The former Minister for Development

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Cooperation, Agnes van Ardenne, did create space for research. Lessons have been learned, and we have to use them if we are to move forward. I hope that Bert Koenders, the new Minister, can be encouraged to work on a follow-up – I think there is certainly a need for one’.

The universities offer a pool of potential talent that the ministry could tap into. Both de Vos and Box see increased interest in development cooperation among students. De Vos recalls a conversation with a colleague from the UK Department for International Development (DfID), who said that the most talented British students used to want to work only for the Treasury or the Foreign Office. Now they say they would prefer to work for DfID. No less than 70% of those selected for the civil service choose DfID’.

Box believes that in order to attract such talents to the ministry, it needs to change its policy. ‘Here in the Netherlands these top achievers do not receive support in building their careers. How many people at the ministry, for example, are encouraged to complete their PhDs? The ministry needs to offer them more of these kinds of options’. Box notes that it is also difficult for ISS to attract young people with original ideas. ‘I am seriously concerned about that’, he says. ‘We need a new generation of academics who have moved on from North–South, development-based thinking, towards a more up-to-date view of globalization, the new core issue in the academic world as well as in foreign policy’.

New world

According to Louk Box, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has not yet adapted to this new global reality. ‘Generally, I think it has been very difficult for Rob de Vos to achieve his objectives for improving knowledge management. Many more changes will need to be made if his ideas are to catch on and bring about real progress’. For Box, knowledge management must be seen in a wider context of change: ‘The world has changed in a very short time. Foreign affairs and development cooperation can no longer be seen as two distinct areas of policy. The core problems are no longer the traditional differences between North and South. There are rich and poor in both North and South, and globalization has become a central factor. A global civil society has emerged, and there is growing interest in international law – The Hague is already host to several international legal institutions – in which the Netherlands could play a leading role. That places completely different requirements on the way the ministry manages knowledge. Confidential diplomatic reports and secret memoranda no longer set the tone. You can now download the best analyses, like the reports of the International Crisis Group, from the internet’. Box emphasizes the need for an open approach, and addresses de Vos once again: ‘That calls for a much broader cultural change, not just within the Directorate-General for Development Cooperation (DGIS). And that is much more difficult if the Minister of Foreign Affairs keeps everything under lock and key, as some ministers have done’.

De Vos acknowledges the differences between the two ‘blood groups’ at the ministry – development cooperation and the political side – despite their formal merger following the 1996 policy review: ‘There is an enormous difference in culture between them. The diplomats say to us at development cooperation that we see problems that don’t exist. And that makes life difficult, because we want to – and have to – increase the level of integration within the ministry. The different approaches are due partly to their cultures, but also to the areas in which they are

active. For the political side of the ministry, critical reflection on Middle East policy, for example, is extremely risky. Whereas I want these critical reflections very much. As the senior management of the ministry, such an open approach has to be in your blood’.

De Vos adds that political support to change the way knowledge is managed within the ministry is essential: ‘We are engaged in intensive debate with Minister Koenders. During a recent meeting in Nijmegen he said there is no knowledge culture at the ministry at all – this shows that we need to crank up that debate even more’. De Vos does believe, however, that Koenders will give the necessary cultural shift a new lease of life.

External advice

De Vos also sees it as a positive sign that, unlike his predecessor, Koenders is seeking advice from external experts: ‘That makes everything more interesting. We often find that he arrives at the office after the weekend with lots of promising new ideas and questions’.

In the past year, the Netherlands Development Assistance Research Council (RAWOO) and the Strategic Policy Planning Unit (SPL) within the ministry have been abolished. The Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV) is next in line. Louk Box’s thoughts on this are quite clear. ‘The RAWOO was the only advisory council in the world with equal representation from the North and the South, while the AIV is practically the only body that provides independent advice on development cooperation. These councils should have been given a free rein. By abolishing them, there is no longer an organization that can provide the kind of knowledge that is required in this new world. The ministry is isolating itself and is becoming more vulnerable’.

While Box sees RAWOO and the AIV as unique, de Vos believes that the councils themselves were isolated. ‘I have noticed in the past four years at the ministry that we do nothing at all with their reports’, he says. He raises his arms to the heavens: ‘The RAWOO was really of no use at all. It might have been a fantastic phenomenon – researchers from the North and South all working together – but in terms of bringing about policy changes, it played no role at all. And the AIV is no more than a great ritual. That is not the way to create a knowledge culture at the ministry’.

Box and de Vos cannot agree on the value of and thus the need for advisory councils and knowledge departments. Box would like to see more ‘brokers’, people who can act as intermediaries between research and policy: ‘And by that I don’t mean just one or two people, like the proposed post of scientific advisor. I mean knowledge departments with teeth, so that they can bite if necessary. We need departments that can ensure that the foreign affairs side of the ministry focuses on generating knowledge and not just on accumulating information’. But de Vos does not want to go back to having a club of experts advising the ministry’s senior management. ‘I think we have a fundamental difference of opinion’, he concludes. ‘We don’t want an advisory group with a direct line to the minister. He can get that advice from outside. We want the ministry to become a learning organization, which is not easy. We are therefore setting our sights higher. That is why we have introduced the knowledge and research strategies (KOS), which every department must draw up. The senior management at the ministry must be responsible for the main issues. And that calls for a culture shift. We are starting off small and letting it spread, like oil on water. That is something I have learned from the past’. ■

 For longer versions of this discussion, in English and in Dutch, visit www.thebrokeronline.eu.