

## Knowledge management at Foreign Affairs

# In search of a strategy

The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs is working to create a more knowledge-oriented organizational culture. But at the same time it is losing its internal capacity for strategic thinking, a crucial attribute in an era of globalization, integrated policy and the politicization of development cooperation.

By **Mariette Heres and Frans Bieckmann**

No Dutch government department is involved in a more complex sphere of activities than the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It compasses the whole world, in all its facets. In addition to technical knowledge to ensure the effectiveness of its aid programmes, the ministry increasingly requires sound strategic advice to ensure the validity of Dutch foreign policy. Above all, the ministry needs a well thought-out, multidisciplinary analytical model with which it can understand the complex political realities in developing countries and in the world at large. With such a framework, the ministry should be able to bring together and assess the many elements – economic, political, social, cultural, religious, etc. – both within countries and in a global context, in a coherent and comprehensive manner. Throughout the ministry, there must be processes for channelling, analyzing and converting the continuous flows of information into intelligent policy advice. There is also a need for political vision, or the ability to extract the essence from the complexity of information that is available on each issue, and to set policy priorities.

There are, of course, a number of instruments that the ministry uses to transform information into the knowledge needed to determine policies. Perhaps the most important are the multi-annual strategic plans (MASPs), which are drawn up by the embassies in the Netherlands' 36 partner countries. Each MASP describes how the embassy aims to assist the country in achieving the Millennium Development Goals, setting concrete targets and specifying measurable results that can later be evaluated using a variety of instruments developed in recent years. An essential component of a MASP is the annual country analysis drawn up by each embassy on the basis of a 'track record'. In the track record, each country is assessed on the basis of four criteria: poverty policy, economic policy, governance, and cooperation with the Dutch government and other donors. The ministry uses



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this information to determine what type of aid it will provide to the country, either in cooperation with the government or through other channels.

The ministry also has two other instruments for processing information into knowledge, both developed by the Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael. The first is the Stability Assessment Framework (SAF), [which](#) is used to assess the stability of a country, together with the government and other local partners, including civil society organizations. The SAF >

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helps in determining the institutional capacities required to develop an integrated policy in the country. The second, the Strategic Governance and Corruption Assessment (SGACA), is a new instrument that is currently being tested in five countries.

There are a number of problems with the way these instruments are currently applied, however. Within the ministry, the Directorate-General for International Cooperation (DGIS) does have a tradition in this respect, but the value of academic knowledge is less well appreciated on the foreign affairs side of the organization. There, they prefer to place their trust in traditional diplomatic skills, which are largely accumulated through experience.

### New initiatives

In 1996, following a far-reaching review of Dutch foreign policy, the two branches of foreign affairs (including European affairs) and development cooperation were formally integrated. At the same time, many powers were delegated to the embassies. Today, the ministry is working to bring these different knowledge cultures into line, so that the embassies are not presented with conflicting messages. One important step towards a ministry-wide knowledge policy may be the proposed appointment of a scientific council advisor (*wetenschappelijk raads adviseur*), positioned high in the bureaucratic hierarchy, and will promote the use of knowledge throughout the ministry – not only by DGIS, but also by the European and foreign affairs branches.

To promote better knowledge management, in 2005 the ministry introduced a new research policy, *Research in Development*. One of the main features of this policy is that the various departments are to develop their own knowledge and research strategies (*kennis- en onderzoeksstrategieën*, KOS) describing the departments' policy objectives and the knowledge they need to achieve them. They also specify which organizations they have to work with and on what themes, and what research should be financed. The strategies are taking some time to materialize, however. Only one KOS, that of the Environment and Water Department (DMW), has so far been made public.

An important secondary objective of the knowledge and research strategies, and the rest of the research policy, is to bring about a change in the organizational culture of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The idea is to encourage officials to think about the knowledge process. Instead of automatically instigating new research, they should think themselves about the best way to acquire knowledge.

Three 'knowledge management groups' have been set up within the ministry, with a total of 35 members. These groups meet regularly and organize events such as the 'knowledge week' held in April 2007, lectures and meetings. Under the motto 'development cooperation in debate' (*OS in debat*), an informal group of officials has organized lunchtime lectures and working groups to discuss 'policy theory'. They are examining the theoretical underpinnings of development policy at various levels and from different perspectives. They have now compiled their findings, but the document has so far only been distributed internally.

As at all Dutch ministries, a knowledge forum (*kenniskamer*) will also be created. This forum will bring together senior officials, researchers and academics to discuss the new research policy. It is hoped that the forum will demonstrate that those at the top recognize the importance of knowledge, thus setting an example for all ministry staff.

The ministry is keen to promote contacts between policy makers and researchers, and has launched several initiatives to

#### Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR)

The WRR produces advisory reports on (national and) foreign policy, either on request or on its own initiative. The Council is currently preparing a study of development policy. [www.wrr.nl/english](http://www.wrr.nl/english)

#### IS Academy

The IS (international cooperation) Academy, launched in 2005, is a partnership scheme involving the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Dutch universities. The aim is to foster cooperation between policy makers and researchers and to maximize the impact of knowledge and research on the quality of development cooperation. The partners determine the research agenda, seeking common ground between policy questions that the ministry considers relevant and issues of interest to researchers. At present there are long-term cooperation agreements between the ministry and five universities, and the programme is likely to expand in the future. The IS Academy focuses not only on research, but also on exchanges, with ministry officials giving guest lectures and workshops. Through the IS Academy, the ministry hopes to produce a new generation of academics with feeling for policy.

#### Royal Tropical Institute (KIT)

The KIT in Amsterdam is an independent centre of knowledge and expertise in the fields of international and intercultural cooperation. KIT works internationally. The institute carries out development and scientific research projects and provides various training courses and consulting and information services. Forty percent of its budget originates from the Netherlands ministry of Foreign Affairs, specifically for its biomedical and gender research and consulting work in human resources management in the health sector. [www.kit.nl](http://www.kit.nl)

#### Development Policy Review Network (DPRN)

The DPRN is a network of Dutch and Belgian development experts and policy makers that was set up on the initiative of CERES to reduce the gap between science, policy and development practice. CERES is the coordinating body for development research at six Dutch universities: Utrecht University, the University of Amsterdam, the Institute of Social Studies (The Hague), Vrije Universiteit (Amsterdam), Radboud University Nijmegen, and Wageningen University and Research Centre. [www.dprn.nl](http://www.dprn.nl)

#### Global Development Think-Tank

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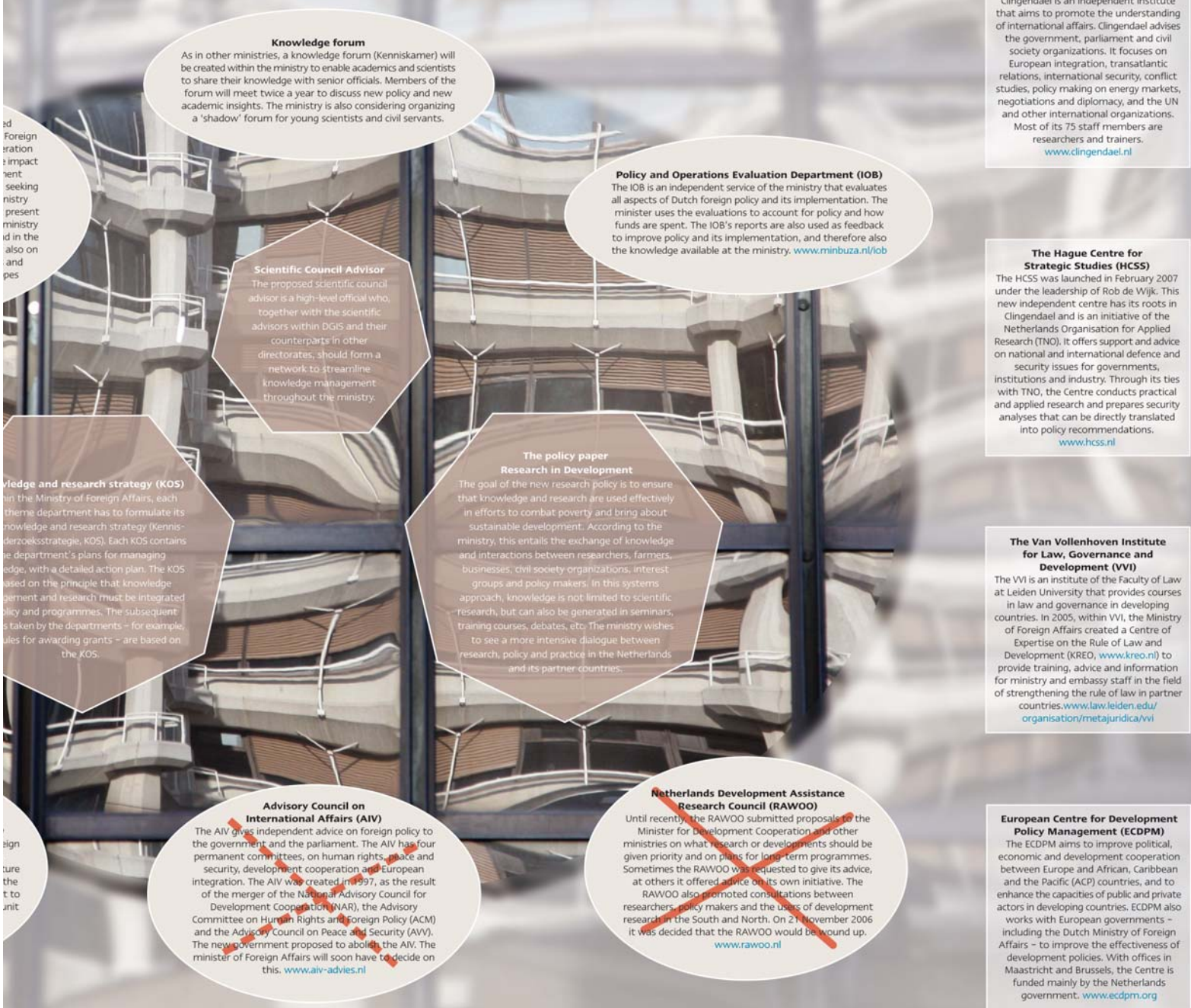
#### Strategic Policy Planning Unit (SPL)

The SPL was a think-tank inside the ministry concerned with strategic issues in European, foreign and development policy. The SPL focused on developments that could be significant in the future and accumulated its knowledge largely outside the ministry. The SPL also gave policy-related support to the administrative and political leadership. The unit was wound up as of 1 February 2007.

Note: Universities, research insti

encourage more effective 'two-way traffic' between the ministry and Dutch universities. After previous attempts proved too ambitious, this is now being taken a step at a time. For example, two ministry officials can work on their PhDs, students and researchers can more easily arrange placements at the ministry, while ministry officials can be temporarily seconded to universities and vice versa. There are plans for the ministry to support three special professorships, and steps are being taken to involve young

# Structure of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs



Michel Verhoeks, Cartographics, Heemskerk

Institutes and consulting firms who deliver advisory services to the Ministry on an *ad hoc* or project basis, are not included.

researchers more closely in the ministry's work. And there is the IS (international cooperation) Academy, a partnership scheme between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and universities.

## Knowledge: a process or a commodity?

Through these various initiatives, step by step, the ministry is trying to change its organizational culture in order to increase its learning capacity. It is making progress, albeit very slowly. Chris

Collison, one of the experts assisting the ministry, recently commented on the status of knowledge management within the ministry. On a scale of one to five, the ministry scored only levels one or two. It is perhaps comforting to know that few organizations ever achieve the 'ideal' level five. 👍

In this process, the ministry is following the principles of what is known as the 'first generation' of knowledge management theories that see knowledge as a commodity. You have to acquire ➤

it, and you devise tools to do that. Knowledge management is thus seen purely as a problem of logistics.

The 'second generation' theories see knowledge as a process. They are based on the rationale that the way in which knowledge is acquired has a great impact on how it is used. The effort involved, the structure and formulation of conclusions – and thus the usability of the research for policy makers – are very different if researchers participate in policy making. If, for example, agricultural researchers participate in platforms with other stakeholders – farmers, government bodies and NGOs – they will formulate the available knowledge and information differently.

The process demands openness on the part of policy makers. They must be willing to open up their own policy for discussion, and to take risks. The policy paper *Research in Development* speaks of the importance of interactions between the various actors. That also calls for openness about the ministry's own analyses and the assumptions underpinning policy. As yet, however, there is little evidence of such openness, perhaps because the ministry is afraid that the imperfections that undoubtedly lie hidden in its policy documents – after all, no one is perfect – will be revealed to the outside world.

The decision to abolish the Netherlands Development Assistance Research Council (RAWOO), in November 2006, is likely only to add to the ministry's tendency to look inwards. The RAWOO used to advise to the ministry about long-term research programmes, and its many contacts in developing countries were able to provide valuable insights that now will no longer be available to civil servants.

### Structural knowledge suppliers

It is debatable whether the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will succeed in transforming its knowledge culture in order to develop the comprehensive, flexible, long-term strategies that are required to maintain a clear perspective on the increasingly complex sphere of activities. The ministry used to have a department, the Strategic Policy Planning Unit (SPL), which operated as a kind of internal think-tank. Its task was to identify and analyze strategic issues and future problems in European, foreign and development policy. The unit gathered intelligence and shared it within the ministry in order to make policy more coherent and consistent. Under several past ministers, however, the SPL (and its predecessors) played an increasingly marginal role. While the strategists used to sit around the table with the development minister, they gradually found themselves pushed further away from the hot seat. Eventually the unit was wound up in February 2007.

Without the SPL, the ministry is now dependent on external experts for the information it requires to fulfil its role. Ministry officials can call upon a group of regular knowledge suppliers. First, the Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV) provides the government and both houses of parliament with independent advice on foreign policy. The AIV is under pressure, however, which suggests that there is little appreciation for strategic advice. It is apparently too much bother for officials to write requests for advice and compile government responses to the reports they receive. The AIV counters this argument by pointing out – through carefully substantiated lobbying of parliament – that many of its reports have resulted in new policy, even though that has not always been acknowledged by the officials concerned. The Senate has already adopted a motion in favour of maintaining the AIV, and the House of Representatives seems to share the opinion.

Most AIV advisory reports and other studies are based on specific themes. Ideally, they provide insight into the scientific debate regarding a particular subject, but they still need to make the difficult transformation into policy. That policy must embrace a wide range of different themes and approaches, and thus requires that a more strategic analysis be carried out. There is in fact only one external institute that provides such broad strategic policy advice to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Clingendael. This think-tank, based in Wassenaar, near The Hague, traditionally focuses on the foreign policy side of the ministry's activities (and on the Ministry of Defence). It provides diplomatic training and operates from the perspective of traditional foreign and security policy, in which the Netherlands' interests – in all shapes and sizes – take priority.

Early in 2007, security expert Rob de Wijk, who was in charge of the cooperation between Clingendael and the Netherlands Organization for Applied Research (TNO), left the institute and set up The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies. HCSS appears to have entered the market to provide strategic policy advice, thus challenging Clingendael's monopoly.

But from the development point of view, no institutes are structurally involved. Nor do they even exist. There are, of course, many individuals in academic centres and research institutes that provide advice – such as the Centre for Development Issues (CIDIN, Nijmegen), the Free University of Amsterdam, the Institute of Social Studies (ISS, The Hague), the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT, Amsterdam), and the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM, Maastricht). There are also individuals in other geographically focused university departments who sometimes contribute to the formulation of specific policies. And there is the Development Policy Review Network (DPRN), a loose network of academics whose aim is to reduce the gap between science, policy and development practice.

But all of this advice is fragmented, and addresses mostly technical or bureaucratic issues. Rarely does it enter the political sphere and become part of public debate. The situation is different in other countries. In the UK, for example, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) can make a much more explicit link between development research and the translation of its findings for wider public discussion.

In short, in the Netherlands there is no development think-tank equivalent to Clingendael that is able to bring together all this detailed and sectoral knowledge on development and globalization, and to construct long-term strategic views and policies. Such a think-tank could not only disseminate its informed strategic advice through direct 'bilateral' lines to civil servants, but could also ensure that it enters the public arena. Especially at a time when the ministry is dismantling its own internal capacity for strategic thinking, this might be the right moment to create such a think-tank. ■

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