

C E R E S



# BRIDGING GAPS – CREATING SYNERGIES

*Visions and opinions on  
crossing boundaries*

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## Colophon

Bridging Gaps – Creating Synergy is a special issue of the CERES Magazine, published jointly with the Development Review Network on the occasion of the departure of Prof. Dr A.J. (Ton) Dietz as director of CERES on 27 June 2007.

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## Building Bridges – Creating Synergies

Interview with Ton Dietz

It is one hour before the start of the DPRN Task Force meeting and the only time slot Ton Dietz has available for weeks to come. We have 45 minutes to look back on his 5 years of CERES directorship – *Mirjam Ros*.

**Is it fair to say that your directorship of CERES is best characterised by your drive to bridge gaps and create synergy?**

Yes, but bridging gaps and creating synergy are two different things. When I took on the job of CERES Director five years ago my first concern was to create common ground among scientists within the CERES family. That's to say among scientists with different disciplinary backgrounds, among senior and junior researchers, and among people with different cultural backgrounds. Later, I tried to expand the number of bridges gradually in several other directions. In the first



place within science itself. CERES tried to build a better bridge between Dutch and Flemish scientists and to improve the embedding of Dutch international development studies in the European context. We did that through the European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes (EADI) where CERES people now play a prominent role. CERES then tried to build a bridge with related research schools, for example with

the Research School for Human Rights and the graduate school for Production Ecology & and Resource Conservation (PE&RC) in Wageningen. We also made an effort to create common ground within social sciences by developing the CERES tool for publication rating and output valuation.

**When did you start to build bridges between scientists and development practitioners?**

From the moment that CERES was re-accredited in 2004, which was vitally important for us, we were encouraged to build bridges beyond science and towards development practice. We did that in various ways. In the first place by expanding the number of associated members, including the Royal Tropical Institute and ETC-International in Leusden. During the CERES Summer Schools, we also began to provide a platform for development organisations and consultancy firms like Berenschot and ETC, as well as to DGIS so that scientists could learn from a world which was still unknown to most of them. From 2003 onwards, we began to explore ways of doing this in a more structured manner.

**Was that the start of the Development Policy Review Network, DPRN?**

Yes, but it also signalled the start of other initiatives that served the aim of bridging gaps between scientists, policymakers and development practitioners. Examples are recent developments within WOTRO, the launching of a new

journal called 'The Broker', and the Worldconnectors initiative. There are a lot of bridges, all made as it were from different materials. Some of them are still rickety, but overall there are a lot more bridges under construction now compared to when I became CERES Director.

**Shouldn't that be seen in the context of a radically different spirit of the times?**

Of course! When I became Director of CERES in 2002 our main concern was to fight for our existence. In the first place within Utrecht University, but also with regard to the participating institutions which were summoned 'to go local' and to withdraw from CERES. Another major concern was that the scientific interest in international and development issues and the inflow of new students could no longer be taken for granted. It was a difficult time psychologically. Everywhere, be it at home, with friends or in the media, development scientists tended to be associated with 'open sandals and woolly socks types' and were depicted as archaic pre-

**Initiatives aimed at building bridges between science and practice**

*DPRN*

The Development Policy Review Network is a platform for development experts from policy, practice and science. The aim is to improve opportunities for regular contact and interaction in order to create more synergy. For more information surf to [www.DPRN.nl](http://www.DPRN.nl) and the web portal with a searchable database for development expertise [www.Global-Connections.nl](http://www.Global-Connections.nl)

*The Broker*

The Broker is a bi-monthly magazine that aims to contribute to evidence-based policy making by encouraging exchanges between knowledge producers and development professionals, especially in the fields of economics, human security, governance, and science and technology. For more information surf to <http://www.thebrokeronline.eu>



### *The Worldconnectors*

The Worldconnectors aim to create an open, tolerant, optimistic and pro-active Netherlands that, in all its diversity, operates as a 'global actor in the world, with the urgent aim of working towards a just, sustainable and peaceful world. By connecting different worlds, Worldconnectors hope to generate alternative views and strategies on global issues. Worldconnectors engage in dialogue, public events and media activities. For more information surf to <http://www.worldconnectors.nl>

21<sup>st</sup> century do-gooders, isolated from 'realistic' (and pretty parochial) politics.

### **What did that mean for the relationship between science and policy and practice in those years?**

It's fair to say that this relationship was pushed to the edge. Hard words were spoken during a CERES Summer School where former Min-

ister of Development Cooperation Eveline Herfkens accused the scientists of contacting her ministry only to secure funds for research. She argued that, to satisfy the ministry's knowledge needs, it was easier and cheaper to knock on the doors of international organisations like the World Bank and that it was politically more opportune to approach research institutions in the South. According to the Minister, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs could do perfectly well without Dutch knowledge institutions. Her statements had a tremendously negative impact. That was the spirit of the times when I became Director of CERES five years ago.

### **How did you fight back?**

In the first place I put a lot of effort into bringing the work of CERES members to the fore by developing the valuation tool and stimulating strategic publishing. That meant thinking in advance about the potential impact of publications and ways to increase international recognition. I tried to create a culture in which it is considered prestig-

ious to publish in A-rated journals – which is not to say that every article should be submitted to an A-rated journal.

### **Publishing in A-rated journals does not sound like bridging the gap between policy and practice.**

That's true, but this too should be placed in the appropriate time frame. In 2002–2003 it was of utmost importance to CERES as a research school, and for the community of development scientists, to gain recognition from scientists (and particularly university administrators) who were ill-disposed towards our field. The valuation tool was important in this respect and the fact that this tool allowed us to prove that the quantity and quality of our output had strongly improved over the years helped to ensure our re-accreditation in 2004. This re-accreditation proved that our field was scientifically legitimate and capable of producing eminent results in research and training. Only then could we take the next step of bridging the gap between science and practice.

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### **Policymakers and practitioners blamed the scientists for having become estranged from development practice**

At the time they were right. The gap had been created on both sides. Only a few researchers were interested in the link between science and development practice and focussing on scientific legitimisation was a matter of survival. On the other hand, policymakers and practitioners were so explicit about their lack of trust in scientists and so poorly inclined to follow their recommendations that there was little incentive to be relevant to policy or practice.

### **When was the time ripe to restore the balance?**

Only when we were re-accredited in 2004 was it possible to acknowledge that the situation had completely got out of hand. From then on, the challenge for CERES was to find an equilibrium between maintaining high standards of output while at the same time building bridges towards policy and practice

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*“Scientists should beware of becoming consultants because they are not cut out for that kind of work.”*

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– by senior scientists and by training junior researchers. In that sense, the whole story of bridging gaps is one of agency as well as of context. It is one of agency because it became a deliberate CERES policy to bridge the gaps and it is one of context because in 2004 the most severe forms of parochialism and nationalism in Dutch society, public opinion and the media were on their way back. From 2005 onwards a wind of change caused the Dutch elite to become more libertine, open, tolerant and cosmopolitan again. These are features that the Netherlands had always been famous for. In that sense, the context played a favourable role: it was a matter of going with the flow rather than swimming against the tide.

### **Has the process been that smooth?**

Of course, the process of change was not always smooth. There have

been a lot of disagreements and a lot of legitimate questions have been asked about how far the relationship between science and practice should go, about the autonomy of science, about who should determine the research agenda, and about how to obtain money for high quality research without having to turn to an external donor whose agenda you then have to be accountable to.

### **What’s your opinion on this?**

Scientists should beware of becoming consultants because they are not cut out for that kind of work. It is interesting to gain experience with consultancies once in a while, but it should remain a marginal activity. There is a good reason why consultancy firms exist. Scientists should make an effort to obtain external funding from a diversity of sources which could lead to long-term research initiatives over, let’s say, ten years.

**That’s easier said than done with increasing pressure being placed on research funding.**

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Here we should distinguish between direct government funding and the second flow of funds. Many CERES members faced a severe reduction in government funding. For a long time the hope was that the second flow of funds would increase, with funding by the Ministry of Education enabling large research initiatives through NWO and WOTRO. However, contrary to expectations, this funding has been very limited up to now. Funds did become available from other Ministries, but these were generally spent on very large research initiatives of which our sector did benefit marginally or not at all. In such a situation one can try to acquire funds on the international market, from the EU, the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations and other big financiers. The other way is to try and involve societal players that have knowledge agendas in their work, in order to organise synergy.

### **How does CERES try to realise such synergy?**

In the first place by offering plat-

forms within CERES itself, such as the Summer School, which we have been organising for 15 consecutive years. Organising synergy has also been central since the very beginning of CERES in the sense of crossing boundaries between disciplines. CERES has succeeded in bringing together the political, geographical, cultural, and social sciences and in building bridges towards the more technical and the agro-biological sciences. More could have been done in relation to economic sciences and vice versa.

### **Have the synergies resulted in new scientific developments?**

Definitively. A paradigm shift has taken place with respect to institutional knowledge related to norms, law and ethics. Several studies have made it clear that the success of many initiatives depends on a proper institutional structure and culture. That wisdom has resulted in a larger involvement of management and organisation scientists. Compared to ten years ago, a larger number of CERES members

have also started to deal with law, policy and governance. In my opinion, we should build stronger bridges as far as institutional knowledge is concerned. If a knowledge centre somewhere is acquiring institutional knowledge in a serious and innovative way, CERES should learn from it and cooperate with it.

### **Can you give an example?**

A good anecdote in this respect is the debate we had when the chair for disaster studies was established in Wageningen. The question was whether scientists who deal with disaster aid should, as a matter of course, contact and cooperate with scientists with a military background. On that occasion I argued that the fact that the Netherlands Defence Academy now has a Behavioural and Philosophy Section is intriguing enough to warrant an investigation of the opportunities for cooperation.

### **Do you mean cooperation with the military?**

There have been some interesting developments in this respect that I

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would not have regarded as being possible ten years ago. Imagine CERES members inviting military people to teach their Master's students. Or CERES members working together with people with a military and defence background on an evaluation of an organisation like IKV Pax Christi. I am very positive about bringing people with different backgrounds together in research and in platforms and about stimulating PhD students to look beyond the boundaries of their research school. I consider those important examples of building bridges and creating synergy.

**What about the relationship with practitioners?**

I know of a number of think-tanks in the Netherlands where I believe things are happening which are intellectually more exciting than in the so-called scientific world. Take HIVOS for example, or ETC, IKV Pax Christi, IUCN and the ICCO Alliance. If this is true, the academic world should have the courage to say: "we are going to consult and link

up with them and explore opportunities for cooperation."

**So there is no longer any room for studies on pre-colonial masks made by a lost tribe in Africa?**

I was always of the opinion that every self-respecting scientific organisation should create room for people who do not seem to fit in; for those with unusual ideas. When I was director of AGIDS, I used to argue that it isn't bad at all to allocate 10% of the available funds to activities that everyone considers to be 'out of bounds'. Scientific history has shown many examples of work undertaken by pioneers who were regarded as mad but which turned out to be vitally important 20 years later.

**Like WOTRO's frontier research projects for the generation of new insights and knowledge?**

I consider WOTRO's decision to focus on the Millennium Development Goals, while at the same time allocating a substantial budget to innovative research that is not

mainstream nor that high on the political agenda as one of the most important decisions of the past few years. I am proud to have been one of its 'architects'. It is remarkable however - considering the commotion two years ago - that the majority of the proposals fit into a mainstream compartment. Some scientists were extremely afraid that WOTRO would become a policy-driven institute with no room for exciting research! I find it a bit disappointing to find out that so few people make use of the available opportunity.

**So, there have been some disappointments after all?**

When I look back on 5 years of being CERES director things have not always been positive. Scientists face the tremendous professional challenge of thinking about the really big issues of this world and of dealing with them from a long-term perspective and in an innovative way. The critical mass that is needed to take on this challenge is insufficiently mobilised. The most

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obvious example is the dire need among Dutch NGOs for serious scientific research in the area of evaluations. I consider the number of scientists capable of carrying out high-level research in this field to be extremely limited and the quality of their work and their scientific openness rather disappointing. I am also concerned about the fact that there is apparently no new generation of CERES-educated post-docs who are willing to become engaged in this field, while lots of academically-trained people (including PhD graduates from CERES) within these organisations are searching for ways to improve evaluations. It is disappointing to see that they are scarcely able to link up with their peers who have continued to be actively engaged in science.

#### **Are there any other missing links?**

Although there are 500 CERES members dealing with around 1,500 topics and themes, there is only a handful of scientists carrying out research into Dutch inter-

ventions in developing countries. Moreover, there is no critical drive to investigate the activities of Dutch businesses abroad. There are very few CERES scientists taking a critical look at the activities of entrepreneurs who are working under a Corporate Social Responsibility banner – including Fair Trade and Max Havelaar. In my opinion, it is fine for scientists to carry out research into pre-colonial masks, but there should be a balance with research which is related to development and that balance has still not been achieved.

#### **What do you consider to be the ideal way forward?**

CERES can be proud of the training given to first-year PhD candidates, the Summer Schools that are organised every year and the CERES ‘think tanks’ that have been set up. We can also be proud of the role we play with South African colleagues in the SANPAD programme, in particular the PhD and Supervisor’s workshops. However, there is still a lot to improve, such as the quality

of scientific and policy-oriented training in later years of PhD trajectories and the link with (research) Master’s programmes. There should also be a balanced mix between local activities in graduate schools and central activities at national level. Moreover, the research school’s financial basis needs to be a lot stronger. It would also be good to rethink the organisational architecture of the PhD training activities with regard to the eight working programmes. CERES should also have the ambition of involving all scientists from the relevant study domains in its activities, including the best ones and some from Flanders.

#### **And what about bridging gaps and creating synergies?**

I think it would be a wise strategy for CERES and its members to continue along the two lines I referred to. That means in the first place strengthening what we have started as regards the exchange between the three sectors in the triangle. Not only in the Netherlands but

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also internationally, so that policy, practice and science are more effectively linked. This in turn means that a more important section of the scientific agenda should be targeted at the really big global issues, including those related to policy and practice. In the second place we should continue to focus on strategic publishing. That means making the scientific world aware of the top publications our work has led to, while at the same time finding ways to share knowledge with those involved in practice and the general public. Not ‘either-or’ but ‘and-and’. In addition, the question about the relevance of research for policymakers and practitioners is a legitimate one and should be posed systematically. As a scientific community we should create the institutions where asking and answering that question is a self-evident relevance test. That is what we are doing with both CERES and the DPRN. I hope that this mission will continue for a long time to come.

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*“The question about the relevance of research for policymakers and practitioners is a legitimate one and should be posed systematically.”*

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#### **Any last remark?**

Yes, I would very much like to thank Agniet Cools, Lolita van Toledo and Ab van Eldijk for five years of professionalism and dedication in co-steering CERES to the point we have reached now. Without them CERES would not have survived. They ensured it was a privilege for me to be scientific director for the past five years. ■

## “Our Ambitions Go Beyond This”

The DPRN’s next phase

**The end of the first phase of the Development Policy Review Network (DPRN) is approaching. As far as its Task Force is concerned, the ambitions have not yet been fulfilled. – Mirjam Ros and Mariëtte Heres**

Jan Donner, President of the Royal Tropical Institute and Chairman of the DPRN Task Force, is enthusiastic about the DPRN. “The DPRN is really something new and obviously fulfils a need since more than 1,300 people have already attended one or more DPRN meetings.” The DPRN was set up in 2003



*Jan Donner*

in response to a seemingly unbridgeable gap between policy and science. The DPRN received a boost when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs granted a subsidy in 2004. Between 2005 and 2007 the DPRN has organised annual expert meetings for 13 world regions and one thematic meeting each year. In this way the DPRN provides a platform for development experts from policy, practice and science to meet, to exchange information and to explore the potential for synergies. A searchable database of development experts on the Global-Connections web portal now facilitates the identification of thematic, regional and Millennium Development Goal expertise. “We are now three years down the road and the gap between scientists and practitioners is a lot smaller than it used to be,” Jan Donner says.

DPRN Task Force member Eric Korsten of SNV says that the DPRN is important to his organisation because of its bridge-building function. He considers the DPRN regional expert meetings a step in

### Who’s who?

*Jan Donner* is President of the Royal Tropical Institute and Chairman of the Development Policy Review Network (DPRN) Task Force.

*Eric Korsten* is Senior Strategist Impact Evaluation at the SNV Netherlands Development Organisation.

*Dieneke de Groot* is senior policy advisor Research and Development at the Interchurch Organisation for Development Co-operation (ICCO).

*Martin de Graaf* is Principal Consultant for Public Sector Reform of BMB Mott MacDonald (an international management consulting company based in Arnhem and formerly named Arcadis BMB).

(see the next page for the other DPRN Task Force members).

the right direction. “But there is also room for improvement. We should move beyond just informing the parties about relevant research, interventions and policies and initi-

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ate a real search for common agendas. In the next phase we would like to see such meetings embedded in a broader process.”

According to the Strategic Plan that the DPRN Task Force is currently finalising, such a process includes the drawing up of overviews of relevant research, interventions and policies so that the scope for co-operation can be identified more easily. Discussions should also start well in advance of the meetings. E-discussions on a position paper could be instrumental in this. As Task Force member Dieneke de Groot from ICCO explains, “The challenge is to make optimal use of the internet. We should organise virtual meetings, like in D-groups on topics of common interest, parallel and prior to the normal meetings. Ideally the whole ‘triangle’ takes part in such a debate, including the business sector.” Donner adds, “Besides the serial approach of three consecutive annual meetings on the same region, there is also the intention to organise special, unique meetings

around topical issues. We want to keep people from the three domains interested.” In the next phase, proposals for such meetings could also come from the ministry or development organisations.

The continued development of the Global-Connections web portal is also high on the agenda. Martin de Graaf, a consultant working for BMB Mott MacDonald (formerly Arcadis) as well as Eric Korsten strongly advocate better access to information. De Graaf: “I often use World Bank reports because they are easily accessible, but they may not be the best reports available. Finding academic publications takes a lot of time. Linking the experts in the Global-Connections database to their publications would greatly enhance cooperation between the sectors.”

The final challenge is to improve the commitment and participation of policymakers. This requires a stronger focus on policy review and work on the creation of policy briefs. As Dieneke de Groot ex-

#### **The other DPRN Task Force members**

- Prof. Dr Ton Dietz, CERES
- Dr Paul Engel, European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM)
- Dr Dick Foeken, African Studies Centre
- Mr Jan Gruiters, IKV Pax Christi Nederland
- Dr Paul Hoebink, Centre for International Development Studies (CIDIN)
- Mr Bram van Ojik, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (observer)
- Ms Lolita van Toledo, CERES

plains, “It would be good if policymakers also suggested themes for DPRN meetings. This has happened in the case of the Southeast Asia and Oceania meeting, where they suggested that corruption should be discussed. I think their involvement can be stimulated if a theme is directly relevant to their work.” As far as the DPRN Task Force is concerned, some achievements have been made but a lot remains to be done. ■



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## “We Need Shepherds”

The importance of science from a policy perspective

**Ministry staff are supposed to translate the minister’s ideas into policy measures as well as they possibly can. The ministry takes the position that knowledge is an important foundation for this. According to Rob de Vos, policymakers need to be encouraged to take knowledge on board. “Policymakers tend to keep to beaten tracks. They are not naturally receptive to knowledge, they need shepherds to guide them.” What about the ministry’s receptivity? – Mariëtte Heres**

When asked how the Dutch science is valued at his ministry Rob de Vos, Deputy Director-General for International Cooperation (DGIS) answers, “Dutch scientists should confront policymakers with new insights. Science has to raise curiosity, push the policymakers to the limit – although not constantly – and keep them awake.” According to De Vos, civil servants need a push to absorb knowledge, be-

cause they tend to walk well-worn paths. “Because policymakers are not naturally inclined to absorb knowledge, we need shepherds.” He refers to examples of such shepherds as being the Chief Scientist at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Rob Visser, and also CERES Director Ton Dietz, whom he describes as a tireless advocate for bridging the gap between science and policymaking. De Vos observes, without blaming any of the parties, that the worlds of science and policy are not converging. “Both sides lack the necessary curiosity,” he concludes.

The Directorate Cultural Cooperation, Education and Research (DCO) does its best to put knowledge on the agenda of policy staff. According to staff member Henk Molenaar, the gap between science and policymaking is experienced by many. “This is particularly the case in the field of development cooperation. In 1992, our research agenda was strongly oriented towards the South. We took the principle of ‘ownership’ very seriously.

### Who’s who?

*Rob de Vos* is Deputy Director-General of the Directorate-General for International Cooperation (DGIS) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands.

*Henk Molenaar* is staff member of the Cultural Cooperation, Education & Research Department (DCO) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. His department granted the subsidy to the Development Policy Review Network (DPRN).

*Wepke Kingma* is Director of the Sub-Saharan Africa Department (DAF) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

This principle requires the help to be oriented towards requests from the South. That was the right thing to do, but the side effect was that less money was invested in Dutch research which supported the policy discussion. That has caused this gap.” Another cause, according to Rob de Vos, is the decentralisation of policy implementation. “The universities used to be more inte-

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grated into the development programmes. However, now that the embassies are implementing the programmes – which in itself is a good development – there is more distance.” De Vos hopes that the ministry staff and the academics will influence each other more in the future. “We have several young people at the ministry who are showing a profound interest in science. They graduated not so long ago and are often still in touch with the university.”

### **Profundity**

Wepke Kingma, Director of the Sub-Saharan Africa Department at the ministry is aware of the importance of communication with scientists for his department. “Scientists are able to help fathom the complexity of Africa. The 47 countries need a wide variety of approaches. Research furthers profundity and helps the thought process relating to structural changes.” Wepke Kingma doesn’t see a big gap; he knows where to find the right scientists when he needs

them. Henk Molenaar and Rob de Vos both think science is crucial for their ministry. It does not come about automatically, however, and it means continually drawing attention to the significance of knowledge. This requires a change in corporate culture. As De Vos adds, “When we talk about becoming more outwardly focussed, civil servants take that seriously. They go to Africa, Latin America and Asia. But being outwardly directed also means visiting the Universities of, say, Wageningen, Utrecht or Groningen. I really want to stimulate that.” Rob de Vos thinks that the mores can only be changed by rewards. “It is frustrating not to be rewarded for the extra work you do by looking into research, while on the other hand you will be punished if your memo is not finished or is no good. So what we need to do is create opportunities to update knowledge.”

Wepke Kingma of the Sub-Saharan Africa Department confirms that there is often no time left for research at the moment a policy

document needs to be drawn up. “It is hard to insert a research question in the time line. We have to do more and more with fewer civil servants, so we are under considerable pressure of time,” Kingma explains. He does, however, think that it is important for civil servants to keep their professional literature up to date. “I try to keep up with all scientific articles that are important politically.” Kingma is unable to judge if his staff also spend time on this.

As Henk Molenaar adds, “Many civil servants feel they have enough knowledge or that they don’t need it. At the ministry we often echo what others have said, for example the World Bank and the British, who spend a lot of time on research.” According to Molenaar, the Dutch do not need to do that. “The Dutch researchers are leaders in the field of development studies.”

### **Bridging gaps**

De Vos thinks scientists would like to influence policy, but do not achieve their goal because their



*Henk Molenaar*

publications are difficult to read. The gap between both worlds could be bridged by improving the way research results are presented. As Rob de Vos explains, “My bookcase is bulging with great publications, but they need to be translated for the policymakers. That would be possible by increasing the involvement of policymakers in the research process, by using a different language, or by ‘translating’ the results. Science needs to be brought closer to home.”

According to Henk Molenaar, the relationship between the ministry and Dutch scientists is on the mend. The Development Policy Review Network (DPRN) is one step in the right direction, as is the I.S. Academy. The latter is a partner programme of the ministry and Dutch universities. The partners together define the research issues that are relevant for the ministry and interesting for science. “Together with the I.S. Academy we develop a new generation of scientists with policymaking skills, as a result of which the contact between our staff and academics will also improve,” Molenaar clarifies. “For example, our staff arrange guest lectures.” In spite of this, Molenaar thinks more stimuli are needed to develop knowledge management and to increase the learning capability at the ministry. “We are using knowledge and research strategies (*kennis- en onderzoeksstrategieën*, KOS) which are to be developed by every directorate and embassy,” Molenaar explains. In this KOS the directorates will describe how they

intend to organise knowledge within their department. “There is also a Knowledge Chamber, where scientists meet with those high up at the ministry.” Rob de Vos highlights the influence of the new Minister as well. His approach stimulates others at the ministry to focus on knowledge management. “It makes a difference if a minister is willing to read more than official memos. Minister Koenders is willing to do that, even though a mass of paperwork comes his way. He also likes to check his insights against science.”

In addition to these new initiatives, a number of knowledge-related departments have been closed. Scientist Louk Box interprets this as a signal that the ministry is scaling down its influence even further. He explains that the ministry no longer has a structure conducive to receiving knowledge (see “*Looking beyond Academia*”). Henk Molenaar and Rob de Vos do not agree with Box’s analysis. As De Vos explains, “The managers are now forced to envision a longer time period than

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before. The removal of the Strategic Policy Planning Unit does not eradicate strategic thinking. The opposite is more or less the case. These departments were an alibi for not continuing to reflect. It's now up to us to take responsibility for strategic thinking. Our personal commitment is high, and that is of better use than one single department." Separate knowledge departments functioned in a situation which was too removed from management, according to De Vos. They became isolated. Molenaar therefore thinks separate knowledge and strategic departments are outdated. "You have to open up the whole system. We want to turn the ministry into a learning organisation at every level. Knowledge, innovative research strategies, and the I.S. Academy as well, are enabling us to increase the receptiveness of the whole machinery."

### **DPRN as a shepherd**

Isn't an initiative like DPRN out of date then? Henk Molenaar does not think so. He believes that, in any event, it could grow into an instru-

ment of the present time. Molenaar visualises virtual communities, with different parties organising virtual meetings in the future. "But that will take some time," he admits. One of the most striking problems of DPRN is that - despite the great enthusiasm at the top of the ministry - the civil servants rarely show up. This group's attendance is very low compared to the attendance of scientists and the staff of development organisations. As Molenaar explains, "DCO pays DPRN to intensify the relationship between policymaking and science. So I think it is a pity that many civil servants don't go to the meetings. The attendance level would probably go up if DPRN were to link the discussions as closely as possible to the policy issues we are wrestling with. Civil servants would have to be involved by giving them a role and by making them co-owners of the DPRN meetings."

Wepke Kingma would like to attend DPRN meetings, provided the subject is of interest to him. "Even if this is the case, I'll have to make

choices because there is a huge number of seminars and meetings," Kingma adds.

Molenaar mentions another reason for the civil servants' low attendance rate. "Scientists don't understand a lot of our goals," he states. "Knowledge isn't a goal in itself for us. Our goal is to use that knowledge." According to Molenaar, the radiance of the top and the political leadership will provide an important positive influence. "If they think in a cross-border manner, this will strongly influence all of the machinery," he says enthusiastically. Molenaar is seeing this happening in connection with the new developments currently taking place at the ministry.

Rob de Vos, who has a post high up at the ministry, also reacts enthusiastically to the DPRN. "I look at it from a distance, but I can see that the DPRN is a shepherd too. And we need those shepherds to make changes." As Molenaar adds, "A collective demand for knowledge needs to emerge. And we have to continue stimulating this." ■

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## “Policy Excludes Any Information It Doesn’t Need”

Interview with Paul Richards

**Relations between British academics and development professionals are often regarded as being far ahead of their Dutch counterparts. However, Paul Richards, who experienced the British policy sector as an expert on the conflict in Sierra Leone, is sceptical. “Maybe the Brits should take the Dutch DPRN as an example.” – Frans Bieckmann**

“There is nothing like the DPRN in the UK,” says Paul Richards, professor in Technology and Agrarian Development at Wageningen University. “And I think the view here in the Netherlands is a bit distorted. I was in a meeting at Clingendael and saw how amazed people were to hear about how British researchers were going to get involved in strengthening policymaking. But that is a very partial view. British links between research and policy seem to me to be much more limited.” According to Richards, the British foreign policy departments



have a great deal of analytical capacity themselves. “The best people are hired and scouted at the elite universities when they are young and brilliant. They then become intelligence and policy analysts. This creates a closed elite of specialists.” While the system is slowly changing, it does not mean that the British government is already more open to independent academic advice. “One big difference with the Netherlands,” Richards explains, “is

that the UK development policy has, with regard to a number of countries, become closely related to security issues and foreign affairs. This means that, especially in the case of countries in conflict, advisors often work on issues which are considered to be highly sensitive and even secret. The level of debate is subdued by the Official Secrets Act. If you do sensitive work for the Department for International Development (DfID) or the

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Foreign Office, you may not be allowed to talk about, for example, private security companies in Africa.”

Richards continues by talking about his own experiences. “I came into contact with that world when the war broke out in Sierra Leone while I was working there as an anthropologist. I was doing research on forest conservation on the border between Sierra Leone and Liberia, a strategic area during the war. Given that not many researchers work inside the war zones, I was one of only a few to provide a view from the inside. I painted a different picture to most, which included portrayals of British and other venture capitalists roaming these war-torn countries competing for resources, and of them being one of the major motivators of conflict themselves. This was in the early 1990s under a Conservative government. When Labour came to power they declared an ‘ethical foreign policy’. But in the case of Sierra Leone things continued along the same lines, without the British foreign

minister knowing about it. I was contacted first in 1994, when Sierra Leone rebels took British development workers and mining engineers hostage. The official line in British circles was that the rebel movement was of little or no importance. There was a plan to promote democracy at the same time as British mining capital was boosting the economy. But my grassroots views that the rebellion was serious, and motivated by serious injustices, were apparently not appreciated by the policymakers. They did not fit into a predetermined scheme based on British economic interests.

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*“To think that something like the DPRN is possible in the UK is a rather naïve positivist assumption.”*

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Then I began to see that the development and security fields are more closely related, at least in the UK, than I had realised. Aid is seen as a useful way to enter the arena in difficult parts of the world. Things went badly wrong in Sierra

Leone partly because of poor decisions by British and other western policymakers in relation to the 1996 peace process. The war then became an international nightmare.”

### **Aid positivists**

“To think that something like the DPRN is possible in the UK is a rather naïve positivist assumption. It cannot even be applied to engineers who provide technical advice. Plant engineers can give different sets of interpretations for one and the same data set. These days, social scientists often freely express doubts about factual truth. As a result, a lot of advice is in reality no more than an opinion on the probability of one theory or another. This only works in an academic environment where there is organised openness. But such openness is absent whenever security and other national interests are involved, as is usual in the case of rich country policy in relation to developing countries.”

The question is whether, apart from the more security oriented is-

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sues, it is possible to generate effective cooperation between research and policy fields. “It is almost impossible. It might be possible if the minister in question is effective and strong and really listens without focusing purely on the short-term national interests. Former Secretary of State for International Development Claire Short was like this.” Such a minister should stand up to other members of the government who want to influence development policy and ignore the awkward findings of academics.

“It is very often the case that such useful academic insights are not put into practice in the policy process. In the case of Sierra Leone, the policymakers were advised to focus on education, employment and justice. Under Claire Short, policies were starting to change. But, in the end, different issues – namely security and the restoration of traditional rural governance – became priorities, in part to protect British mining interests. Other advisors and members of the govern-

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*“Academic information that gets through to the policy arena has usually been selected based on strict criteria.”*

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ment started to interfere. I even experienced this personally. When I was hired by the World Bank to do a social assessment study in Sierra Leone, DfID hired another anthropologist to check and counter every argument our team made. In academia, if you issue controversial findings you are asked to debate them in public. In the case of our social assessment report I never received any written objections, nor was I ever called to any debate. The findings were marginalised through a whispering campaign.”

### **Distortion**

These criticisms are mainly of a political nature. However, Richards also has doubts about the character of academic advice itself. He warns that the message gets distorted when it is translated into policy proposals. “Academic information that gets through to the

policy arena has usually been selected based on strict criteria. Controversial figures like Paul Collier, a British economist now very influential in policy circles on Africa, are essential to the academic debate because they provide new insights and pose new questions and theses which can be weighed in an open debate. But the resulting picture is always a critical and complex one.

On the other hand, policy excludes anything it doesn’t need to survive. Policy implies strict selection to ensure things fit into predetermined frameworks based on considerations which are hidden in open debate. Why otherwise is the Liberian ex-president Charles Taylor standing trial before an international war crimes court in Den Haag while Tony Blair exchanges diplomatic pleasantries with Taylor’s one-time mentor Colonel Gaddafi, and celebrates a major Libyan business deal for BP? At one stage Gaddafi was probably as heavily involved in the war in Sierra Leone as Taylor. Policy very clearly overrides everything that goes against the current of

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national interest. These closed practices do not fit with the open and innovative character of academic debate.”

Some people question whether a trend has been taking place recently in the direction of think-tanks and research organisations that provide useful short policy briefs and other intermediary activities to make academic findings accessible to policymakers and other development professionals. Richards remains sceptical. “In the UK there are several highly-regarded development policy institutions. One of these is the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in London. But they are financed as a sort of consultancy firm. Their work focuses on the short term and they are highly dependent on ad hoc financing. If these funds dry up, they cannot continue their research. There is little job security, which in turn damages long-term intellectual spirit. This risks the focus being on what those who provide funding more or less want to hear, with researchers becoming guns

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*“That is in the end what initiatives like the DPRN or think-tanks are all about: intermediating, translating complex ideas for not so well-informed people.”*

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for hire.” Richards prefers such institutions to be firmly embedded within academic environments, as is the case with development studies institutes at Sussex, East Anglia, Bradford and Birmingham. The test in the end is ‘speaking truth to the power’. “This is an obligation for academics and this is also why I am very sceptical about excessively close relationships between academia and policymakers. I think that academics should stay with their own kind, even if it risks the accusation of ivory tower irrelevance. An ongoing, fact-driven, critical and sceptical debate may sometimes produce genuinely new knowledge, and if it stands out, even policymakers will eventually have to take note.” However, how does this knowledge reach the public, the politicians, the media and the policymakers? That is in

the end what initiatives like the DPRN or think-tanks are all about: intermediating, translating complex ideas for not so well-informed people. “On the rare occasions that you have some genuinely new knowledge, you have to communicate it effectively. You should be media-savvy. But again, you have to be aware of the pitfalls. You should only use the media if you really have something genuinely new to communicate. There are some academics who, having been on the radio or TV once, find it tempting to start reacting to issues about which they have little or no research-based information. Radio and TV are especially insatiable when it comes to their need for instant comment on troublesome issues for which, in fact, there is no information – for example on the minds and motivations of terrorists. The expert speculators seem at times to be driven more by vanity than any genuine knowledge of the social organisation of, for example, terrorist cells. It seems to me pretty unlikely that, in the pre-



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sent circumstances, any academic has genuine first-hand research knowledge of this kind. We have to start a debate in the academic community about the ground rules governing when or when not to intervene in the media.”

Policymaking and academic research are two different things. Richards adds. “Policy work means predicting the future. Academics look at the facts, at what has already happened. If you try to look into the future, you become a soothsayer.”

### **Common ground**

It is difficult for Richards to see a positive side to a close relationship between academics and policymakers. We have one last try and ask him, “Can you imagine a good model for such cooperation?” “There isn’t a perfect model. But, from the British perspective, we regard the Dutch system as a rational and well organised structure. The DPRN seems to be part of the Dutch model, which is based on trying to find common ground. Dif-

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*“The Dutch are straightforward. Claire Short was, in that sense, very Dutch, and our overseas aid policy was better for it for a time.”*

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ferent parties with different interests and opinions are engaged in discussions designed to find a consensus. There is also a collective modesty among the Dutch academia. This might be useful to the British as well because the world has changed. The typical Cold War British ‘spy’ – a John le Carré-like intellectual – is redundant. Now governments need other sources of information, about home-grown rebels and grassroots developments in war-torn countries. The British are held back by elite values, and a culture of nods, winks and nudges. The Dutch get round a table and bang on about the most sensitive matters in public. The Dutch political culture is less hypocritical than the British. The Dutch are straightforward. Claire Short was, in that sense, very Dutch, and our overseas aid policy was better for it for a time.

I remember a story of a friend who took part in a meeting with her to which twenty experts on war in Africa had been invited. Short started by telling them that they each had two minutes to present their views, which they ought to be able to put it on the back of a postcard. My friend was tenth in row, so he had time to prepare. But the first ones didn’t get any further than their introductions. It was a kind of shock therapy, obliging the researchers to be short and clear. Claire Short was always that straightforward. Maybe that’s the reason why she didn’t last long at the top of the British political ladder.” ■

## Looking Beyond Academia

Scientists on their interaction with development policy and practice

In its policy paper 'Research in development' (2005), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs states that research is intended to contribute increasingly to sustainable development and poverty reduction. One of the methods envisaged is enhanced cooperation with academics. But how do academics involved in the DPRN view this cooperation with policymakers? Louk Box, Han van Dijk, Pieter Boele van Hensbroek, Wil Pansters en Peter Ho share their points of view. – *Mariëtte Heres*

Academics and policymakers have always had different goals. While academics are concerned with the advancement of knowledge, policymakers try to translate government policies into concrete measures. Louk Box, rector of the Institute of Social Studies (ISS), claims that science and policy comprise two entirely different worlds: "Policy focuses on the short term, and it is policy perspectives that determine



*Louk Box*

its priorities. Academic research, by contrast, is oriented towards the long term. Researchers can formulate their questions independently, and everything – without restriction – is open to discussion. Another notable difference has to do with the fact that policy is the world of big money, while the world of research always experiences shortages. The fact that these worlds are so different need not be a problem though."

According to Pieter Boele van Hensbroek of the Centre for Development Studies (CDS) at the University of Groningen, it is a good thing that both worlds know their

### Who's who?

*Louk Box* is rector of the Institute of Social Studies and board member of CERES. His institute hosted the DPRN meeting on Non-EU Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

*Han van Dijk* is Professor of Law and Governance in Africa in the Department of Social Sciences at Wageningen University and research fellow at the African Studies Centre in Leiden. He was responsible for organising the DPRN meeting on West Africa.

*Peter Ho* is Professor in International Development Studies and Scientific Director of the Centre for Development Studies at Groningen University. *Pieter Boele van Hensbroek* is a philosopher and research coordinator at the same institute. Together they organised the DPRN East Asia regional expert meeting.

*Wil Pansters* is a senior university lecturer at the Discipline Group Cultural Anthropology at Utrecht University. He is also a member of the CERES directorate. He coordinated the DPRN Central America meeting.

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own rules of the game and have different norms and perspectives. “Both academics and policymakers have their own interesting and relevant roles to play in society. This should be the very point of departure for any relationship between the two.”

According to Boele van Hensbroek, science finds its added value in the very fact that it is not directly connected to policy. “Science is more fundamental and often innovative. Our strength as researchers is that



*Pieter Boele van Hensbroek*

we are not trailing behind trends and fashions.”

For Han van Dijk, based at Wageningen University and the African Studies Centre, one difference between scientists and policymakers concerns their risk-taking behaviour. “At the ministry, people tend to avoid risks. Anyone who goes a step too far is immediately brought back into line. Science is less bothered by that. By contrast, innovation is an asset among academics.” Both worlds could potentially benefit from proper links connecting the two, but constructing these does not appear to be an easy task.

#### **Working on a relationship**

The relationship between staff at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Dutch university researchers has been a dynamic one. The intensity of mutual contact and cooperation has depended on who was the minister in office, on his or her policy concerning research as well as on the spirit of the times. Louk Box takes a rather gloomy view of the current relationship.

“The interest of academics in development issues waned during Herfkens. She was of the opinion that the ministry could do without experts from outside and she sought cooperation mostly with the World Bank. This resulted in a decrease in mutual interest and an increasing lack of understanding on both sides.” However, most academics believe that the gap between academics and policymakers is gradually closing. “The dialogue in which we engage today was much less evident in the past,” says Peter Ho. “The current dialogue covers government policy in its totality, but it still has to crystallise. It would be a step forward if this dialogue came to involve more than simply drumming up academics at an opportunity for public comment. We would like to be given the opportunity to contribute our views and ideas throughout the entire process, from policy development through to implementation.”

Han van Dijk’s programme at the Africa Studies Centre involves working together with the Ministry



*Peter Ho*

of Foreign Affairs. This is not always easy: “Together with the ministry, we try to find answers to questions that are relevant to both of us. However, our research does not always generate the findings that the ministry is looking for and we cannot adjust our conclusions to the wishes of the ministry. We must guard our credibility within our own circles.” He also points out that, due to lack of time, ministry staff do not read research reports thoroughly and often rely, for example, on World Bank catch-phrases.” Nevertheless, Van Dijk agrees with other academics that

dialogue has improved. “Ten years ago we were still entrenched,” he says. “In the eyes of policymakers, academics were utterly unpractical, while academics in their turn thought that policymakers were just messing around.” We understand each other much better these days. We acknowledge that policymakers have only limited space in which to manoeuvre, and they recognise that we cannot reduce the complexity of a certain problem to a handy A4.”

Box is far less hopeful and feels that the relationship between the ministry and academia has worsened. He would like to see ‘brokers’ playing an important role. These brokers can span the gap between academics and policymakers by ensuring that research lands on the relevant ministry desks. But brokers are scarce, both in the academic world and at the ministry. “The academic world lacks brokers with sufficient sensitivity to policy. And at the ministry the knowledge brokers have gone. Many departments have been closed down, such as

the National Advisory Council for Development Cooperation (DGIS/SA) which used to take on policy preparation for DGIS; the Strategic Policy Planning Unit SPL; and the Netherlands Development Assistance Research Council RAWOO. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is inward-looking and has withdrawn into its ivory tower. Incidentally, academics are being asked for policy advice, but there is no longer a reception structure for knowledge.”

### **In the ministry’s grip**

Policymakers have a clear preference for research that is of direct use and benefit to their particular policy area. No time is available to read the many elaborate research documents that do not appear to be of direct relevance to the ministry’s policy. Research financed by the ministry therefore needs to be policy-relevant. Understandable, most interviewees say, but whether or not a certain research project is policy-relevant is a matter of debate. Wil Pansters, associate professor at Utrecht University and board member of CERES, considers

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it a dim criterion. “Some research activities may not immediately appear policy-relevant, but could nevertheless turn out to be. These research projects generate background knowledge which can be highly useful to policymakers who want to get to the bottom of things. Such things are difficult to assess objectively.”

Han van Dijk agrees that a great many research projects are relevant to the work of policymakers. “We not only create knowledge about development problems, we also conduct historical and political research. Such knowledge is indispensable for the enhancement of development policy.” According to Van Dijk, policy-relevant research can only be conducted if based on prior in-depth knowledge of the context of a particular country or theme. “For instance, one can hardly establish the policy contribution to the building of civil society unless based on knowledge about the historical and political developments of a country. In Mali, the added value of donor inter-

vention was overestimated. Our research showed that the strengthening of civil society was much more a consequence of the democratisation process.” Given the ambiguous definition of ‘policy-relevant’, Wil Pansters proposes a different criterion: “Policymakers are prone to ask normative questions because they want to know how best to change a certain situation. Not all researchers want to tackle such normative questions and focus instead on empirical and theoretical issues.” Pansters adds that there is a grey area. “Some scientists take pleasure in extending limits and contributing to policy issues. Whether you do so depends on the research tradition and field



*Wil Pansters*

of study. Development economists within CERES work more often on policy issues and maintain contacts with for instance the World Bank than anthropologists do.”

Box states that academics are not being judged on writing policy evaluations or ‘grey literature’ but on their scientific achievements. “What matters is the quality of research, the number of publications, and one’s citation scores. And anyway, how would we envisage judging researchers on the policy-relevance of their work? When exactly is research supposedly relevant, and under whose policy? Some academics are expressing concern about the ministry’s directive force. Pieter Boele van Hensbroek observes that it is often policymakers who decide which theme is considered relevant and which one is not. Academics are expected to focus their research accordingly. Boele van Hensbroek: “A critical public debate is needed on the relevance of science and research. In such a debate, scientists should be prepared to listen to criticism

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and account for themselves.” Pansters also sees the danger of the above development: “Within CERES we sometimes worry that, increasingly, only research projects related to the Millennium Development Goals are receiving funding. We have to be aware that such concepts can be whims of fashion. And therefore researchers should not be obliged to stick to them,” Van Dijk adds. “During the past twenty years, a process of self-censure has been taking place, almost without being noticed among researchers who are increasingly selecting subjects related to current policy issues.” He attributes this process to the funds that reach researchers via the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “This development has led to policy-dependent research. The risk of government-directed research is that you end up with research that takes no risks, the results of which are predictable.”

### **The DPRN as a builder of bridges**

All of the interviewees are involved in the Development Policy Review Network (DPRN) as organisers of



*Han van Dijk*

annual regional expert meetings. Do they think that DPRN will be in a position to intensify the relationship between researchers, policy-makers and practitioners and close the gap? The academics interviewed are for the most part positive about the DPRN, but they also recognise the need for further growth. Pieter Boele van Hensbroek claims that the idea behind DPRN is stronger than what is currently being realised. “What we need is a knowledge society, but this cannot

be created by merely attending a meeting once a year.” Han van Dijk would also like to see DPRN grow into something more structural. “I would like to form groups from this triangle which can then initiate more structural cooperation. But this is not yet happening. What is lacking is a driving force as well as money.” Louk Box considers the DPRN to be a potentially important network that could help close the gap. But due to lack of a reception structure at the ministry people are continuing to muddle on. “Currently the focus is still on individual contacts which are not embedded in a structure. This way we can keep on meeting and discussing till the cows come home.”

Wil Pansters identifies another important added value of the DPRN. “Personal networking is crucial. Of course discussions on content must be held, but DPRN also provides a communication channel. Are you aware of the expression that part of the sociology of knowledge consists of the sociology of social networking?” ■



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## Gap – What gap?

Interview with Thea Hilhorst

**In April this year, CERES member Thea Hilhorst accepted the post of endowed chair in Humanitarian Aid and Reconstruction at Wageningen University. Her research into aid is very closely linked to policy and practice. “From the point of view of my field of work, I feel the gap is too small,” she maintains.**

**– Mariëtte Heres**

Thea Hilhorst has been doing research into disaster aid for years. She is currently involved in, among other things, research financed by the NWO into emergency aid provided in the conflict area of Angola. “I am privileged,” she explains. “Thanks to the VIDI grant provided by NWO, two of the PhD students working with us are able to perform independent research. This is rare because very little independent academic research into humanitarian aid and reconstruction is performed at international level. Research in that field predominantly takes the form of consultancy



*Thea Hilhorst*

work.” She is soon going to start a second WOTRO-financed research project in Ethiopia. Five of her eight PhD students are carrying out their research in consultation with development organisations. This research into aid interventions is directly relevant to policymakers and practice. Hilhorst sees herself as a true bridge builder. “I am also trying to write my scientific work in a way which is understandable to a wide audience”.

However, Hilhorst does think it is important that, in addition to consultancy work, there is space for independent research which is relevant to policy. “At the heart of the research initiated by NGOs and other practitioners is the reality of their individual organisation. However, independent research starts from a multiple reality with the people concerned as the primary point of reference. That’s why I feel that we must protect academic research by means of financial independence.”

Hilhorst has discovered that academic bodies perform a great deal of consultancy work. As a scientist, she is not always happy that this is the case. “Although the work then has a scientific stamp, the question is whether it is valid? Often, no scientific articles are produced and it is therefore not subjected to a peer review, despite this being the essence of scientific assessment. In addition, problems can arise regarding the rights to the research material. Often, organisations want to do something with this material

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themselves, as a result of which data is not available for independent use.” According to Hilhorst, if you leave research which is relevant to policy completely to the players themselves, the results will be biased. “Managers and academic consultants often carry out the whole process together, from defining the need for research, drafting the proposal and budget, to the presentation of the report. There is no third party to monitor quality. As a consequence, there is no guarantee that the research is efficient, solid or reliable.” Hilhorst believes the DPRN or WOTRO have a role to play in developing research protocols for this kind of research which are similar to the protocols common in the academic world.

The professor in Humanitarian Aid and Reconstruction also advocates retaining fundamental research. “I understand that policymakers or development organisations cannot finance purely academic research. However, if WOTRO, for example, moves too far in the direction of

policy relevant research [*read more about this in the interview with Renée van Kessel- ed.*], bringing with it implications for methodological choices such as the involvement of many stakeholders, we must be careful not to exclude more fundamental and critical development research.” I have noticed that the part of our research which is linked closely to the stakeholders rarely includes the posing of fundamental questions such as what development is, to what extent the aggregated effects of aid undermine the chance of development instead of strengthening it, or to what extent the way of thinking in terms of North-South relationships is still relevant, and how globalisation ought to be changing our world? It is crucial that space is retained for this kind of free-thinking research.■



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## WOTRO – From Tropical Research to Science for Global Development

Interview with Renée van Kessel

**Academic research can be relevant to development. That's why WOTRO, the Netherlands funding agency for development-related research, has radically changed its approach, says its Director, Renée van Kessel. Although it used to focus on ex civil servants in the former colonies, WOTRO's work has recently been mainstreamed into the goals of the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research, NWO, of which it is a part.**

– *Frans Bieckmann*

“WOTRO's evolution has passed through several stages,” WOTRO Director Renée van Kessel explains. “Initially, WOTRO used to be an important source for traditional tropical research, for instance on coral reefs or anthropological field work. It was not unusual in those days that scientists doing research in tropical countries dealt with their

pet subjects which had no relationship whatsoever to broader societal issues. This has totally changed,” Van Kessel argues. “Today, in 2007, research funded by WOTRO needs to be problem oriented. ‘The tropics’ no longer exist as a confined working area. There are lots of problems in the world that influence global development, such as poverty, hunger, health, education, the friction between the environment and economy and international relations. All these problems can and should be the object of comprehensive and integrated scientific research, which can contribute to sustainable development.”

That's why Van Kessel, in contrast to others, prefers not to speak about ‘development studies’ to describe the academic field covered by WOTRO. “That would be a step back because development studies do not include fundamental research on, for instance, hydrogen or biofuels which can help solve energy and climate problems in the world. It also takes hard-core basic research to select candidate mole-



cules for malaria vaccines. Globalisation has meant that such disciplines are an indispensable part of the global development agenda nowadays.”

### **Development instead of tropics**

It has taken many years for WOTRO to change from a small foundation focussing on traditional tropical research into a modern and fully integrated organisation oriented around science for global development. “Ton Dietz, as a member of the WOTRO board, has played a major role in this transformation

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towards a well-adapted organisation.” Van Kessel describes how WOTRO arrived at this stage: “WOTRO was founded in 1964, as a foundation for former colonial civil servants, just after Dutch New Guinea was handed over to Indonesia. As an organisation it focused on tropical research in a very literal sense, with an emphasis on ethnological and biological (taxonomic) research. In those days WOTRO was entirely financed by the Ministry of Education and Science. Although formally part of ZWO – NWO’s predecessor – it was a stand-alone organisation with an independent board.”

From 1981 onwards the Directorate General for International Cooperation (DGIS) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs started to co-fund research projects submitted to WOTRO. This meant that not only pure scientific research, but also more development-related studies could be financed, although they were always subject to academic peer reviews. This continued to be the case until the mid 1990s, based

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*“Suddenly WOTRO was no longer a follower, but became a sort of leader.”*

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on a modest budget of about 3.5 million guilders. “This co-financing by the DGIS was not welcomed by all members of our ‘academic hinterland’. The criteria to select development-related research were rather tenuous and, for administrative reasons, were only established ex post,” Van Kessel explains. “ZWO (which later became NWO) was engaged mainly in ‘high level research’ in physics, chemistry, cognitive sciences and the like, and WOTRO’s activities and its interaction with the DGIS were looked upon with some disdain. There were doubts about the academic level because of the suspicion that the selection of proposals and the implementation of research might be interfered with by criteria which were not just scientific.”

The experiment with DGIS co-funding was broadened in the early 1990s with a special fund for PhD students from the South. “Demand-

oriented research became popular. The unique character of the WOTRO approach was rooted in a combination of a selection procedure based on excellence criteria and supervision of the researchers in both the Netherlands and their home country.”

### **Leading the troops**

The favourable results of small development-related projects laid the foundation for one of WOTRO’s key instruments, namely the integrated programmes. These are integrated, multidisciplinary programmes in which Dutch researchers and those from the South work together based on a clear focus on policy relevance. As Van Kessel explains, “The DGIS criteria for development relevance had also become more professionalised and this facilitated the start of a symbiotic relationship. In the meantime, the spirit of the times was also changing within NWO. Suddenly WOTRO was no longer a follower, but became a sort of leader. At the end of the 1990s NWO itself began to reflect upon its ‘ivory tower’ status. It de-

### WOTRO's aims for 2007–2010

- Excellent scientific research with relevance to development;
- Use of scientific research in development practice and policy;
- Synergy and interaction among relevant players and institutions.

*Source:* WOTRO Strategy 2007–2010.

liberated on such questions as to whether there should be a focus on the societal relevance and valorisation of research. Or whether there should be more cooperation with stakeholders, both in the public and private sphere. In this respect WOTRO was leading the troops, as 'development relevance' has been a condition for DGIS funding for 20 years already."

### Partnerships

Bridging the gap between research and policy and practice has become an explicit aim of the WOTRO strategy for 2007–2010 (*see box – ed.*). "WOTRO's aims are as much about

excellence as about development relevance, so any criticism that development relevance or policy orientation implies less scientifically sound methods and results does not hold," says Van Kessel. "Our ultimate aim is a knowledge chain comprising fundamental research, translational research and recommendations for policymakers and business. In all cases, the main point of departure is that research must be excellent, top of the bill, and in accordance with carefully selected academic procedures."

According to Van Kessel, the WOTRO approach has also matured in another way: "In the past, researchers went into the field, collected data, came back to the Netherlands and wrote the conclusions. People from the South were not involved at all, either in formulating the research questions, in the implementation of research or in the dissemination of results – which were only published in academic journals anyway. At a certain stage, under former Minister Eveline Herfkens, the DGIS reacted –

and maybe overreacted – by demanding that research questions be formulated by researchers in developing countries, while scientists in the North were only allowed to play an assisting and facilitating role. Today, WOTRO has finally achieved a balance, with the consensus being that it is better to work in partnerships in which the North can help the South to build research capacity. Research is to be carried out jointly. An even more recent development is the fact that civil society organisations in the South participate in the formulation of the research programmes. WOTRO grants special 'seed money' for workshops, to be held in advance of the actual research project to make the programme more relevant to development."

Of course there is always the question of what exactly is meant by development relevance. "There have always been hypes and fashions," Van Kessel answers. "They used to depend on the international debate and the policy lines of the sitting responsible politician.

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Now they are determined mainly by the Millennium Development Goals. However, 10 years ago everybody was talking about Eveline Herfkens' 19 countries combined with a focus on women, the environment and good governance."

### **Innovations**

WOTRO is innovating in several other ways. One example is the new – involvement of the possible 'users' of research results in the selection process. "There has always been a commission that, based on peer reviews, selects the best research proposals that have been submitted after a call from WOTRO or NWO. Now this list of prioritised proposals is being compared with that of another commission made up of representatives from civil society organisations and other potential users because these are the ones that are ultimately supposed to benefit from the research."

Another innovation in the NWO and WOTRO approach is a greater focus

on multidisciplinary research. "NWO introduced interdisciplinary research programmes, in which the several divisions of NWO, including WOTRO, work together. Examples are 'Sustainable Earth, 'Conflict and Security' and 'Cultural Identity'. "WOTRO's participation in these programmes gives it a greater internal legitimacy. It also increases the attention of DGIS, which can, in this way, benefit from NWO as a whole. That is also the reason why former Minister for Development Cooperation Agnes van Ardenne decided to increase the WOTRO funds considerably. A logical next step would be to abolish WOTRO and amalgamate it with NWO," says Van Kessel. "Some people argue that if development relevance is such a broad concept, it could also be an integral part of NWO's research strategy as a whole. The DGIS money can then be distributed among all NWO disciplines." That is, however, still a bridge too far. "The development relevance is still not really imbedded in NWO policy. Maybe it will be in the next

strategic period that starts in 2011."

### **Development Policy Review Network**

WOTRO is keen on facilitating the translation of research results into policy advice. As a consequence, it is discussing the conditions under which it could possibly finance the Development Policy Review Network (DPRN). "A decision has not yet been taken," says Van Kessel, "as it is not exactly clear yet how things have to be organised in order for such a network to function optimally. The DPRN would be part of what is called our 'Strategic Support Activities', which also includes the new bimonthly magazine called 'The Broker'. I certainly think that the DPRN could play a role in bringing together research communities. There used to be what were referred to as working communities (*'werkgemeenschappen'*), which were organised around a specific theme or region until the end of the 1990s, but which were mainly science-

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oriented and don't exist anymore. There is certainly a need for a mechanism that creates such dynamic networks for exchange and discussion, but it is quite difficult to figure out how to create a sustainable organisation that really incorporates the rather divergent academics. It should be a facilitating network of academics who actively seek to 'translate' research findings on behalf of policymakers and other users. That requires flexible rather than obligatory structures and fixed meetings every month or so. Such a network ought to function in a natural way, with people coming together to discuss urgent issues in a way that the concrete results of a research programme can be presented. Another example, on the demand side, is that policymakers might want to discuss a specific issue. Based on the searchable database on Global-Connections.nl, a list of experts could then be generated who would be able to attend a meeting convened at short notice. Of course a prerequisite is that civil

servants or policymakers are curious to find out about the experts' views. This is currently not always the case. We still have a lot of work to do in this respect. A lot depends on the people who are already in the organisation. Although there are currently some enlightened proactive people inside DGIS, this situation can change every three years. One minister or another can also make an enormous difference." Van Kessel has high hopes that something good will come out from the DPRN. "We need a good organisational structure that allows us to act quickly and effectively. A DPRN meeting should become something which is both an honour to attend and worth being invited to." ■





The Research School for Resource Studies for Development (CERES) set up the Development Policy Review Network (DPRN) in 2003. The aim is to provide a platform and improve opportunities for regular contact and interaction between development experts from science, policy and practice. In this publication some of the people involved reflect on the potentials and hurdles associated with bridging gaps and creating synergies between the three sectors. The booklet is a joint publication by CERES and the DPRN on the occasion of the departure of Ton Dietz as Scientific Director of CERES.



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