

# Gaps in our knowledge

In this new series, practitioners in the field of international cooperation describe the dilemmas and research issues they and their organizations face, how researchers can help resolve them, and the questions they would like to see answered. First, Jan Gruiters explains how research could contribute to his work in conflict resolution and peace building.



**Jan Gruiters** (IKV Pax Christi)

Jan Gruiters (1956) studied business administration and computer technology. He has worked as an organizational consultant and has held a number of positions in Pax Christi Nederland, the Council of Churches and the Dutch peace movement. In 2000, he became director of Pax Christi, based in Utrecht, the Netherlands, which merged with the Interchurch Peace Council (IKV) in January 2007 to become IKV Pax Christi.

## **W**here does IKV Pax Christi operate and what does it do?

IKV Pax Christi is concerned with conflict resolution and peace building in around 20 countries in the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, Central Africa and elsewhere. We work primarily in the context of what are known as fragile and failing states, where government is largely absent. We also operate in countries with authoritarian and repressive regimes. In the Netherlands, our activities include a campaign against cluster munitions and efforts to breathe new life into the nuclear non-proliferation treaty.

IKV Pax Christi made the link between security and development long before it became fashionable. Now that it is in vogue, I think it is time for a few critical comments on what is now called the ‘3D concept’ – defence, development and diplomacy. This is the approach applied by the Netherlands in which defence, development and diplomacy jointly address conflicts throughout the world.

First, 3D cooperation always takes place in highly politicized contexts. Take Afghanistan, for example. It is very important to specify explicitly and exactly why you are getting involved: is it for the Afghans themselves, for the region or for Western security? That is not always self-evident. In our view, the main priority is the dignity of the people living in the conflict zone.

Second, it is too easy to talk about the link between security and development. Everyone keeps saying that there can be no security without development, and vice versa. That may be true at a normative and political-ideological level, but when you get down to policy and actual daily practice, we know very little about it.

## **What do you think about scientific research in relation to your work?**

It is still very difficult to bridge the proverbial gap between policy and practice on the one hand and scientific research on

the other. We do have contact with university institutes that focus on conflict studies, but generally speaking I think that organizations that are concerned with international cooperation could do more. We should be much more proactive in setting the research agenda, making it clear what research questions are important for us, and where there are gaps in our knowledge.

A lot of knowledge initiatives have their origins in the international cooperation sector. We see the emergence of knowledge centres and knowledge forums, while NGOs, especially the large ones, are investing a great deal in knowledge. That is starting to become a problem for IKV Pax Christi. It is getting too difficult to follow and to continue to play an active part in the discussion.

### **What questions would you like to see answered by research?**

First of all, I would like to know more about transition processes in countries with autocratic governments. In my view we know far too little about how such states can make the transition to democracy, and what factors play a role in that process.

We thought we knew how to go about it: if we were to invest, that would lead to economic development, and that would, in turn, bring democracy. But we have seen that does not work. Even worse, the few studies that have been carried out show that, as per capita incomes rise, the chances of a democratic transition decline in countries without a democratic tradition. That is very confusing. And we don't know why this happens. Perhaps it is because traditional development cooperation has little impact on these kinds of countries. We would like more insight into how these processes of change occur, how internal forces play a role in them, and what you can and cannot do to support them. Scientific research could help us to acquire that understanding.

My second question is related to the 3D concept. I once said that we hear a lot about development and defence, but little about diplomacy. It may be true that, in the past 50 years, more countries than ever before have been involved in military operations around the world. But between 2000 and 2005, four times as many conflicts were resolved through diplomatic efforts than through the use of military force. Diplomatic or political solutions are being sought in 58% of current conflicts.

In fragile states, an important role is often played by 'non-state actors' who are difficult to get around the negotiating table. IKV Pax Christi has been active in North Uganda for eight years and was responsible for getting the negotiations between the Lords Resistance Army (LRA) and the Ugandan government up and running. We are interested in a thorough analysis of such processes: what are the factors for success? What role is played by state actors and civil society organizations? We need more systematic information on these negotiation processes, because it is only on the basis of these arguments that you can persuade governments to work with organizations such as ours.

In practice, you see that such cooperation is very difficult, while it is clear to everyone that civil society organizations have much better access to groups like the LRA, and are more likely to persuade them to negotiate than diplomats. There is a need for civil diplomacy, but it seems that governments want to maintain their monopoly on diplomacy. In the development sector, it is recognized that civil society organizations can and should play a major role. That is also starting to be understood in defence circles. But not yet in the diplomatic world.

That of course makes it a difficult subject for research. It would need an action research approach, or a study of closed processes. That's how we'd like to see our eight years of involvement with the LRA analysed: what are the dilemmas, the areas of tension, the factors for success? ■