

Context,
international cooperation



Development Policy Review Network

Mid-term evaluation

Final report

August 2007

Context, international cooperation
Utrecht, the Netherlands

Development Policy Review Network

Mid-term evaluation

Final report

August 2007

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	iii
Acknowledgements	v
Abbreviations	vi
Executive summary	vii
1. Introduction	vii
2. Relevance	vii
3. Efficiency	vii
4. Effectiveness	viii
5. Sustainability	viii
6. Learning and innovation.....	ix
7. Conclusion.....	ix
Chapter I Introduction: parameters of the study.....	1
1. Introduction	1
a. <i>Background information</i>	1
b. <i>Reason for the evaluation</i>	1
2. Purpose of the evaluation	2
3. Evaluation process.....	2
4. Methodology	2
a. <i>Literature review</i>	2
b. <i>Tracer study</i>	3
c. <i>Self-assessment workshop</i>	3
d. <i>Interviews</i>	3
5. Composition of the evaluation team.....	3
6. Reporting	4
7. Reflections on the study process	4
Chapter II Relevance	5
1. Introduction	5
2. Positioning of DPRN.....	5
3. Strategy in relation to the objectives	6
4. De-fragmentation of the sector.....	6
5. Conclusions and reflections	6
Chapter III Efficiency.....	8
1. Introduction	8
2. Capacities	8
a. <i>Task Force</i>	8
b. <i>DPRN coordination</i>	8
3. Financial efficiency	9
a. <i>Meetings</i>	9
b. <i>Global Connections</i>	9
c. <i>Additional costs</i>	9
4. Conclusions and reflections	9
Chapter IV Effectiveness	11
1. Introduction	11
2. Coherence.....	11
3. Output.....	12
a. <i>DPRN regional and thematic meetings</i>	12
b. <i>Websites and database</i>	13

4. Outcome	14
a. <i>Cooperation by attendants</i>	14
b. <i>Unbalanced representation of different professional groups</i>	15
c. <i>The websites</i>	16
5. Conclusions and reflections	16
Chapter V Sustainability	19
1. Introduction	19
2. Some preliminary remarks	19
3. Conclusions and reflections	19
Chapter VI Learning and innovation.....	20
1. Introduction	20
2. Learning	20
a. <i>The role of leaders</i>	20
b. <i>Learning from the meetings</i>	20
3. Innovation.....	21
4. Conclusion and reflections	21
Chapter VII Conclusions and final reflections	22

Acknowledgements

The Development Policy Review Network (DPRN) has been formed in 2004 with the aim to bridge the gap between development practitioners and researchers. The Network is funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The implementation of an external (Mid-Term) evaluation in 2007 is part of the contract with the Ministry.

In June 2007 DPRN and Context, international cooperation (Utrecht, The Netherlands) signed a contract with regard to the implementation of the study as per the Terms of Reference which had been agreed upon. (See Annex I.)

Many people assisted the study team with this assignment. On behalf of the team I want to thank the members of the Task Force, respondents of the tracer study, those who granted us an interview and the participants of the self-assessment workshop.

The evaluation had to be conducted within a very short time frame. This led during the initial stage of the data collection process to a number of organisational and logistical problems which could however be solved with the energetic and able support of Dr Mirjam Ros, the coordinator of the DPRN, and DPRN support staff. Moreover Dr Ros provided essential support with regard to data collection.

At all levels, the evaluation team experienced a collaborative attitude and openness, which enabled us to take up numerous issues in a relatively short period of time.

Last, but certainly not least, as coordinator of this external evaluation, I want to thank my team-members at Context, international cooperation (Dr Chris Eijkemans, Ms Sarah Cummings, Mr Peter Das, Ms Marieke Hart, Ms Anne-Marie Leenkengt and Ms Els Mulder) for their pleasant and professional collaboration during all stages of the study process.

Context, international cooperation considers the facilitation of external evaluation of this nature as useful learning events not only for client organisations but also for Context, itself. Feedback is welcome at: info@developmenttraining.org

Despite the intensive and fruitfull collaboration with stakeholders involved, the content of this final report is solely my responsibility.



Fons van der Velden
Coordinator of the study

August 31, 2007
Context, international cooperation
Utrecht, the Netherlands

Abbreviations

AMIDSt	Amsterdam Research Institute for Metropolitan and International Development Studies
CERES	Center for Resource Studies for development
DCO/OC	Directie Culturele Samenwerking, Onderwijs en Onderzoek (Directorate Cultural Cooperation, Education and Research)
DGIS	Directoraat Generaal Internationale Samenwerking (Directorate General International Cooperation).
DPRN	Development Policy Review Network
MDG	Millenium Development Goal
MFO	Medefinancieringsorganisatie (Co-financing organisation)
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
SWOT	Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities and Threats
ToR	Terms of Reference

Box I: Users' guide

Composition of the report

Main chapters

The present report basically consists of three clusters. In Chapter I a brief overview of the study process is presented. Chapters II – VI contain the basic findings and/or analysis collected from the study of dossiers, tracer study, interviews and self-assessment workshop. Attention is paid to, respectively, relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability and learning and evaluation. Chapter VII provides some conclusions and reflections.

Summary

For an overview of the study reference may be made to the executive summary at the beginning of the report.

Annexes

The report contains – in a separate document – seven annexes. Apart from the ToR for this study and basic information on data collection, a brief report of the self-assessment meeting and suggestions for website-oriented approvals are given. The annexes are meant for the more interested and/or involved reader.

Executive summary

1. Introduction

The roots of the Development Policy Review Network (DPRN) trace back to 2003, when Center for Resource Studies for Development (CERES) took the initiative to bridge the gap between development practitioners and development researchers. The major aim of the Network is to support a better learning ability and more development relevant research by systematically organising meetings of policymakers, development researchers and practitioners linked to the Netherlands. Within this context, the Network organises regional and thematic meetings. In the period under review (September 2004 - June 2007) in total 28 of such meetings have been organised. Two websites are launched: www.dprn.nl and www.global-connections.nl. The latter is a database for development expertise.

During the preparatory phase, it was decided that the external evaluation would focus on the following areas: (a) relevance; (b) efficiency; (c) effectiveness; (d) sustainability and (e) learning and innovation. The evaluation has been conducted by consultants from Context, international cooperation (Utrecht, The Netherlands).

2. Relevance

Within the existing infrastructure of development and international cooperation in the Netherlands, the Network is well positioned, taking an important place among the knowledge initiatives relating to development and international cooperation in the Netherlands. The DPRN was established at the right time and its formation was a response to an apparently felt need. The chosen strategy is suited to the objectives of the Network. The DPRN deals in a relevant way with the identified limited dialogue between policymakers, researchers and development practitioners. The relevance and appropriateness of the DPRN is enhanced by the fact that the Network contributes to de-fragmentation in the development sector in the Netherlands.

3. Efficiency

The evaluation team is of the opinion that the DPRN is organised in an efficient manner. The management of the Network tackles the inherent limitations of network organisations as such in an adequate manner and delivers the output which it is expected to provide. One of the main strengths of the Network is that the DPRN Task Force has the 'capacity to mobilise capacity', in particular within academic institutions in the Netherlands and up to a certain degree in Belgium. Furthermore, the DPRN coordinator appears to contribute to the efficiency of the Network.

The financial administration is arranged efficiently. The meetings were organised in a cost-effective manner; somewhat clouded however by additional input of the host organisations not accounted for by DPRN. The evaluation team considers that the coordination costs are reasonable. The costs for developing the websites are fair.

4. Effectiveness

The objectives of the programme are in line with the mission and strategy of DPRN: to stimulate debate and discussion on development issues and policies, in particular on Dutch policies, among researchers, policymakers and development practitioners; and to facilitate information exchange between the various types of development experts in or linked to organisations in the Netherlands. This objective builds logically on the DPRN's mission of bridging the gap between science and practice. This implies that there is a proper coherence between strategy and objectives of the Network.

a. Output

All outputs, planned at the start of the programme, have been realised. The planned meetings have taken place and attendance was satisfactory. The meetings are well documented and the documents are available on the DPRN website. Lists of relevant institutions, people and activities are provided, and the websites are in the air. The content of the databases is relevant to development and international cooperation. In the websites emphasis is on collection of information and knowledge rather than on stimulation of connections between the Network participants and links to other websites and initiatives.

b. Outcome

It is fair to assume that increasing cooperation among participants in DPRN is taking shape. Policymakers, researchers and practitioners find each other more easily. Due to attribution problems it is not (yet) possible to substantiate this statement with hard empirical data. Involving policymakers is an important objective of the Network and a crucial element, determining the relevance of the initiative. It turns out that policymakers' participation during the period under review is relatively poor. Policymakers involvement in the agenda setting of the meetings is also limited, although many efforts are undertaken to include them. The Network has the potential to realise cross-fertilisation between the various professional groups, but until now this does not seem to materialise to its fullest extent.

The website statistics reveal that neither the DPRN nor the Global Connections website currently receive sufficient visitors to be sustainable. This may be considered as one of the major limitations of the programme. For Global Connections, this is due to its pilot status. However, among other things, this means that the resources available online are not reaching the potential audience. It is believed that the websites do have the potential to attract more visitors, after some improvements are implemented.

5. Sustainability

In view of the relatively short existence of the Network, it is too early to assess the sustainability of the initiative. Such a study should be undertaken at a later stage. However, regarding the design of the whole endeavour (relevance, strategy, activities, organisational set-up, relationships), the evaluation team is of the opinion that this appears to be a sustainable effort. However, since in the end the members of the Network will have to carry the initiative, the DPRN will have to pay sufficient attention to the process aspects of the network and facilitate the process of networking and self-organisation.

6. Learning and innovation

Unlike what its name seems to indicate, DPRN breathes the atmosphere of a platform. A platform is more static and less interactive than a network. This is also reflected in both the DPRN and the Global Connections websites. They have an emphasis on collection of information and knowledge, rather than on stimulating connection to other websites and related initiatives.

There are a number of clear indications that the capacity to learn and innovate is well anchored within the systems, procedures and especially in the culture of the Network. Leaders of the Network have an open attitude towards learning and innovation, and are backed by supportive organisations. DPRN meetings are systematically evaluated and this evaluation provides feedback into the meetings. There is also adequate communication between the Task Force and the organisers of the regional and thematic meetings.

7. Conclusion

A number of critical reflections may be drawn on the basis of the primary data collection and analysis. Much of the sustainability of the Network depends on the commitment and ownership of the members. To this end the DPRN might concentrate on process facilitation of networking and self-organisation. One of the challenges of the network is the balancing act in terms of approach. The DPRN can bring people together on certain themes, but it is up to the Network to determine the depth of the debates. The Network could furthermore focus on increasing participants' involvement in terms of agenda setting, on-line exchange and d-groups. In addition the network might benefit from a shift from a regional to a more thematic focus as many issues are crossing the boundaries of a region. Another challenge resides in the fact that the network meetings exhibit as yet an over-representation of academic researchers, whereas policymakers, the corporate sector and practitioners are under-represented. This deserves pro-active follow up action from the Task Force. Last but not least it may be worthwhile to conduct a study on the impact and sustainability of the DPRN initiative in future. At the moment, the initiative is still too young to assess its impact.

Chapter I Introduction: parameters of the study

1. Introduction

a. Background information

The roots of the Development Policy Review Network (DPRN) can be traced back to 2003 when CERES took the initiative to bridge the gap between policymakers, practitioners and researchers concerned with development issues and international cooperation. By organising a number of regional and thematic meetings, DPRN aimed to bring together researchers from academic institutions, policymakers and practitioners. There were plans to target and include the corporate sector at a later date. In addition, the setting up of an extensive database of people and organisations, thematically or regionally active in the field of development cooperation, was envisaged in order to facilitate contact between them.

The major aim of the current DPRN is to support a better learning ability and improved development relevant research by organising systematic face-to-face contact between policymakers, development researchers and practitioners linked to the Netherlands. Within the context of this overall objective, the DPRN organises regional and thematic meetings. In the period under review, September 2004 until the present, in total 28 of such meetings - 26 regional and 2 thematic meetings - have been organised. Two websites, DPRN (www.dprn.nl) and Global Connections (www.Global-Connections.nl), are operational.

DPRN is located at CERES, but is not part of it. CERES provides services to the DPRN as well as a judicial framework. AMIDSt is responsible for the financial management of DPRN. It also houses the coordination unit of the Network.

DPRN is governed by a Task Force in which the main Dutch development organisations and research institutes are represented. The Task Force meets about five times a year. The institutional context in which DPRN operates consists of a great number and huge variety of institutions to which thousands of professionals are linked. This includes the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, MFOs, smaller NGOs, consultants, research and training institutes and advisory bodies.

DPRN participates in the Worldconnector and Broker bi-monthly magazine initiatives.

b. Reason for the evaluation

In October 2004, the Minister for Development Cooperation approved a grant of € 600,000 to DPRN for the period 2004 – 2007. An external evaluation at the end of this period was one of the contractual conditions for this subsidy. For the years 2006 and 2007, an additional € 263,000 was received as a contribution to the web portal.

The Network has expressed the aspiration to learn from former experiences. As such the present evaluation should be considered as a learning exercise. It should also be regarded as a mid-term review and will serve as an input for a second phase of DPRN.

2. Purpose of the evaluation

The evaluation covers the entire period from 2004 up until now. The main objectives of the evaluation as specified in the Terms of Reference are summarised as follows (see Annex I):

- The evaluation explores whether the programme meets the objectives that were agreed in advance and whether it fits within the policy of DGIS DCO/OC;
- The evaluation provides insights into the lessons learned during the first phase of the programme;
- With the lessons learned as a starting point, the evaluation will formulate recommendations for the second phase of the DPRN.

The evaluation, carried out in the month of June 2007, was conducted at output and outcome level. It was agreed in advance that an evaluation at the level of impact would be premature.

3. Evaluation process

Evaluations are intended to be learning exercises which provide opportunities to reflect on the past in order to define future policy and actions. They are essentially exercises aimed at mutual learning to enable stakeholders to emerge stronger and with a better appreciation of each other's strengths and weaknesses. Evaluations, however, are also important for accountability reasons. The current evaluation is no exception to this practice.

As a first step in the evaluation of DPRN, the draft Terms of Reference were prepared by DCO/OC in consultation with DPRN. At the request of Context, international cooperation the ToR was extended to include the methodology. To enhance the objectivity of the evaluation, increase participation of the DPRN stakeholders, and promote learning, it was decided to complement the methodologies described in the ToR with two additional activities: a tracer study and a self-assessment workshop. The evaluation remained 'external' in nature but was carried out with active participation of stakeholders involved.

The coordinator of DPRN, Dr M. Ros-Tonen, provided all relevant background documentation. She furthermore drew up a list of key persons out of which the evaluators could select further contacts. Some were approached for interviews, others for the self-assessment workshop or the tracer study. During the evaluation process, Dr Ros acted as the counterpart for the study team.

4. Methodology

In line with the ToR, the evaluation team used four different methods for data collection.

a. Literature review

Extensive background documentation was made available to the evaluators. This documentation included:

- reports, and background literature from all regional and thematic meetings;
- minutes of the DPRN Task Force meetings;
- self-evaluations, proposals and reports to the donor;

- communication between the members of the Task Force; and
- communication between the DPRN Task Force members and the organisers of the thematic and regional meetings, etcetera.¹

b. Tracer study

A tracer study was carried out with a view to collecting data from end users of the DPRN products. This methodology was added to the original set of methodologies to include perceptions of the users of the Network. A questionnaire (see Annex II) with questions about the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability and the learning capacity of the DPRN was disseminated by e-mail to the 189 persons who had participated in two or more thematic or regional meetings. Only eight respondents returned the questionnaire.

c. Self-assessment workshop

A self-assessment workshop was organised in order to give the DPRN Task Force members and the organisers of the regional and thematic meetings the opportunity to jointly reflect on the Network. The workshop took place in a participatory and interactive manner. It was felt to be an efficient way to collect qualitative data from a number of important stakeholders in a short time span. The dynamics during the session generated new and interesting insights into the Network. During the workshop, a SWOT analysis was performed in which the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of DPRN were identified and analysed. A report of the self- assessment workshop may be found in the Annexes to the report (Annex III).

d. Interviews

The evaluation team interviewed nine persons who were considered important for a proper assessment of DPRN. These included members of the DPRN Task Force, organisers of the regional meetings, representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the administrator of the Global-Connections website. More interviews were planned but, due to limited availability of key persons and time constraints, this turned out to be too ambitious. The interviews were held with a topic list as a guideline for the questions (see Annex IV). Seven interviews were conducted face to face. Two interviews were conducted by telephone. Reference may be made to the list of people interviewed in Annex VI.

5. Composition of the evaluation team

The evaluation was carried out by a team from Context, international cooperation. Mr Fons van der Velden acted as the overall coordinator of the study. He worked closely with Dr Chris Eijkemans and Mr Peter Das. All of them were involved in primary data collection, shared notes and observations, undertook a joint analysis, and jointly drew up the final report. This core team was supported by other colleagues from Context, international cooperation: Ms Sarah Cummings (analysis of websites), Ms Marieke Hart (tracer study and data analysis) and Ms Anne Marie Leenknecht (tracer study and editing). The Context office manager, Ms Els Mulder, provided backup support.

¹ The reports of the thematic and regional meetings, including the background material are also published on the DPRN website.

6. Reporting

As agreed beforehand, reporting took place in three stages: On 4 July 2007, a draft debriefing note was presented for feedback at a meeting of the DPRN Task Force at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. During this meeting, the evaluation team received comments on major observations, facts and figures, analysis of the DPRN programme and organisational structure, and preliminary conclusions. Based on the debriefing note, and further internal reflection a draft report was written and sent to the DPRN coordinator for comments on 8 August 2007. On the basis of the feedback to the draft report the study report was finalised (31 August 2007).

The structure of the report largely follows that of the ToR.

7. Reflections on the study process

In spite of the strong commitment and involvement of all parties concerned to make the evaluation a success as well as the enabling factors mentioned in the previous sections of this Chapter some factors limited the execution of the study. The following major issues need to be mentioned.

- The evaluation had to be executed in a limited time frame, thereby contributing to logistical and organisational problems. Since, particularly, the key persons in the Network have very busy agendas, it was difficult to arrange time and space for meetings. Timing was unfortunate: the study started just before the summer retreat. Many intended participants of the self- assessment workshop and respondents to the interviews and tracer study could not be reached in time.
- The tracer study could not be tested due to time constraints.
- Time constraints may have been a factor for the low response, particularly to the tracer study.
- The DPRN initiative is a relatively young endeavour. Hence it was decided during the preparatory stage that the impact of the Network could not be studied.

The above resulted in a less than optimal response. The variance in the responses given, however, was rather limited.

Despite these shortcomings the evaluation team holds the opinion that by and large justice could be done to the ToR for this study.

Chapter II Relevance

1. Introduction

The question of relevance of an organisation, programme or project is in fact a question about its *raison d'être*. Are the activities implemented adding value within the context in which the initiative is operating? Are the strategic choices logically built upon the problems identified and are they initiated at the right time?

The evaluation team has examined the positioning of the Network, as well as the relation between its strategy and the objectives. The findings are elaborated below.

2. Positioning of DPRN

There is growing consensus that there are serious shortcomings in the quality and depth of the debate about development policy and practice. While the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs might be at the forefront of knowledge for development, a recent publication (Heres and Bieckman)² has emphasised the continuing need for improvement in the knowledge infrastructure in the field of international cooperation. The authors also argue that the Ministry for Development Cooperation suffers from a lack of academic interest when it comes to policymaking. In this context, the DPRN seems to be well-positioned because it aims to involve policymakers in the academic debate.

DPRN is positioned centrally in the area of knowledge for development initiatives in the Netherlands. While many development organisations, have recently introduced their own knowledge centres, institutional linkages with other development constituencies are often lacking. Practitioners, policymakers and researchers are still working in separate domains. Some organisations, such as PSO, Partos, ETC and KIT have no systematic linkages with the research community but are able to meet researchers at the DPRN meetings. In this way, the DPRN seems to take a central position, facilitating contacts between the different professional groups within the entire field of development cooperation.

It appears, furthermore, that the DPRN was established at the right time, in response to an apparently felt need. There is no other initiative at the national level in the Netherlands which stimulates dialogue between policymakers, academics and development practitioners in a systematic manner. Some respondents argue that DPRN is highly complementary to other initiatives in the field, further enhancing its relevance. Other initiatives, such as the IS-academy, are limited to relations between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Dutch universities; development practitioners are more or less absent. In addition, the IS-academy has a much more limited reach in terms of numbers involved.

In 2005 DCO/OC started with the implementation of a new development research policy. In the past decade, however, the directorate particularly supported and financed activities which were implemented in the South. Although this focus will remain in the period to come, there has been a policy reorientation in which the broader development-related Dutch research agenda is receiving more attention. This implies an increased focus on knowledge

² Heres, M. and Bieckmann, F.: Knowledge Management at Foreign Affairs; In search of a strategy. *The Broker*, issue 2, June 2007.

management within the Ministry for Development Cooperation. DCO/OC recognises the crucial role that the DPRN plays in this field.

3. Strategy in relation to the objectives

As a strategy to stimulate a dialogue between policymakers, academics and practitioners, the DPRN chose a two-pronged approach:

1. organising systematic regional workshops about current developments and relevant academic research on thirteen regions outside the European Union, open to policymakers, academics and practitioners. In the period under research, two meetings were organised per region. In addition, two thematic meetings were organised on current cross-cutting subjects in the field of development cooperation. In 2005, the meeting was concerned with the Millennium Development Goals. In 2006, the thematic meeting was about measuring results in development;
2. setting up a database in which experts from the three professional groups can present themselves and their fields of expertise.

The before mentioned strategy is recognised as having a high potential as well as suiting the objectives of the DPRN. It tries to promote dialogue and improve the linkages between policymakers, researchers and practitioners. The face to face character of the DPRN meetings was found to contribute to the realisation of the strategy, since the representatives of the different disciplines meet and get to know each other in person.

4. De-fragmentation of the sector

The respondents felt that the DPRN was a welcome initiative in terms of de-fragmentation of the sector of development and international cooperation. They consider many initiatives by universities, NGOs, policymakers or other actors to take place too much in isolation. The DPRN has the potential to counteract this isolated way of working and to connect related or overlapping initiatives. Indeed, in the development sector as a whole, there is an increasing tendency to try to breakdown this isolation. This cannot, of course, be attributed solely to the DPRN but the DPRN does fit into the range of initiatives that are trying to do this. Related to this, the DPRN has been seen as an initiative that has opened up the rather closed world of the Dutch development sector. Several respondents felt that there is a small closed circle of practitioners, researchers and policymakers that are able to exert influence on the agenda setting of the development and international cooperation sector. The DPRN can play an important role in promoting more openness in the sector.

5. Conclusions and reflections

The DPRN initiative is relevant in terms of positioning, timing, strategy in relation to the objectives and with regard to de-fragmentation of the sector of development and international cooperation. It counters the de-fragmentation of this sector in the Netherlands. The initiators deserve credit for their work and their vision. They identified the niche at the right time when setting up the DPRN. DGIS and in particular DCO/OC deserve credit for their recognition of the need for such a network and for their financial support to realise the strategies.

DPRN certainly has the potential to connect professionals in the field of development and international cooperation within the Netherlands, and it is uniquely positioned to do this. To

undertake this effectively, the DPRN might have to consider the need to transform itself from a platform to a network with members, as its name implies. A network is more open than a platform and provides more space for interaction. A platform might be too static for what DPRN intends to be.

Chapter III Efficiency

1. Introduction

Whereas the Chapter on ‘relevance’ dealt with the question of whether the DPRN was doing the right thing, the Chapters ‘efficiency’ and ‘effectiveness’ will consider whether the DPRN is doing the things right. This chapter will elaborate on the former, that is current organisational capacities and financial efficiency.

2. Capacities

a. Task Force

In the opinion of the study team, the DPRN is organised in an efficient manner. The management of the Network adequately tackles the problematic elements which are inherent to networks and delivers the output which it is expected to deliver. The activities described in the project proposal are organised according to schedule and they are suitable for achieving the objectives of the initiative.

The organisational set-up is suited to the implementation of the formulated strategy. Meetings are well-organised. Background information and reports are of a high standard. The quality of the communication between the Task Force and the organisers of the workshop is considered to be good. Regular meetings are organised where sharing of experiences takes place. The organisers feel that they are taken seriously and report to be satisfied with the room to manoeuvre they are given.

One of the main strengths of the Network was felt to be that the Task Force has the ‘capacity to mobilise capacity’ within academic institutions in the Netherlands and, up to a certain extent, in Belgium. Organisers of the regional meetings, who are members of academic institutions, invest a lot of time and resources in making the meetings happen. Sometimes the resources needed (labour, funding, time) go far beyond those provided by the DPRN. Ensuring such an involvement, dedication and commitment of the organisers can, to a large extent, be attributed to the personal qualities of the leaders of the Network in terms of management skills, knowledge and experience, and their extensive networks. This enhances the efficiency of the programme.

Although the Task Force is functioning well as the managing body of the Network, it seems that much of the energy comes from a select core group of Task Force members. Some members show a very high whereas others a low attendance rate. While there is a close correlation between attendance and distance members have to travel to attend the meetings, distance does not explain all. In particular, the attendance and involvement of the Ministry for Development Cooperation leaves much to be desired. Representation of the corporate sector is also low. The core group meets regularly and according to schedule.

b. DPRN coordination

Some respondents emphasised the key role of the DPRN coordinator. During the self-assessment workshop, the coordinator was identified as being a major asset to the network. She plays an important role in mobilising key persons for the meetings, organisers and

participants, and she ensures adequate and timely follow up in terms of reporting on the website.

3. Financial efficiency

a. Meetings

The financial administration is arranged efficiently. The meetings were organised in a financially efficient way.. In general an amount of € 8.000,- is reserved and disbursed for every regional meeting. For the two thematic meetings, an amount of € 7.500,- was allocated. One respondent with a wealth of experience in organising expert meetings argued that a conference with a comparable number of participants and keynote speakers would usually cost about € 20.000,-. In many cases, the institutions which organised the meetings have substantially contributed in terms of finance, manpower and material. They have been willing to contribute their own resources so that the meetings could be organised with low costs for the DPRN. This means that the issue of financial efficiency is somewhat clouded by the additional input and resources from the side of the host organisations of the meetings not accounted for by DPRN itself.

In total, an amount of € 223.000,- was spent on the meetings. Approximately 1470 people³ . attending the meetings, giving a cost of € 152,- per participant per meeting. The meetings took place over a full day covering the specific themes and issues in depth.

b. Global Connections

The technology and design of the Global Connections database is derived from the ASC's website for African Studies expertise. The investment costs for the Global Connections website comprise € 160.000,- over a period of three years, giving an average of € 53.333,- per annum. The evaluation team consulted an international expert on websites and online communication to give his first impression of the level of investment in this web portal. He felt that this was a reasonable level of investment, that is if it includes the development and inputting of the data.

c. Additional costs

The evaluation team considers the coordination costs to be reasonable. The Task Force's high appreciation of the work of the DPRN coordinator implies that the personnel costs of 0.4 fte are a good investment. Other coordination costs, such as CERES office costs, travelling and meeting costs for the coordinator and the members of the Taskforce, appear to be reasonable.

4. Conclusions and reflections

With regard to the capacities within the network, it seems that DPRN has been organised in an efficient way. This is an asset, particularly as the Network is a new initiative and still in its early stages of organisational evolution. It is now moving from a pioneering stage with short lines and informal contacts to a more formalised structure. Until now, the DPRN has experimented in getting people around the table. In the first year, the main guidelines for organisers of the regional meetings were broad: link to MDGs, ensure a substantial information component, and find a way to facilitate discussions. The DPRN learned from

³ This is the sum of the total number of participants of the meetings; not the number of unique participants.

these experiences and is now more directive regarding the organisation of the meetings. The Network is organised in an efficient way, with limited staff involvement. Organisers of meetings are well-supported and documentation is adequately available.

In financial terms, the DPRN is well managed. Compared to its output, costs are relatively low.

The Task Force and wider project management function well. Improvements in the attendance rates of the Task Force meetings would, however, be advisable. Increased involvement of policymakers (including staff of Embassies) and of representatives of the corporate sector in the Task Force could significantly add to perceived importance of the DPRN initiative. It could also result in an increased diversity in participation of the target group in the regional and thematic meetings, particularly a wider representation of the corporate sector and of policymakers.

Chapter IV Effectiveness

1. Introduction

Apart from a further elaboration of the question ‘is the DPRN doing things right?’, this Chapter also deals with mission and vision of the initiative in relation to its activities relate. Attention is paid to coherence, output and outcome. As agreed with the DPRN, it is impossible at this stage of the programme to assess results at the level of impact.

2. Coherence

In order to assess the coherence of the DPRN, the evaluation team examined the extent to which the objectives of the programme are consistent with its mission and strategy. The objectives of the DPRN, as described in the Annex to the ToR of this evaluation (Annex I), are assessed as to their logic with regard to the DPRN’s mission.

The evaluation team is of the opinion that the objectives of the programme are consistent with the mission and strategy of the DPRN. The DPRN defines its primary goal as stimulating debate and discussion on development issues and policies - in particular on Dutch policies - among researchers, policymakers and development practitioners; and to facilitate information exchange between the various types of development experts in or linked to the Netherlands, with some extensions to Belgium. The objective builds logically on the DPRN’s mission of bridging the gap between science and practice: research can play a more significant role in policy formulation and practice in international development. In addition, development research should also be informed by policy and practice.

Some of the more specific objectives of the Network are examined below. The first one is “to create a climate for open debate and discussion.” (see annex to ToR; in Annex 1) An important precondition for this is that potential participants of such a debate are brought together. The openness and quality of the debate will greatly benefit if participants know each other and are well-informed about the subject. In this context, regional and thematic meetings, where people meet face to face, is a logical strategy.

The second, third, fourth and fifth specific objectives of the DPRN are very much related to each other:

- “...to enhance the role of research based knowledge in the national debate on the development policy”;
- “...to enhance the contribution of academic research to policy formulation and development practice.”;
- “...to adapt the policy- and research agendas by canalising the research questions from policymakers and practitioners to the academic scholars.”;
- “...to stimulate joint formulation of recommendations for research, policy and practice by aggregating the experiences of these different professional groups.”

The regional and thematic meetings were organised by academic institutions, generally university departments. These organisations had a considerable influence in deciding on the subject or, at the least, they had the opportunity to bring in their own specific academic expertise on the subject. The choice to have these academic institutions organise the meetings has significantly contributed to realising the objective of enhancing the role of research based

knowledge in the debate on development policy. The fact that academic institutions organised the meetings might also have led to a skewed focus: some respondents argued that the debate tended to become too research-oriented. An increased input of policymakers and practitioners, who face the current issues in the field of international cooperation in their day-to-day work, would be desirable. As was said, their participation should gain significance.

The meetings provide a space where practitioners and policymakers can contribute their research questions and perspectives. Some of the methodologies used during the meetings provided the opportunity for these professionals to discuss both burning issues and matters that they encounter during their daily work. An appropriate methodology to stimulate such contacts is the open space approach. This was applied, apparently not totally successfully, in the November 2006 regional meeting on East Africa. However, the fact that this methodology was applied provides some indication of coherence between the objectives of the Network and the implementation of its strategy.

A sixth, more specific, objective is about creating access to development expertise in the Netherlands by the introduction of a web portal. Since the Internet has become an indispensable part of professional life, in particular as it comes to networking, information and knowledge exchange, the development of a web portal in itself is a logical choice in the realisation of this DPRN objective.

3. Output

a. DPRN regional and thematic meetings

The outputs planned with regard to the DPRN regional and thematic meetings at the beginning of the programme were realised. The meetings have all taken place and attendance was satisfactory. The target of thirteen annual regional meetings was reached. On average, more than fifty people attended each of these meetings. More than half of them came from the academic world, while less than ten percent of the participants were policymakers. Practitioners took an intermediate position with about one third of total attendance. The remaining attendees were classified as 'unknown'.

The meetings are well-documented and documents are available on the DPRN website. In addition, two thematic meetings took place. The first one focused on the MDGs, while the second one in 2006 considered results measurement in the development sector. Both meetings were very well-prepared, with abundant background information, available on the DPRN website. Attendance was high and very diversified. In total, 92 people attended the MDGs meeting, while 199 people registered for the results measurement meeting. The regional meetings had a total attendance figure over two years (in total 26 meetings) of 1179 people.

Many of the participants attended more than one meeting. This can be regarded as a measure of success: they valued what was offered to them and their appreciation was such that they decided to participate in another meeting. Approximately 400 unique persons were involved in the organised meetings. The meetings were instrumental in creating a database of regional and/or thematic actors, and data of over 1000 experts are available. An inventory of available expertise exists for twelve of the thirteen regions (Central Africa is planned for the second half of 2007).

b. Websites and database

The DPRN has two websites: the DPRN website itself at: www.dprn.nl and the Global Connections database at: www.global-connections.nl. Both are linked to each other with multiple links. The lay-out and design are different. The Global Connections website is still a pilot version and its development is in full swing. Findings with regard to this website should be interpreted in this perspective. Some, more technical, comments and suggestions on the websites are presented in Annex 5 to the report.

b.1 DPRN website

The design of the website is fairly simple. The content comprises an overview of the DPRN's mission and task force members; activities; news; publications; partners; 'join us'; links; and contact. There is a 'What's new' page which links to new items on the webpage. It links to expertise inventories that became available in July 2007 and as such appears to be up-to-date enough for such a website aimed at a professional audience.

The website provides consistent and up-to-date access to information about the DPRN's organisation, activities and outputs. Much of the information (meeting reports, documents) available is of high development relevance and this website is often the primary source for such resources.

The DPRN website provides selected links to its partner organisations and to four related initiatives on the links page. However, it is not linking to the wealth of other related initiatives taking place in the Netherlands, such as the IS Academie or NWO-WOTRO. The DPRN is currently working on this.

The TouchGraph Google Browser⁴ which identifies links to other websites, demonstrates that the DPRN website is predominantly linked to academic and research websites in the Netherlands and abroad.

The website is in general terms user friendly. However, at the time of the evaluation, the 'About DPRN' page did not appear to open consistently.

b.2 Global Connections website

The Global Connections website is currently a pilot version with plans to improve the functionalities in the future. Its design is simple – although not the same as the DPRN website. The home page features an image which might not provide an appropriate indication of the content of such a database.

The Global Connections website provides access to a database of development expertise in the Netherlands and Belgium. Not only does it provide access to the database; it also allows users to feed their expertise into the database itself. This is unique content which is not available elsewhere in one location, and it has the potential to be used to promote cooperation between development organisations and development practitioners in the Netherlands and Belgium, and further afield. The Global Connections database does not as yet provide

⁴ The TouchGraph Google Browser reveals the network of connectivity between websites, as reported by Google's database of related sites.

comprehensive coverage of the practitioners in the development field⁵. The reason for this low coverage is that people have been approached on an individual basis, either because they were identified as an expert in one of the regional or MDG inventories, or because they had registered for one of the DPRN meetings. However, the DPRN has deliberately not approached organisations yet since there were still too many bugs in the ‘add your profile’ module to deal with mass mailings which invite people to add their profile. Most of these bugs have now been solved and the DPRN plans to proactively approach 450 organisations in August 2007 after the holiday period.

The Global Connections database does not provide comprehensive coverage of the policymakers in the development field either. For example, there are only 33 experts from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the database which must be less than fifteen percent of the total number of experts. This situation will probably also be improved in the near future: the DPRN is currently in discussion with DGIS to make expertise inventories available on the Ministry Intranet; and to request all staff of the ministries and embassies to add their expertise to the Global Connections database.

The links to the other websites are via the entry for each organisation and there are also links to publications of individuals which take the user to university repositories of documents. The TouchGraph indicates that the Global Connections website is predominantly linked to academic and research websites in the Netherlands and abroad.

A search using Google, based on the key words ‘Netherlands expertise MDGs’, did not find the Global Connections website coming near to the top which implies that the Global Connections website is not very ‘findable.’ As said above, this is, among other things, related to the pilot stage of the Global Connections website. A greater use of the website is foreseen and will, however, correct this problem.

The search engine on the database works well and quickly, and allows for the easy identification of organisations and experts by name, and searching of experts by theme or region, or MDG relevance.

4. Outcome

a. Cooperation by attendants

There are several indications that personal contacts during DPRN meetings have contributed to cooperation between participants. For example, one respondent reported that he took the initiative to co-write a proposal for development research with colleagues whom he had met at a DPRN meeting. Respondents of the tracer study indicated that they particularly value the network function of these meetings, especially because it helps them to find experts on certain topics. An Amazon network was established at a DPRN meeting but was not sustainable.

⁵ Despite the fact that there are prominent ‘practitioners’ in the Task Force (although when individuals become heads of organisations they have left the realm of practice and are now probably policymakers, whatever their background), their own organisations are not heavily represented in the database: Arcadis (1 expert in the database), ECDPM (1), Pax Christi (4), SNV (8), and ICCO (1). In most cases, this must represent less than 10% of practitioner coverage. The one exception to this is KIT with 27 entrants although this must still represent less than 30% of the total number of experts. For Hivos and Oxfam Novib, neither of which are partners of the DPRN, the number of experts in the database comprises 9 and 17 respectively.

Apart from these micro-effects, some macro-developments were also mentioned. The influence of the DPRN can also be seen at other fora. For example, members of the DPRN are participating in initiatives such as the Worldconnectors⁶ and the Broker⁷. Some respondents remarked that the DPRN was one of the contributors to a process of creating an open atmosphere which ultimately led to, among other things, the Schokland agreement.

Respondents have a positive feeling about an improved 'working-climate' between, for example, academics and DGIS staff. They signal an increased interest by DGIS in the results of academic research. But also NGOs are paying more and more attention to knowledge management and are building resource and knowledge centres. It is unclear, though, whether all of this can be attributed to DPRN.

The network also seems to add to breaking away from stereotypes about the sectors involved: practitioners, policymakers and academics. There is a huge variety in characters, attitudes and approaches of people within these segments. Through the meetings, people are valued because of their input and capacities. It turns out that there is much more diversity within these groups than is often assumed.

b. Unbalanced representation of different professional groups

In spite of the high attendance-level at the meetings, there was an unbalanced representation of the various professional groups. Particularly respondents of the tracer study identify an over-representation of the academic population in the meetings. Policymakers are rather absent in comparison with the other groups, a position which they share with representatives of the corporate sector. Moreover, of the representatives of the corporate sector, the vast majority seems to be affiliated to consultancy organisations. As far as DGIS is concerned, it is a small group of interested individuals who are attending the DPRN meetings. A variety of reasons were identified by respondents of the evaluation:

- research is often slightly lagging behind policy formulation. For this reason, research is not sufficiently focused on topics that are relevant for policy formulation in future. The day-to-day agenda of the majority of the policymakers is largely determined by urgent matters and by what is written in the newspapers;
- it is hard to motivate policymakers to show interest in issues which are not of short-term relevance;
- the employees of DGIS who are working in the regional departments are, for the greater part, juniors who do not yet have sufficient experience to enter into dialogue with experienced practitioners or researchers;
- the bureaucratic culture within DGIS is not conducive for stimulating exchange and debates. Staff have to ask for permission to participate in meetings. If they are allowed to attend, they have to fulfil a formal function at the meeting on behalf of DGIS;
- one respondent emphasised that it was worthwhile to further investigate the lack of academic interest within DGIS (or even the entire Ministry of Foreign Affairs). In

⁶ The Worldconnectors was set up together with the NCDO and SID (see www.worldconnectors.nl). The Worldconnectors aim to increase attention for international cooperation among selected key players in the Dutch business, policy and science sectors, and to gain further support for development cooperation in the media and parliament. DPRN is taking part both in the Worldconnectors Project Group and the Worldconnectors Steering Group.

⁷ DPRN takes part in the Editorial Committee of the Broker. The Broker is a bi-monthly magazine aiming to contribute to evidence-based policy making by encouraging exchanges between knowledge producers and development professionals (www.thebrokeronline.eu)

other ministries, the situation appears to be different. The ministries of VROM⁸ and Justice, for example, seem to base their policies more on academic research than the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

c. *The websites*

The DPRN website has a relatively low number of visitors (for statistics: see Annex 5); on average 148 per month in 2006 and 130 per month until June 2007.

The statistics indicate that the 45% of the visitors come from twenty known organisations, giving the clear impression that the DPRN website is indeed probably reaching the core of development and international cooperation organisations in the Netherlands which, one assumes, is the target group for this website⁹. The DPRN website is most strongly linked to academic websites within the Netherlands and not to the world of Dutch or Belgian NGOs or policy.

The statistics for 2007 (see Annex 5, Table 4) reveal that the Global Connections website has not been receiving a high level of visitors (an estimated average of 131 per month), or unique visitors¹⁰ (105 per month), since the beginning of the year. This is not surprising considering the website and the database have both been under development in this period. Until about May, the database was filled by student assistants only. The input module through which people can add their profile themselves has only been available from June onwards. Data for 1/11 July 2007 present a far higher number of visits than was found in preceding months, despite the fact that only the first third of the month was included. This coincided with an e-mailing, informing users of the availability of the database. It is therefore predicted that the mailing planned for August, and aimed at 450 organisations, will lead to a dramatic increase in the use of the Global Connections website¹¹.

5. Conclusions and reflections

It is fair to assume that cooperation among policymakers, researchers and practitioners in the areas of development and international cooperation, participating in DPRN, is taking shape. Unfortunately, however, it seems that many initiatives survive only if they can be combined with the ordinary, day-to-day work. This is an important condition to reach sustainability. An intrinsic motivation is necessary to give content to cooperation and to maintain it.

Since involving policymakers was an important objective of the Network, and a crucial element that determined the relevance of the initiative, their under-representation can be seen as a major shortcoming. Although only included as a target group at a later stage, a limited participation of members of the corporate sector is also a shortcoming. The group of

⁸ The Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment

⁹ This is borne out by the TouchGragh of the DPRN website.

¹⁰ A unique visitor is a unique IP address that has made at least one hit on one page of the web site during a certain period of time. If this visitor makes more than one visit during this period of time, it is counted only once as a unique visit.

¹¹ There are two extra reservations related to the interpretation of this data: June 2007 statistics, when no visitors were counted, were not included in the analysis. In the opinion of the person undertaking the web analysis, this is the correct action because she was aware of consulting the Global Connections database during this period. This also mirrors the experience of others. In addition to this, the fourth highest user of the Global Connections website during July was *Context, international cooperation*, demonstrating that the evaluation itself has increased the use of the website.

politicians, not mentioned in the DPRN plans but brought forward by one of the respondents, is another gap that needs attention. Although the Network has the potential to realise cross-fertilisation between the various professional groups, until now this does not seem to materialise. This issue needs to receive significant attention. Lastly, starting from the philosophy that application of knowledge should be based on experiential learning, certain target groups (as the ones mentioned above) should play a more prominent role in setting the agenda. The Task Force has already agreed on an increased role in agenda setting of people from practice.

Since regionally focussed meetings do not seem the most optimal construction, particularly for staff of DGIS and probably also for practitioners, a solution could be to focus more on thematic workshops. Expertise seems to be more grouped by content areas instead of by regions, and can more easily be mobilised on that basis. The DGIS employees of the thematic departments do have more relevant experience. In addition, developmental problems and issues of international cooperation do not stop at the edge of a certain region. Focussing on thematic issues will probably increase participation.

The question for the Network to invest 'in-depth' in topics or remain broad in its approach also needs consideration. Each choice has consequences for the audience of the meetings. Going in-depth enriches the quality of the debate and will attract interested specialists, whereas remaining broad would lower the brink for various participants. It could result in more audience, but less commitment. The Task Force expressed its preference and indicated that the one should not exclude the other. DPRN can bring people together on certain themes, but it is up to the Network to determine the depth of the debates. In the short term, the DPRN aims to involve many more people.

Both the DPRN and the Global Connections websites have an emphasis on collection of information and knowledge, rather than on stimulating connection to other websites and related initiatives. Although the content of the databases is very relevant to development, the next phase of their development needs to place more emphasis on interaction and connection with others.

The coverage of the Global Connections is currently largely focused on the academic world. As the team is informed, some concrete activities are planned for the near future which will be addressing this limitation.

Regarding the web statistics, neither website currently receives sufficient visitors to be sustainable which means that the resources available online are not reaching the potential audience. These websites do have the potential to attract more visitors, however, as is demonstrated by: (i) at the time of the thematic meeting in June 2006, the use of the DPRN website rose significantly. It is possible to argue that the meeting – and the resources available online – dramatically increased awareness of the website, leading to significantly more visitors. Potential users of the website therefore need to be continually reminded of its existence. The communications strategy proposed in the conclusions should increase awareness and use of both websites. (ii) The e-mailing of potential users of the Global Connections database did lead to a proportionally high number of users at the beginning of July 2007. It is therefore argued that greater awareness of the website among potential users would greatly increase its use.

The DPRN and Global Connections websites have the ambition to facilitate linkages between the worlds of research, policy and practice, which make them of unique potential. Putting these ambitions into practice in the next phase of their development does call for concerted attention, however. More detailed recommendations for the websites are made in Annex V.

Chapter V Sustainability

1. Introduction

The ToR refers to sustainability as one of the topics to be evaluated. It is clear, however, that not much can be said on this point as yet. From the start of discussions related to the evaluation it was agreed that measuring impact, one of the essential parts of sustainability, would be ‘a bridge too far’ at this stage. The initiative is still young and barely beyond its infant stage.

Having studied the set-up of the initiative and the response of the final target group, the evaluators dare to make some, be it rather preliminary, remarks. The evaluation team considers that it would be advisable to conduct a more thorough study of the impact and sustainability of the DPRN at a later stage.

2. Some preliminary remarks

Regarding the design of the initiative (relevance, strategy, activities, organisational set-up in the form of a network, relationships), the study team is of the opinion that the DPRN appears to be a sustainable effort. The Network occupies an important niche and is, for this reason, able to mobilise a lot of energy. Participants of meetings, meeting organisers and Task Force members have demonstrated commitment. Many respondents argue that they are starting to see the benefits of the Network. Very provisionally, it can be said that bridges between the professional groups are being built and that people are crossing them. Again, the DPRN is still in a pioneering stage, but the foundations for a sound construction are laid.

Members of the Task Force clearly stated that the DPRN wants to stick to the philosophy that the Network itself does not implement activities. The DPRN is a network which leaves the organisation of events to its members. In accordance to its mandate, the DPRN facilitates exchange among professionals. Therefore, the DPRN needs to continue to follow the process approach, facilitating the engagement of researchers, policymakers and development practitioners, and maintaining their involvement as a way to reach sustainability. The study team shares this opinion¹². The existing challenge is that the self-organising process of the collaborating organisations and participants needs to be enhanced. However, self-organisation can hardly be facilitated from outside in. For the time being, this requires action at the level of programme, organisation and external relations.

3. Conclusions and reflections

DPRN is a young initiative and, as such, is still in the process of dealing with its growing pains. Since it is a network, much of its future will depend on the commitment and related activities of its members. They are the ones who, ultimately, have to carry the initiative. In this regard, it seems essential that the DPRN pays sufficient attention to the process aspects of the network. DPRN has to concentrate on facilitating the process of networking and self-organisation. It will have to face the paradox of self-organisation, which implies investing substantially in a process that, in the end, will have to carry itself.

¹² As far as the study-team is informed, this issue is recognised by DPRN and included in the draft strategic plan 2008-2010.

Chapter VI Learning and innovation

1. Introduction

The current evaluation is conducted as a mid-term review of the project. The DPRN has the intention to apply for a second phase of funding for the project and intends to use this evaluation as an input. DPRN aims to continue its activities at a higher level of ambition and intends to learn from its past experiences. The evaluation is expected to shed some light on the lessons learned during the first stage of the project and the evaluation team has been asked to elaborate on the innovation and learning capacity of the programme.

2. Learning

a. *The role of leaders*

In his book, *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge states that the role of leaders is indispensable for an organisation's capacity to learn¹³. The DPRN appears to have leaders that take this role and responsibility seriously. The management has a willing attitude towards the input of different stakeholders and has created an atmosphere of openness in the Network. It was found that the DPRN core group provides strong and motivating leadership with regard to this issue.

Another important aspect is the constructive attitude of the organisations that back the members of the Task Force. Respondents of the interviews have, for example, received the opportunity to work for DPRN during their normal working hours. This implies that the management of these organisations is also supportive towards the DPRN. However, in some cases Task Force members are the leaders of their own organisations which makes this process easier. It was reported that several Task Force members also invest some of their spare time in the DPRN.

b. *Learning from the meetings*

The adequate communication between the organisers and the members of the Task Force appears to contribute to the learning ability of the Network. Organisers report that their comments are taken seriously. Members of the Task Force report that input of policymakers and practitioners is seen as indispensable and important for improving the meetings. After each of the two meeting cycles, the DPRN Task Force members and the organisers of the regional meetings came together to discuss the past cycle of DPRN meetings. At this gathering, the experiences were exchanged and the challenges and lessons for the next cycle identified. The conclusions of these meetings are well documented and appear to have been used in the organisation of later meetings.

After every meeting, evaluation forms were filled out by the participants. Members of the DPRN Task Force emphasised that these evaluation forms were systematically analysed and used as input to enhance the quality of the meetings. This indicates that the learning ability is structured and anchored in systems.

¹³ Senge, P. 1990, p. 326.

3. Innovation

In the thematic and regional meetings, many different types of methodologies have been applied. Some of these may be classified as 'innovative' (within the context in which they are used). The Open Space approach, applied in the regional meeting on East Africa in November 2006, is a good example of this. This methodology provides the opportunity for the participants to bring in what they consider relevant to the meeting from their day-to-day activities. Open Space can generate vivid discussions on current issues and facilitate innovative approaches. This approach fits in with the objective of the DPRN to facilitate exchange between the different professional groups.

Some of the methodologies which have been applied can be labelled as 'creative'. During one of the meetings, a professional drawer was hired who visualised the discussion of that day with cartoons. A stand up comedian shed a different light on the day with his humorous commentary. Methodologies like these provide an extra dimension to the meetings. Participants acquire an extra stimulance to remember what was dealt with during the meeting. Reports of the meetings indicate, though, that not all of these methods have generated the desired results. Nevertheless, the fact that these have been applied shows that there is an open and experimental attitude which is necessary for learning as indicated above.

4. Conclusion and reflections

There are a number of clear indications that the capacity to learn and innovate is well anchored within the systems, procedures and especially in the culture of the Network. Leaders of the Network have an open attitude towards learning and innovation, and are backed by supportive organisations. The DPRN meetings are systematically evaluated and the results of these evaluations are used as input for the enhancement of future meetings. Furthermore, there is adequate communication with the organisers of the regional and thematic meetings.

Chapter VII Conclusions and final reflections

The initiators of the DPRN have shown vision when they decided to establish the network: the DPRN was needed, timely and filled a specific niche. The initiative started well and many results have been realised. The DPRN is in transition: from the pioneering stage to a more formalised structure. It is well-organised and supported by dedicated staff and other stakeholders. Commitments of organisers, who until now mainly come from academic institutions, reach beyond their immediate returns. Investments are substantial. The outcome of the Network is according to its plans. Some 28 Meetings have been organised, and attendance, although skewed with regard to the various target groups, was good. Two websites, one providing access to a database on expertise on development and international cooperation, are operational.

Although it is still early to talk about outcome and impact, there are sufficient gains in this initiative. The DPRN seems to be able to substantially contribute to bridging the gap between policymakers, researchers and development practitioners in the Netherlands. Although more still needs to be done, the current efforts are highly valued by the respondents. The relevance of the DPRN is beyond discussion. The evaluation team is also positive about the efficiency and effectiveness of the initiative. Moreover, the DPRN turns out to be an organisation with an open attitude to learning. The evaluation team finds it too early to make a statement about the sustainability of the network.

While conducting the evaluation, the team has a number of critical reflections, largely as a result of the communications with various the DPRN stakeholders. The team would like to present these below, but it is, of course, up to DPRN to take these on board.

- *Network or platform?*

Unlike what its name seems to indicate, DPRN breathes the atmosphere of a platform. A platform is more static and less interactive than a network. This is also reflected in both the DPRN and the Global Connections websites. They have an emphasis on collection of information and knowledge, rather than on stimulating connection to other websites and related initiatives.

- *Pro-active facilitation of the Network*

Related to being a network, the tasks and responsibilities of the Task Force (the management of DPRN) are viewed as facilitating the achievements of the formulated objectives. In that sense, the DPRN does not have the direct responsibility for organising thematic or regional meetings, but will have to leave this to the organisers. Much of the sustainability of the DPRN as a network depends on the commitment of its members. They are the ones who, ultimately, have to carry the initiative. In that regard, it seems essential for DPRN to pay sufficient attention to the process aspects of the network. DPRN might have to concentrate on facilitating the process of networking and self-organisation.

The Task Force indicated that it attaches high importance to input from people who work in the practice of development cooperation. Effective learning comes primarily from within. To ensure a more strategic input from these practitioners, they should have an increased role in agenda setting of the meetings and workshops and meeting may be based on principles of experience based learning. The capacity to learn and

innovate seems to be well-anchored within the systems, procedures and especially in the culture of the DPRN.

- *Balancing act in terms of approach*

The question for the network to invest 'in-depth' in certain topics or remain broad in its approach also needs consideration. Going in-depth might enrich the quality of the debate and attract interested specialists, whereas remaining broad could make the initiative more accessible to some participants. It could result in a greater audience, but less commitment. The Task Force expressed its preference and indicated that the one should not exclude the other. The DPRN can bring people together on certain themes, but it is up to the Network to determine the depth of the debates.

- *Means to increase participants' involvement*

Since the maintenance of mutual contacts of the Network participants is influenced by their ability to combine the Network with their ordinary, day-to-day responsibilities, congruence between the two has to be sought. For the Network this, among other things, implies facilitating a high involvement of its participants in agenda setting and organisation of the meetings, embedding the meetings in processes targeted at bringing the various groups together. This could be done by promoting on-line exchanges and d-groups, for example, which are already planned in the DPRN's draft strategic plan 2008-2010.

- *Shift from regional to thematic focus*

Regionally oriented meetings do not appear to have been the best approach for some potential participants. Much expertise seems to be more grouped by content-areas instead of by regions and many issues do not stop at the edge of a certain region. Indeed, many of the Dutch NGOs have now moved their organisational focus from a regional to a thematic focus.

- *Increased participation of underrepresented groups*

Attendance during the regional and thematic meetings is skewed: there is an over-representation of academic researchers, whereas policymakers, the corporate sector and practitioners are under-represented. Special efforts will have to be undertaken to increase the participation of these professional groups. The Task Force is already experimenting with requiring two organisers with differing professional backgrounds for each meeting.

- *Website oriented recommendations*

For the websites, a number of recommendations have been made in Annex V. Some of these have a somewhat technical nature. Others refer to the potential outreach of the websites. Suggestions to the DPRN include the development of a communication strategy; improved monitoring of the web statistics; increased user-friendliness; and making links to other websites in the fields of policy and practice.

- *Follow up study as to future impact and sustainability*

It is worthwhile to conduct a more thorough study on the impact and sustainability of the DPRN initiative in future. At the moment, the initiative is still too young to assess its impact.