

Breaking down barriers



Frans Bieckmann
 Editor-in-Chief
 editor@thebrokeronline.eu

Development professionals, policy makers and scientists in the field of global issues have for a long time been separated by institutional boundaries, cultural barriers and poor communication. But for some time now the trend has been towards integration, cooperation, forging linkages and bridging gaps. In academia this is called interdisciplinary research, while within (foreign) ministries and development NGOs it fits under the umbrella of 'policy coherence' – all policies should be 'for development', and screened for their impacts on global poverty and justice.

Yet the term 'coherence', for the first time in many years, does not appear in the Dutch government agreement presented at the end of February 2007. Let's take a positive view and assume that the presence of social democrats – who have always advocated coherence – in the government means that the concept has been 'mainstreamed', to use some concealing jargon.

There is still a world to win. In the field of immigration, for example, the cooperation between the ministries of Justice and Development Cooperation was in effect a politically correct way to conceal the policy of sending back migrants. Now, as you can read in the feature article by Roeland Muskens and myself, rhetoric is okay: we're going for a *win-win-win*. 'Circular' migration should benefit not only the host countries like the Netherlands, but also the migrants' countries of origin, and the migrants themselves.

Even the formerly totally divided ministries of Defence and Development Cooperation – and their constituencies – are gradually coming together. The resulting 'Dutch (integrated) approach' is proposed as the alternative to the brutality of the American way.

That, at least in Iraq, is a clear example of how focusing on just one (in this case military) logic can have disastrous consequences. As Bart Tromp shows in his review, in Iraq the US government ignored the most recent scientific theories of war, democratization and reconstruction.

There is also much in favour of removing the barriers between academic disciplines. 'Nobel prize-winning research is often at the interface between disciplines', I quote in the article on interdisciplinary research. The argument seems clear. The world is complex, and investigating only small, separate parts of it, each within their own logic, cannot provide all the answers. Studying the complexity itself requires combining the divergent methods of different disciplines. Environmental research is a good example. Here, researchers working in all fields of science cooperate with economists and social scientists who investigate human behaviour. Of course this leads to methodological difficulties, as Joris Tiens shows in his article on the 'livestock revolution', but perhaps that is all the more reason for scientists to get involved.

In the policy field, one specific form of coherence is important in this respect – that between broad foreign policy and science policy. Something of a new government vision is emerging, following the dominant discourse about the need to strengthen the knowledge economy in the Netherlands and in Europe. It goes like this: the Netherlands is losing the battle against China and India. This, for the moment, also seems to be true in Africa, as Ellen Lammers describes.

The future is grim: after beating us in the market for low skilled and low-paid workers, the easterners are also taking over our highly skilled jobs. To be able to compete and keep 'our' multinationals at home, we need to invest in 'centres of excellence'. Here two strong lobbies converge. Business wants to attract more (foreign) 'talent'. The academic world uses other arguments: science itself will be much better if we create opportunities for independent, free and fundamental research.

Today, a third, more political, factor comes together with the other factors – the focus on climate change and the need to find alternative sources of energy. And there is a fourth factor, a foreign policy priority: this search for sustainable technology can reduce the West's dependency on fossil fuels and therefore on undemocratic regimes in the Middle East. If properly combined, these factors provide a blueprint for coherence – a very fine win-win. Everybody is happy.

But, as every scientist, diplomat and politician knows, the devil is in the detail. There is always a risk in mixing up policy fields: in choosing politically correct language the differences and conflicting interests are often polished away and everything is presented as a win-win. Most often, it is a zero-sum game in which certain interests prevail. Even in the most carefully hyped win-win situations, the first part of the equation to perish is usually the development interest. Take again the example of migration. While lip service is paid to the idea of 'brain circulation' (the positive counterpart of the brain drain), quite often the adjective 'selective' is added to migration proposals: we should encourage the brightest minds to come to the Netherlands, to win the battle for brains.

There is only a thin line between policies that serve the national and the global interest. On the one hand, there is the one-sided focus on the narrow national interest that characterized the recent past, now under the banner of 'Netherlands, land of knowledge'. As the first political debates on 'dual nationality' have shown, this has certainly not disappeared under the new government. On the other, there are policies that keep in mind the interests of the world as a whole. Here, global solutions to climate change, transnational migration, and the economic race to the bottom are also seen as benefiting the national interest. It is for politicians, NGOs and civil society – the bottom-up 'coalitions of the willing' described by Ko Colijn – to emphasize these longer-term goals.

Of course, this is the realm of politics. But scientists, whether they want it or not, are part of this political game. By carrying out independent and fundamental research on these complex relationships, they can make significant contributions to at least a better understanding of the choices that need to be made.

Politics – at least in the Netherlands or in the rest of Europe – can never forbid scientists to do independent research. Politicians may not want to collaborate in, say, investigating the reasons for the war in Iraq. But that does not mean that the academic world can not start an investigation itself. Not for political reasons, but for the 'truth' – the closest approximation possible to what really happened. This, in the end, is highly political.