

Think-tank



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Knowledge is power. This may be a cliché, but it is increasingly true. It is especially relevant now that the Netherlands Minister for Development Cooperation Bert Koenders is calling for 'politicization'. That is a good initiative, if it means paying greater attention not only to promoting democracy and good governance in the South – which is necessary – but also to global political and economic relations in which dictators can thrive and injustices persist. If development professionals are to address an increasingly complex world in an intelligent manner, they need a detailed and up-to-date understanding of the continually changing political, social and international context in which foreign policy has to operate.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the large NGOs have to deal with enormous quantities of information. But the important thing is how they deal with it: knowledge means giving information meaning. At the moment, far too little attention is devoted to translating information systematically into a broad and coherent strategic vision. Such a vision is crucial to enable the right political or economic pressure to be exerted at the right moment, to strengthen certain social and economic processes through development aid, or even to safeguard peace and security through military intervention.

The ministry and NGOs should devote much more energy and resources to accessing knowledge of and in developing countries. This could be achieved by employing universities, embassies and the broad partner networks of Dutch NGOs as liaisons.

This 'accessed' knowledge should then be brought together and converted into concrete, strategic perspectives for action. While in the field of traditional diplomacy and security there are well-equipped think-tanks – like Clingendael and The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies – there are none in the development sector. There is an enormous pool of development knowledge, but this is fragmented, dispersed among academics and their departments, country offices or the emergency assistance units of NGOs, or among the many policy theme departments at the ministry. There is no institution that combines this knowledge and lifts it to a strategic level.

There is therefore a need for a think-tank to address, for example, Dutch foreign policy from the perspective of globalization and development. Such a think-tank could look beyond the traditional boundaries of development cooperation. It could give policy relevance to concepts like human security or sustainable development. It could also formulate strategic policy recommendations in fields such as global governance, poverty, human rights and justice.

A good starting point would be the European Development Report, an initiative of (research institutes in) some EU member states and the European Commission. The central theme – 'a globally inclusive society based on fair multilateralism' – certainly looks promising. The report will look at European foreign policy from a supranational perspective and address a wide variety of issues that lie outside the traditional realm of development cooperation, without being dominated by the one-sided viewpoints of security experts and diplomats.

It is therefore regrettable that the Dutch Ministry of Foreign

Affairs withdrew from the initiative just before *The Broker* went to press. The official reason: a European report would not add value to existing annual publications like the Human Development Report (HDR) and the World Development Report (WDR). First, the initiative is still too fresh to judge on that. And, more important, the rejection starts from a wrong vision of knowledge. Of course the HDR and the WDR provide a lot of information that does not need to be duplicated. But the transformation of information into knowledge, and research processes themselves, have an intrinsic value for policy making and the making of political alliances. At a time when the formulation of an alternative European foreign policy is necessary in order to make a difference in world politics, and nationalist sentiments and inward-looking tendencies are dominant, such a collaborative process of research and the formulation of policy proposals could open doors and break through barriers. For the Dutch government to pull out of such a project is a – not very encouraging – political statement.

There is one more reason why the EDR and its intentions represent a welcome break from the past. Those who proposed the EDR want to create an open and autonomous research effort. Complex knowledge on international political processes can thrive only in the open. The quality of country analyses by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and NGOs could be improved through open debate between civil society organizations and academics in developing countries, for example, but also among academics in the Netherlands. At present, the ministry's diplomatic branch has a predominantly closed culture. Learning, reflecting and dealing openly and critically with knowledge does not come naturally to diplomats. One reason for this closed culture – and at the same time the main argument for opening up the debate – is that Dutch foreign policy embraces many conflicting interests. There are tensions between national and global interests, North and South, economics and the environment, the Netherlands and its fellow EU member states, and so on.

Even though the Netherlands will not participate in the EDR, it would be a positive move if the ministry were to throw 'into the ring' its own analyses and strategies – and perhaps the policy theory that has been developed in draft form in recent years. For a start, the country analyses drawn up by the embassies on the basis of track records could be made public. At present, the ministry shares these analyses only with some other donors. But if the aim is to promote real exchange, what would be more logical than also to seek out the very valuable inputs of civil society organizations and academics?

One way or the other, a think-tank on globalization and development would appear to be necessary, for several reasons. It would be the necessary step from valuable but unnoticed research that many Dutch academic institutions already conduct to the formulation of broad and strategic policy-oriented proposals and advice. It would stimulate debate on the strategic vision that may or may not underlie Dutch foreign policy. And, maybe, such a think-tank could contribute to the European Development Report, even if the ministry has turned away from it.