

## Research policy evaluated

# Lessons not learned

The lessons of a recent evaluation of demand-driven research programmes in developing countries have not been incorporated into the ministry's new research policy.

By **Frans Bieckmann**

In 1992 the Minister for Development Cooperation Jan Pronk introduced what was then a radically different research policy, emphasizing demand-driven research. A key element of the new policy were nine Multi-annual Multidisciplinary Research Programmes (MMRPs), in which researchers in developing countries were granted full autonomy in setting their own agendas. The research conducted under the programmes was to be demand-driven, interdisciplinary and relevant to local needs.

On behalf of the ministry's Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB), Ria Brouwers of the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, and inspector Fred van der Kraaij, recently investigated what had become of these good intentions. They evaluated four of the nine MMRPs (Bolivia, Mali, Tanzania and Vietnam) and two programmes (in Ghana and South Africa) involving collaboration between Dutch and Southern researchers.

Brouwers believes that 'the idea behind policy was excellent, and is still valid'. It was years ahead of what would later become common practice among the more progressive donors. But in putting policy into practice, many things went wrong. 'Two of the MMRPs, in Bolivia and Tanzania, had done reasonably well. Bolivia was quite good, if you take into account the local context, but the others were in a sorry state'. In Mali and Vietnam the programmes were embedded in the government. As in most other developing countries, development research was not regarded as a discipline. Most important, the programmes did not know how to respond to the high degree of autonomy they had been granted.

The collaborative programmes also presented a mixed picture. The South Africa-Netherlands Research Programme on Alternatives in Development (SANPAD) was doing well, but its counterpart in Ghana had become bogged down in endless consultations. 'Just setting up something like this takes years', says the IOB report. 'It was all very difficult'. It concludes that a lot of patience is needed to see results from initiatives such as these.

### Short term

One of the problems is the short-term perspective that dominates politics. During Jan Pronk's second term as minister, from 1989 to 1998, the Directorate-General for Development Cooperation (DGIS) welcomed contributions from researchers and academics. But he was succeeded by Eveline Herfkens, who is famous for telling a group of researchers in Nijmegen that it was not her job 'to put bread on their plates'. She was, however, a supporter of local ownership – the idea that developing countries should take the 'driver's seat' – and so allowed the MMRPs to continue.

Herfkens was followed by Agnes van Ardenne, who had no interest in research, so that the ministry's support for the programmes declined even further. In 2004, through a series of

bureaucratic manoeuvres, it was decided that the MMRPs would no longer be funded directly from The Hague, but by the embassies or other donors. That put an end to the programmes' assured funding. Between 1992 and 2006, DGIS had provided €60 million to the MMRPs, about 10% of the amount earmarked for funding pure research.

In 2005 van Ardenne introduced a new policy, *Research in Development*, which no longer focused on strengthening research capacity in partner countries, but rather on improving the use of knowledge within the ministry itself. 'The new policy was introduced while we were still in the middle of evaluating the old one', says Brouwers. 'We reached a number of our conclusions that could have been useful in formulating the new policy.' One of those conclusions was that the programmes that had performed best had concentrated on building capacity – through training courses for researchers, and in South Africa even setting up a research school. The other programmes may have organized workshops here and there, but had focused on research itself.

### Balanced partnership

The most decisive factor, according to IOB, was leadership. Success only seemed possible if strong, resolute individuals took the lead and staff turnover was low. The involvement of Dutch researchers sometimes proved a complicating factor. Often they did work with Southern researchers, but it was not always easy to interest them in genuinely collaborative research efforts. There is considerable pressure on Dutch researchers to publish the results of their work quickly in order to meet annual targets, and collaboration in developing countries is often slow and time-consuming.

The IOB report concludes that DGIS tended to overprotect the MMRPs, shutting them off from the research environment in their own countries, as well as from researchers in the Netherlands and elsewhere. 'You can't conduct research on an island,' says van der Kraaij. 'The fear that the Netherlands, because it is more advanced scientifically, would dominate the programmes, turned into complete rejection of the professional knowledge and experience that Dutch researchers had to offer. That was a missed opportunity.'

And therein lies the report's most important recommendation: make sure that there is a balanced partnership in which Southern researchers can learn from European knowledge and experience, and are not isolated from them out of fear that they will be dominated. This, of course, entails recognizing that inequalities exist. Checks and balances should be built in to ensure that they do not threaten the demand-driven nature of the programmes.

Unfortunately these lessons can no longer be put into practice, as the central funding of the MMRPs has now come to an end. ■