

Researchers must map the world

What are the dilemmas facing practitioners in the field of international cooperation? How can researchers help resolve them? Koos Richelle, head of EuropeAid, wants researchers to deliver more accurate analyses of what is happening in the developing world in order to build more realistic European policies.



Koos Richelle (EuropeAid)

Koos Richelle has been director-general of EuropeAid since 2004. Before that – after an extensive career in The Hague, of which five years as head of the Dutch development programme (DGIS) – he was Brussels' first man in DG Development for three years.

What does EuropeAid do?

EuropeAid is the directorate-general of the European Commission responsible for implementing aid programmes and projects across the world. EuropeAid works according to EU strategies for the delivery of aid that are designed by other directorates-general, including DG Development for the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries and DG External Relations for other regions of the world. Humanitarian aid is managed by a separate directorate-general, called ECHO. The work EuropeAid does contributes significantly to the development objectives of the EU (as formulated in the European Consensus on Development) and to the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals. The European Union is the world's biggest aid donor.

How do research and practice relate at the European level?

A great deal of development research commissioned by the EU is never put into practice. Sometimes this is because the research is too general, and therefore hard to apply, but there is also a tendency in development cooperation to hop from one trendy issue to the next. Focusing on the most-hyped issue leaves no time or space for discussing other relevant research findings. Last year trade, climate change and food security swiftly succeeded each other as the subjects meriting all donor attention. Timing is a key factor. By the time research results are available, the examined issue is often no longer topical. Thus few people rush to implement the findings. Whenever I take five minutes to think about the return on the EU's investments in development research, I start to feel rather despondent.

I dare say that development cooperation is only to a very limited extent based on scientific insights. An abundance of research is done, but there is a noncommittal attitude toward implementing the findings. For example, studies on why

there are Asian but no African economic ‘tigers’ could fill a library. These studies have found that land and property rights are a factor. And although plenty of studies provide theoretical and even practical frameworks for understanding the politics of land use, there has been very little concrete action in response.

There are plenty more examples. For instance, more than a decade ago World Bank research showed that 25% of all international aid was wasted because it was tied to all sorts of donor conditions. It took a long time before political consequences were attached to this insight. Today, there are binding agreements within the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) about untying most of the aid to the least developed countries. Yet, if we are to believe the World Bank, during this decade spent on discussion and political decision making 25% of all donor money was squandered.

Of course we pick up on certain findings incidentally, but there is no systematic handling of research results to speak of that benefits the Brussels policy process. The institutional setting also plays a part in this. The primary responsibility for development research lies with DG Research. As DG EuropeAid we are of course involved, but rarely are we responsible for initiating or financing the research or for translating its results into policy – these things are often up to the governments of developing countries. As a consequence, our people feel little natural ownership of these research projects.

What should researchers focus on more?

First, what needs improvement is what I call ‘mapping’. I like to let facts and figures speak for themselves. We often lack an overall picture of what is going on in a specific developing country. Partly this is because the statistical base is rather weak in most of these countries. Comprehensive household surveys are seldom conducted. But we also lack

insight into basic yet crucial questions, such as which are the areas with economic potential, what is good and what is bad in terms of a country’s infrastructure, which population groups are in acute shortage of clean drinking water and which have the most dire need of healthcare? How much money is available for all of this, both in terms of donor funds and in terms of the government’s national budget? Because we lack such information, much of our policy is built on quicksand. By conducting more and better preparatory research, we make our policies more realistic. Mapping entails more than making satellite snapshots. It is about bringing information together and engaging in policy-relevant interpretation.

Second, there is a need for applied economic research in the areas of infrastructure and public-private partnerships. Take the issue of ‘cost recovery’ for energy. We know that theoretically a great deal is possible with hydroelectric power stations in Africa. But how can we learn to combine investments and gifts in such a way that the poorer segments of a population are also well served? I would love to see an economic model explaining that. Research should be able to tell us how we can design and implement bigger interventions that would have a larger impact than the traditional small and dispersed projects. How can we go about ‘scaling up’ in an environment that is troublesome in terms of good governance and that presents us with problems given that we have to serve people who can pay for their energy and at the same time others who will not be able to do so for the foreseeable future. How do you solve that economic dilemma without creating the perverse situation that people get used to free services, which clearly will not be provided forever? We must after all uphold the principle of cost recovery.

I am always looking for practical, applicable models that can stand the political test. We depend too much on interesting stories and well meaning hearts, but what we need are models that can make the developing world go round. ■