

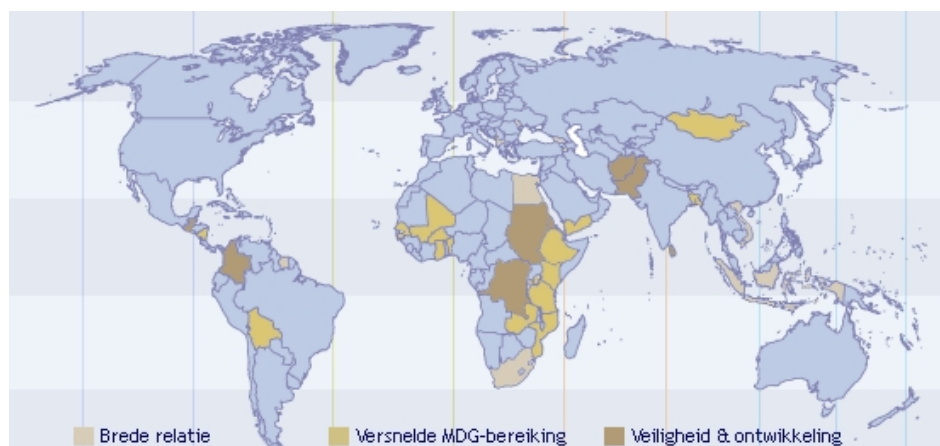
Singing a new policy tune

Singing a new policy tune: Towards a (re)foundation of Dutch development assistance policies

© A theory of development

A theory of development is needed to guide policies in the field of development cooperation. Without such a theory, development cooperation will be less effective. The International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), MDF-Training & Consultancy and Vice Versa initiated a one-year process in close cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to explore a theory of development through a series of debates.

When former Minister of Development Cooperation, Bert Koenders, presented his agenda for modernisation of Dutch development in 2008, he stated that innovation starts with a critical debate about development policies. In order to prevent simplification and cynicism, this debate should focus on the effectiveness of policies in terms of long-term change processes, based on a clear analysis of problems and the perceived Dutch added value. Such a critical reflection requires a re-assessment of the hypotheses and assumptions underlying Dutch development policies.



Minister Koenders (2007–2010) opted for partnerships based on three country profiles: broad relationships with near middle-income countries; accelerated MDG achievement in low-income countries and security and development in fragile states (Source image: Wikimedia.org).

Process organisation

The 'Singing a new policy tune' process was carried out within the framework of the Development Policy Review Network (DPRN) by:

- The International Institute of Social Studies
- MDF-Training & Consultancy
- Vice Versa



In 2006, the Directorate-General International Cooperation (DGIS) of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs started this assessment in the form of a document entitled '*De Broncodes van OS*' ('The source codes of development cooperation'). In this document, DGIS reflected on the efforts to formulate a comprehensive, coherent and theoretically justified foundation of its development policies.

The original 'source code' focused primarily on poverty alleviation and not so much on the entire spectrum of international cooperation. Recently, DGIS has been shifting its focus from development cooperation alone towards a broader perspective of international cooperation. This transition is considered unavoidable in the current rapidly globalising,

and increasingly complex world. Within the framework of this process there is a need to (re-)formulate a policy theory – the theories, axioms, assumptions, values and norms underlying Dutch development assistance policies – in order to improve the quality of future policymaking.

🌐 Towards a new policy theory

The discussions during the ‘Singing a new policy tune’ process generated the contours of a new policy theory. The policy note entitled ‘Towards a theory of development policy’ written by an ISS team coordinated by Arjan de Haan, highlights six elements of a new Dutch development policy theory.

1. Changing context

Generally, the assumption still holds that developing countries need to be supported. The humanitarian motive is as strong as ever and untied aid continues to be seen as part of how the Netherlands positions itself in the world. At the same time, both the global and national contexts have radically shifted, with a much stronger dominance of market orientation, a shift in global economic power and ongoing globalisation. Although it is right for there to be a greater emphasis on coherence and global public goods, there is also a need to acquire a better understanding of how the current aid structure needs to be shaped to support this.

2. A broadening field

The Minister of Development Cooperation continues to be the focus of Dutch development policy. Through this position, the Netherlands sees itself as an important member of the established international aid community. At civilateral level, Dutch NGOs have always played a critical role in the implementation of policy. However, their position is changing and the field is diversifying. The private sector is becoming more important and the work of

DGIS is increasingly integrated with other agencies, notably Foreign Affairs and Defence. There are calls for increased coordination with other ministries that are relevant to managing the global public goods, namely the ministries that deal with agriculture, technology and the environment. Lastly, there is a need for professionalisation and the role of knowledge institutions is thought to be growing in importance.

3. Planned and unintended outcomes

The Netherlands government continues to define the reduction of poverty as the core objective of aid, and the Millennium Development Goals as the international framework along which aid is delivered and assessed. However, there are grave doubts about whether aid is achieving what it has set out to achieve. Likewise, there are doubts about the future of the MDG framework. There is also widespread concern about the unintended consequences of aid, such as aid dependency and unequal power relations. There are calls, which are



The Millennium Development Goals (Source: Wikipedia.org).

echoed in the WRR report, to change the direction of aid and move away from a focus on poverty alleviation and the social sector towards a focus on economic growth.

4. Evaluation

Evaluations of development policies and practices are needed, not only to improve these policies and practices, but also to present them to the taxpayers. Although the main elements of Dutch development evaluations are still considered appropriate, the shift from development cooperation to international cooperation implies a need to broaden the discussions on evaluation.

5. The lack of theoretical analysis

The lack of analysis of the theories that underlie development policies seems to be caused, in part, by the practice-oriented nature of many of the stakeholders. Development research has often focused on practical aspects of development rather than on enhancing the theoretical understanding, while scientific disciplines outside development studies have paid relatively little attention to development aid. However, theory and practice do not necessarily have to be contradictory and a better theorisation of development policy would help to improve its practices and outcomes.

6. Diversity of views on development policy

There is a very large diversity of positions, ideas, and interests in the debate on Dutch aid. A thorough theoretical understanding of Dutch development policy would not only need to address the diversity that exists within the aid community, but should also incorporate a wider perspective and reflect the new global challenges and changing ideas and institutions within Dutch society.

Towards international cooperation?

Development policies are gradually shifting from a narrow focus on poverty alleviation towards a broader approach which addresses



The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should reposition itself (Photo: Wikipedia.org).

global challenges. This transition is often characterised as a shift from development cooperation towards international cooperation. The new approach demands a long-term perspective and should not only involve other ministries and agencies, but also the general public. The following recommendations were made:

- In the field of international cooperation, the Netherlands should strive to remain an example and guide for other countries ('gidsland').
- The policies of DGIS of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are too narrow for a genuine and comprehensive policy on international cooperation. Contemporary themes related to international cooperation demand a broader look, integrating global issues such as climate change, population growth, the environment, trade and migration. It should also involve stakeholders from other ministries and agencies.
- Development cooperation is an important part of the international cooperation agenda. Effective development cooperation requires country-specific strategies in order to cope with differences between developing countries.

- Support for multilateral organisations is important, but the Dutch government should make its own choices, focus and policies and should use existing expertise in the Netherlands when working on the basis of internationally agreed policies.
- An interactive process between stakeholders from the private sector, research institutes, civil society and politicians is essential to create a broad knowledge base of global issues. The development cooperation sector should dare to think 'outside the box' and shift from traditional assistance towards addressing 'the source of the problems'.
- The implementation period of current policies is too short and a change is needed in the direction of a 'minister proof policy'. A long-term focus is essential because time is needed to see whether (sub)sectoral or thematic policies are effective or not, and because working through multilateral channels takes time. Furthermore, problems which have existed for decades cannot be solved within four years.
- Public support for international cooperation policies is important for several reasons. Firstly, international cooperation directly relates to our own behaviour as global citizens. Secondly, international cooperation serves the interest of the Netherlands, because the Netherlands is directly affected by global phenomena such as climate change, migration, and the financial crisis. Thirdly, international cooperation implies opportunities for the Dutch economy.

🌐 Follow up

The process has yielded a wealth of ideas and inspired many people to think about policy theory in relation to international cooperation. The International Institute of Social Studies is continuing research and discussions on this topic in its aiddebates@iss part 2.

Process output

The 'Singing a new policy tune' process included an assessment of previous policy formulating initiatives, three conferences on general development policy, two public on specific policy domains, and the publication of a note outline the contours of a new policy theory.

This resulted in the following publications:

- Policy note: 'Towards a theory of development policy'.
- Seminar report: 'Sustainability and global citizenship'.
- Seminar report: 'Governance in fragile states'.
- Conference report: 'How to lift the IC/DC debate to a higher level?'
- Conference report: 'Kick off conference', with additional reports of discussions about thematic policy domains.
- Conference report: 'Pick your brains' with additional reports of discussions about thematic policy domains.
- Paper: '*De Broncode revisited*' ('The source code revisited'), by Frans Bieckmann.
- Paper: '*Naar een Onderbouwd IS Beleid*' ('Towards a substantiated policy'), by Frans Bieckmann.

All publications are available on the website: <http://www.singinganewpolicytune.nl>

Development Policy Review Network

This infosheet was made by DPRN. With a view to stimulating informed debate and discussion of issues related to the formulation and implementation of development policies, DPRN created opportunities to promote an open exchange and dialogue between scientists, policymakers, development practitioners and the business sector in the Netherlands and Flanders from 2003–2011.