

**Research for Development:  
A Question of Morality Not of Cost Recovery**

**Key Note speech<sup>\*</sup>**

**by**

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A speech by a developing country scholar to a mixed audience of researchers, civil societies and policy makers in a context of a shifting Dutch approach to research for development is a challenging task.

The challenge is in framing the focus of the speech and in identifying the recipient of the message.

The framing of my speech is in providing a perspective from a developing country scholar on how can “Dutch Research Policy for Development” better engage in responding to development needs in a globalizing world.

My message is: It is not about what you do, but it is about the value system that drives you in choosing what you do. It is not about how you do it, but its about the defining features of the process you follow.

The message means simply that the Dutch policy on Research and on Development cooperation must consciously adopt a humane value system that is governed by key defining features. The manifestations can vary but the value and the features must be protected.

As an introduction to such a message, let us pause a little and reflect on the context we are all living in.

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<sup>\*</sup> Presented in the Conference: “Knowledge on the Move: Research for Development in a Globalizing World”, The Hague, February 26-29, 2008, The Conference is organized by a consortium consisting of : ISS, Nuffic and NWO/WOTRO.

My reflection is supported by some personal encounters, I experienced in the course of just one day. Last week, both my son and myself were undertaking a trip abroad. He a young lad in his late twenties, was returning to his job in a multinational company. A company embarking on a leadership program that is recruiting the best minds from around the globe, investing in a diverse multicultural team, providing it with training, financial security and career prospects that are beyond the reach within any national boundary.

My trip, on the other hand, took me to a meeting in Japan where I struck a conversation with a businessman from New Zealand and a Lady from the U.S. The businessman told me that he spent ten years in Japan and that only this year it has struck him that he will settle there. He explained simply: The quality of my life is so much improved. The American Lady was visiting her first granddaughter who was born to her American son and Japanese wife. She commented I could not have wished for a better wife or life for my son.

Stories of hope and expanded horizons made possible by a global world with welcoming borders and respect of cultural diversities.

On the same day, two articles in the newspapers provided a contrasting picture. In Egypt, where youngsters, like my son, have benefited from the best opportunities offered by the education and social environments and have found their space in life. Others, from less advantaged social groups, have embarked on risky and illegal migrant ventures. They were inspired by an unachievable dream of social mobility which ended in a loss of more than thirty lives in the Mediterranean Sea.

A story not confined to Egypt but echoes itself across the developing world.

The Herald Tribune of the same day was reporting on the plight of fishermen in a Senegalese village who are being exposed to the declining fish stocks in the North Africa's ocean floor. A collapse in major fish populations caused by vast flotilla of industrial trawlers from the European Union, China, Russia and elsewhere.

Clearly, the horizon for the future are pulling us into two directions. Within national borders inequities and social exclusions are found in every aspect of life. On the international scene, socio-economic differences that appeared converging are taking a steady diverging path filled with misunderstanding, mistrust and polarization.

How do we rate our society and our world? What is the world we dream of for our children?

The rating and the dream can draw on one of two frames. These frames are irreconcilable.

On one hand, we may use a yardstick that only values growth, wealth, technological advances and recognizes development in the picture I have just contrasted. A yardstick of cost and benefit analysis where the average counts but the variations are ignored will highlight the progress and accept the downfalls as inevitable and just part of life.

Engaging with such a yardstick by pointing to the threat and danger embodied in it, is to my mind, a futile attempt. If your yardstick is not disturbed by inequities and polarization, you protect yourself by building a wall. A wall can be made of concrete or can simply be made by closed minds and closed borders, Our world is abundant with examples of stereotyping and demonizing the differences.

Another frame to view our world and to guide our dream for the future is simply a humane one. A frame that lends itself to a different yardstick.

A yardstick that can not tolerate human sufferings. A yardstick that recognizes equity as a value that we all aspire to. A yardstick that prioritize social cohesion over economic growth and calls for improving the average while reducing the unfair differences. This is development with a human face. This is development that is inclusive.

The Dutch research policy for development and its policy for development cooperation has always had an explicit value system with recognizable features.

I have been personally involved in three manifestations of these policies. I was the Director of a Research Center in Egypt who has led the implementation of MMRP in Egypt. I was honoured to serve as a member and vice chair of RAWOO. I have also worked extensively, as a scholar with strong links to policy in Egypt, on the implementation of Reproductive Health paradigm and the MDG's in Egypt.

The MMRP main contribution was in adopting a value framework. MMRP told us you are truly concerned about developing country challenges, you believe we know best our priorities, you respect our local knowledge, you trust our leadership in defining and tackling our concerns. The Dutch research and development cooperation policies are simply there to help us .

The RAWOO composition of Dutch and developing countries representatives had an explicit message. You wanted to hear the perspectives of developing countries. You respected differences and sought better understanding.

The Reproductive Health paradigm, that the Dutch has championed and even struggled to keep on the international development agenda, demonstrated the values embedded in your development policies. You clearly did not accept that the individual well being could be sacrificed under the premise of societal good. You also identified the prevailing gender dynamics as unfair and detrimental to the health of women all over the world and decided that something should be done about it.

The notion of embedding Research in Society is a principled choice. It is a value statement that has been translated into modalities.

MMRP, RAWOO, RH and MDG's are simply expressions and manifestations. They can take other forms, they can be implemented in different ways but the core value must be protected.

Also, the yardstick has to be consistent with the frame that guides it. It is important to spell out the goals and objectives not the tools for achieving it. To evaluate the performance based on goals not the adherence to implementation steps. To monitor, adapt and respond differently to different contexts.

For example, the discussion that Dutch researchers were excluded from MMRP should be a discussion that does not discredit MMRP because Dutch researchers did not benefit from it. Was the purpose of MMRP to benefit Dutch researchers or developing countries? If your objective is to serve Dutch researchers, there are more effective mechanisms to do so. If your objective is to serve developing countries, the question should be: Was the exclusion of Dutch researchers harmful to the developing countries?

On the same note, the question of overall impact on development process may be unrealistic. The complaints that MMRP did not translate into a coherent research program and that subjects of strategic importance were not addressed are, to my mind, unjustified.

The Center, I work in, was a beneficiary of MMRP. It never occurred to us that the Dutch support, while quite generous for a research centre, would make a real dent to Egypt challenges. For us, MMRP provided a breathing space, a model of good donorship, a real contribution to a large number of researchers with an appreciated impact on local development.

In Egypt, the impact on individual researchers and local topical concerns, extended beyond the life of the program and should be seen as a very cost effective one. The program in Egypt was a source of pride and a breath of fresh air but surely not the solution to our development challenges.

Due to a change in Dutch policy, the program was terminated prematurely. Egypt, despite Dutch initial promise and its achievement, was the only case that was not renewed beyond the first cycle.

The evaluation speaks of resentment for such abrupt termination. We in developing countries speak of gratitude and disappointment.

Another concern highlighted in the evaluation report is the sustainability of such beacons of lights. I fully support such a concern.

The difficulty of sustaining innovative development assistance is that they usually do not address root causes. They are rarely large enough or long enough or enough broadly conceptualized to serve as real solutions.

These assistance, to live beyond the life of any donorship, need to be rooted in actions that are led by national counterparts. They need to be fully embedded in the society. They need to be locally owned. But by who?

The question is who speaks for such a society and who is the counterpart. The answer differs by the purpose of assistance and the by context.

In the case of MMRP, the program addressed a multidisciplinary group of researchers and local actors who needed opportunities to engage with their society. These researchers benefited from the funding so long as it lasted. However, once the funding disappeared, the research environment and the structural constraints of the knowledge system did not allow the program to live on its own. It allowed few fortunate researchers and local actors to break from the mould but they remained the exception, not the norm.

What is the point here? Should MMRP and similar activities decide it is a lost battle since the challenge is so intrinsic and systematic?

Definitely No.

The point is that your help is very much needed. At one level given the structural problems of the lack of appreciation and support for “Research for Development” in developing countries, whatever you contribute translates into precious opportunities.

On another level, if you seek for a more ambitious impact, you should seek a more strategic approach. An approach much more costly and sustained. An approach that pool resources and involve sizable investments addressing both root causes and their manifestations. An approach that is sustained, flexible, adjustable that does not run away.

Furthermore, the flexibility and adjustment need to be careful they do not undermine the value and the positive features. Research for Development should not defeat its purpose.

Research for development should not undermine existing research institutions and depend on flying consultants. It should not assume that knowledge is uni-directional flowing from North to South. Many developing countries in the world have intellectual capacities that are not tapped.

Even if there is shortage in capacity, hence a strategic decision is to nurture and build skills. The involvement of foreign expertise should be judged by how much impact they leave behind not just how successfully they addressed the challenge.

To summarize. My stocktaking of the past and lessons learned:

- MMRP had an explicit value system. This value is what counts not the process. Embedding research in society reflected this value.
- MMRP was precious, it helped and contributed a great deal. The society it targeted was multi disciplinary teams representing a combination of local constituencies (researchers, civil society, and local policy actors)

- The tools to achieve value and goals of MMRP are not carved in stone. Indeed the process should have been more flexible and context specific not dogmatic.
- MMRP should be judged by the goals it could have achieved not the goals we think it should have had and we aspire it to achieve.
- The quest for sustainable impact or for more strategic goals demand a more ambitious strategy.

Now where do we go from here, what is the current context for research and international cooperation? How do we carve the future?

My understanding is that the New Dutch cooperation policy is emphasizing the translation of research to public policies. The goal is to more effectively serve the development needs of the people. This is quite a legitimate goal.

It should be noted that the end goal is the same as MMRP but your tools are very different. MMRP emphasized local ownership and the target group was multidisciplinary teams. Now, you emphasize national concerns and the target group is high level policy makers. The society, the research policy is seeking to serve is the policy makers and implementers.

The concern here is whether by serving the policy makers you are serving the needs of the population?

The answer differs by context and you should follow whatever mechanisms that help you achieve the end goal.

My own take, on the general context, is that I am quite optimistic. I see three positive signals. These signals can be summarized as follows:

1. There are serious reform movements in many developing countries. Policy makers are struggling to address challenges and they appear much more open to societal voices.

2. There is a movement that is forming around equity and addressing root structural causes with an empowerment framework.
3. The search for successful policy models and learning from comparative experiences is much more evident in the research and civil society activities. Indeed, the search now is no more tilted to why we are failing but simply seeks the answer to how can we succeed and how can we learn from others who succeeded.

Let me first elaborate on the three positive signals before moving to the implications for Dutch policies and also for the future.

### **1. Serious Reform Movement**

Many countries in the world are now grasping that the status quo can not continue. At one hand policy makers are realizing that the state can not cope on its own. The nature of the challenges, the degree of such challenges and the voice of the people is being heard louder and clearer. On the other hand, civil society actors are gaining more strength and clarity. The role of civil society as a welfare agent is turning to a change agent. The global world and the communication developments mean that policy makers can not isolate themselves or their people from recognizing the challenges and appreciating the success of others.

Policy makers are more and more turning to their people. They are more ready to listen to the research communities and to be guided by evidence. They are starting to embrace, and not just tolerate, the civil societies and private sectors. Partnership is becoming the norm not the exception.

The question of who speaks for society in our attempt to embed research is clearly gaining more clarity in many parts of the world.

### **2. Equity Lens and Empowerment Framework**

Both equity lens and empowerment framework are gaining stronger momentum. It is true that these have started some time ago. For example, the Millennium Development Goal one and three of poverty

alleviation and gender equality as well as the Reproductive Health paradigm reflect a concern of equity and a search for empowering the community and women to deal with the challenges. However, nowadays equity and empowerment are much more in the forefront of attention and there are many clear illustrations.

For example, poverty alleviation efforts are no longer satisfied with hands out and charity creating passive dependency. The call now is for an empowerment framework with state and citizens as active partners.

More than 50 countries in the world have by now adopted what has become known as Conditional Cash Transfers (CCT's), a real revolution in social policies with a visionary approach.

Another example, is the new commission on "Social Determinants of Health" which was set by WHO during 2003. A commission that is defining health equity as a social success and is calling for a social movement empowering the community and drawing on integrated undersectoral actions to address health inequities.

A movement that already found champions in a number of countries including: Chile, Canada, Iran and that is growing.

A third example, is demonstrated in the recently published World Bank 2006 report on "Equity and Development"

A fourth example, is the DFID generous grant to a Research Policy consortium of international centres on "Pathways to Women Empowerment". A consortium that is already discussing strategies for: "Building Constituencies for Equity and Justice"

These are but a few examples and I am sure much more could be found.

### **3. Successful Policy Models**

The reform movement coupled with the equity lens and empowerment framework are attempting to find practical models for implementations. Indeed, researchers and civil societies are starting to change their focus. They no longer feel the need to advocate for change, given that policy makers now admit the need for change. They are challenged not to describe problems but to propose solutions.

Similarly, developing countries and policy makers are becoming more open to learn from their peers. The search for wisdom from developed countries, that often translated into theoretical solutions not grounded in cultural and social realities, have shifted to South to South collaboration.

The realization that some developing countries could be seen as models of success has inspired many policy makers.

A clear example is found in poverty alleviation efforts in Egypt. The current social policy reforms have turned to the Latin American experience. State visits, experts exchanges, and researching the experiences of Solidario in Chile, Oportunidades in Mexico, Bolsa Familia in Brazil and Bono in Ecuador are now very common in Egypt.

What are the implications of these positive changes on Research for Development and Development cooperation.

The implications are that there is a significant role for donorship. This role need to link with these positive changes. It needs to adopt explicitly an equity and an empowerment framework. It needs to draw on successful experiences. South to South collaboration are as inspiring, if not more inspiring, than models from developed countries.

The investment for research needs to be institutional. It needs to explicitly forge links among national research centres, bringing the best of minds

together for the benefit of society not of researchers. It needs to address root causes and be long term and sustained.

In conclusion, let me register two points. The first is my own encounters with the Dutch policy on research for development, with colleagues from Dutch research community and with Dutch priorities in Development cooperation have translated itself to a deep appreciation and respect to the value system and modalities that have governed the Dutch activities. The term Good Ownership and Good Donorship resonated with me in all my previous encounters with Dutch Donorship for research and for development.

The second point I would also like to register is that I am not sure how much the Dutch community are fully grasping their leadership in this area, how much they are consciously and explicitly protecting the inspiration and ideology that have become equated with their policies.

My plea is to retain the Dutch leadership and my message again is: It is not about what you do but it is about the value system that drives you in choosing what you do. It is not about how you do it but its about the defining features of the process you follow.

You have a duty and the leverage to strengthen the constituencies for equality and justice. You are different and you can make a difference.