

Abstract

The aim of the Development Policy Review Network (DPRN), which is supported financially by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs through WOTRO Science for Development, is to strengthen research-policy linkages for more effective development cooperation. Drawing on the RAPID Context, Evidence, Links (CEL) framework developed by the Overseas Development Institute, this study examines the problems and opportunities DPRN stakeholders are facing in their efforts to foster these linkages. Interviews with twenty-nine stakeholders from different sectors show that they consider DPRN to be relevant as regards linking a rather fragmented Dutch research community with policymakers from various ministries, mainly by looking for policy opportunities, aligning with policy narratives and responding to urgent information needs. DPRN also offers possibilities to strengthen interdepartmental cooperation and address coherency issues. However, it is still possible to improve communication with policymakers through continuous monitoring of their involvement and translating scientific information into concrete policy recommendations and operational knowledge. As regards the ministry, the feeling is that its openness to learning and knowledge sharing needs to be urgently increased and that it should invest more in building its institutional memory.

Bridging knowledge divides

The role of the Development Policy Review Network in strengthening research-policy linkages

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Introduction

In 2003, the Research School for Resource Studies for Development (CERES)² created the Development Policy Review Network (DPRN) with a view to stimulating informed debate and knowledge exchange amongst various development actors (policymakers, researchers, practitioners and the private sector) in the Netherlands and Flanders. The creation of the network stemmed from the widely felt need to increase insight into how research-based knowledge could underpin and improve development policy and practice, and how a more policy-relevant research agenda could be effectuated. DPRN's work is facilitated by a grant from the Directorate General for International Cooperation (DGIS)³ of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, channelled through WOTRO⁴ Research for Development since 2008.

The gap between the different development cooperation sectors was perceived as being critical at the time of DPRN's creation. Communication between the various sectors had been poor, especially between policy and science. This was illustrated by former Minister Herfkens' statement in 2000, when she claimed that she or her staff did not need Dutch researchers because she could buy the necessary knowledge at the World Bank and DGIS was not meant 'to butter the bread of Dutch academia' (Dietz, 2003: 3).

A few years ago the ministry changed its approach to fostering research-policy links particularly after having issued a new policy memorandum on research and knowledge for development cooperation in 2005. The policy emphasises the fact that policymakers at the ministry have to use knowledge more effectively in order to combat poverty and bring about sustainable development (DGIS, 2005). Former Minister for Development Cooperation, Bert Koenders, saw knowledge and research as essential for the development of effective poverty reduction policies. One of his strategies, into which DPRN fits, aims specifically to increase

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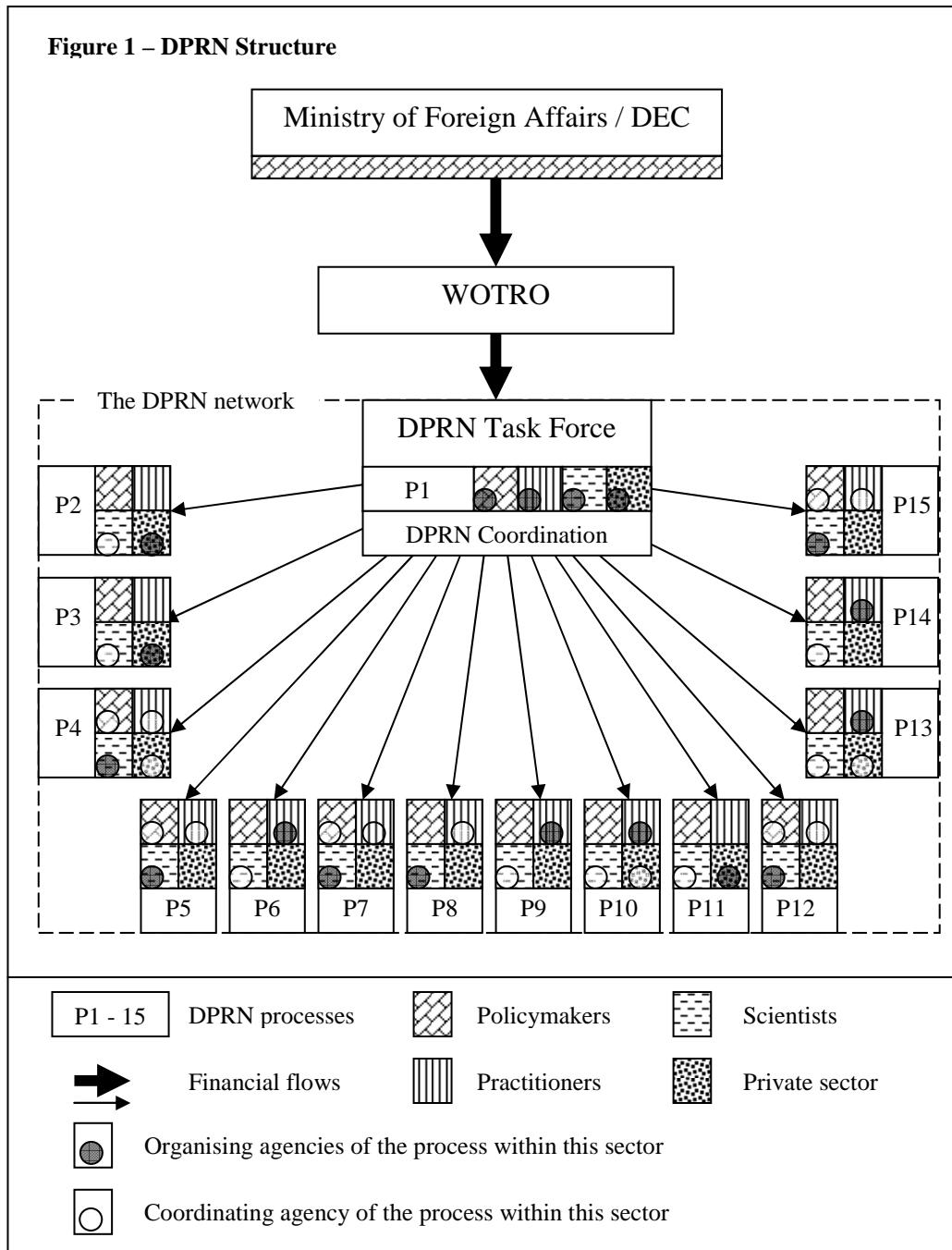
¹ The authors would like to thank an anonymous referee for useful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

² The CERES Research School for Resource Studies for Development is a network of development-oriented researchers from six universities and thirteen other research institutions in the Netherlands.

³ DGIS is one of the three Directorate Generals of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, alongside the DGs of European Cooperation and Political Affairs. It is responsible for development cooperation policy, its coordination, implementation and funding. The DPRN subsidy was made available by the DGIS Cultural Cooperation, Education and Research Department (DCO) until October 2009 and by the Effectiveness and Coherence Department (DEC) since then.

⁴ The division of the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) dedicated to scientific research on development issues.

Figure 1 – DPRN Structure



knowledge circulation by establishing links between science, practice and policy, preferably in network settings (Koenders, 2008).

One of the conditions identified for bridging the gap between policy and research through knowledge networks, is the active involvement of policymakers (Pant, 2009). Feedback, dialogue and collaboration between the different stakeholders are considered crucial in this regard (e.g. Court et al., 2005). During DPRN's first phase (2004-2007) it proved difficult to realise this because, compared to the other sectors, policymakers were under-represented in DPRN activities.⁵

⁵ In the first phase, DPRN organised forty-two meetings that were attended by more than 1,300 participants, of which less than 10% were policymakers (DPRN, 2008). Of the records in the Global-Connections searchable

With a view to addressing this problem, DPRN changed its approach in its second phase (2008-2010) from the organisation of single, region-based yearly meetings to cooperative processes in which one or more – basically thematic – meetings are embedded. These processes are organised by at least two parties that represent two different sectors, with the other sectors also being involved in the process. Each year, the DPRN Task Force⁶ selects a number of these processes through an open call for proposals. In addition, DPRN instigated one process itself during the second phase, which brought the total number of processes to fifteen. In all the processes policymakers are to be involved from the start, with the organisers being required to make use of policy-relevant research and produce outputs that are relevant to policymakers. These are important criteria in the assessment of process proposals. See Figure 1 for an overview of the DPRN structure and Table 1 for an overview of the processes.

Using the Context, Evidence, Links (CEL) framework developed by the Overseas Development Institute as part of its theory on research-policy linkages, this paper addresses the question of what problems and opportunities DPRN stakeholders face in their efforts to foster more effective research-policy linkages in the field of Dutch Development Cooperation. To answer that question, we first examine the political context, i.e. the ministry's views on research and knowledge and how these have shaped research-policy linkages within the field of Dutch Development Cooperation. Next, we focus on the evidence domain, i.e. how the different sectors regard research-policy linkages. Lastly, we assess the functioning of DPRN in the links domain, with specific attention for the ways policymakers have been involved in DPRN activities under the new approach. In the last section we reflect on the way forward and draw conclusions. Data for this study was collected through 29 semi-structured interviews⁷ with respondents from different sectors. Respondents were selected on the basis of (i) their involvement in DPRN activities and/or (ii) their specific knowledge about research-policy linkages in the field of Dutch development cooperation (Box 1). In addition, a literature review was performed of internal documents, policy documents and scientific and professional publications on research-policy links.

Box 1 - Interviewees

The first author held 29 semi-structured interviews face-to-face (15), by telephone (13) and e-mail (1) in the period August-November 2009. Respondents included policymakers (10), scientists (8), practitioners (8), someone from the corporate sector (1) and others (2).

- (i) Respondents affiliated with DPRN included DPRN Task Force members who have been involved in DPRN from the start (4), (co-)organisers of each of the DPRN processes that DPRN facilitated at the time of the research (16), and participants in DPRN process meetings (8).
- (ii) Respondents with specific knowledge about research-policy linkages in the field of Dutch development cooperation, included policymakers from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (6), practitioners (3), scientists (2), and others (2). One of these respondents was not affiliated to DPRN.

database of development experts set up by DPRN to support intersectoral interaction between development experts, less than 15% referred to policymakers (Context IC, 2007).

⁶ The DPRN Task Force is made up of various voluntary representatives from the four sectors of Dutch development cooperation. The Task Force consists of twelve members, five of whom belong to the scientific community (one of whom is an observer for WOTRO), five are practitioners, one represents the corporate sector and one is a policymaker (acting as an observer for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs). The two observers do not play a role in the selection of the processes. The Task Force is responsible for the administrative and internal control of the network and is assisted by the DPRN Coordination Unit (1.7 fte), hosted by the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research (AISSR) at the University of Amsterdam (formerly AMIDSt).

⁷ Although the interviews were held from June to November 2009, the data on DPRN processes and number of participants has been updated until August 2010.

On theories about research-policy linkages

A lot of theoretical thinking about research-policy links has been developed under the Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) programme of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) (Crewe and Young, 2002; Hovland, 2003; Perkins and Court, 2005; Ramalingam, 2005; Ramalingam and Jones, 2008; Jones, 2009; Jones et al., 2009). Drawing on RAPID's Context, Evidence, Links (CEL) framework, this section discusses the concept of knowledge and its importance for development, how knowledge can influence policy processes, and how networks act as intermediaries that bring multiple sources of knowledge together.

Concepts

Three concepts are central in research-policy links: knowledge, research and policy. Perkins and Court (2005) define knowledge as: *'Information that has been evaluated and organised so that it can be used purposefully'*. Knowledge is generally differentiated into explicit and implicit knowledge and it is important to consider both. Explicit knowledge can be easily articulated and accessed by putting it into a codified form (for example in manuals, documents and procedures). Implicit knowledge is, however, more unconscious and intuitive, and much harder to formalise (i.e. know-how based on experience) (Ramalingam, 2005).

In the CEL framework, research is regarded as, *'any systematic effort to increase the stock of knowledge'* (Court et al., 2005: 6). It can be drawn from a range of sources, including governments, NGOs, international organisations, and the more common sources of universities and think tanks. According to the definition of Court et al. (Ibid.: 6) research includes *'any systematic process of critical investigation and evaluation, theory building, data collection, analysis and codification related to development policy and practice. It includes action research, i.e. self-reflection by practitioners towards the enhancement of direct practice.'*

The CEL framework defines policy as *'a purposive course of action followed by an actor or a set of actors'* (Anderson, 1975, referred to by Court et al., 2005: 7). This goes beyond documents or legislation by including activities on the ground. The authors suggest a focus on public policy in the sense that this affects the public or at least is visible to the public. Public policy can be made by governments as well as international organisations, bilateral organisations and NGOs.

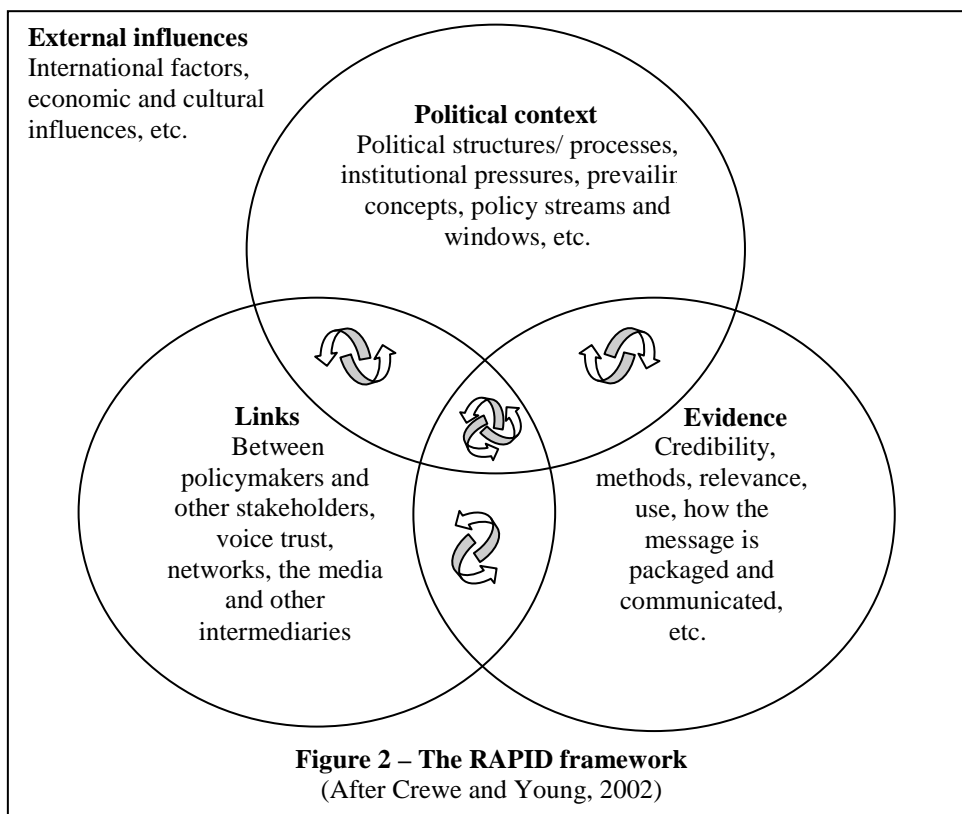
Nowadays, the critical importance of knowledge in strengthening policy and practice is widely recognised in the development sector, especially since the publication of the World Bank report entitled 'Knowledge for development' (World Bank, 1998). Knowledge is seen as crucial for development, not only because it is increasingly shaping the global economic system (triggered among other things by globalisation and the growth of digitalisation), but also because of growing recognition of the complexity, multidimensionality and dynamic nature of development (Ramalingam and Jones, 2008).

Linking research knowledge and policy

Because of the complex nature of development, dealing with development requires a holistic understanding of knowledge and the incorporation of knowledge from a variety of sources other than academic science (Jones et al., 2009; Brown, 2007). In order to deal with the unpredictability and dynamics of development problems, it is also crucial to enhance feedback processes between various stakeholders in development interventions (Ramalingam and Jones,

2008). This emphasis on interaction means that the knowledge divides between different groups of stakeholders need to be tackled.

The CEL framework (see Figure 2) describes the link between research and policy. Rather than regarding the research-policy link as a linear process with a clear divide between the two communities, RAPID advocates a more dynamic and complex view that emphasises a two-way process between research and policy, shaped by multiple relations and reservoirs of knowledge. The focus is therefore no longer on how to transport research from the research community to the policy sphere. Instead, the key question is: Why are some of the ideas that circulate in the research-policy arenas picked up and acted on, while others are ignored and disappear?



In the CEL framework, research uptake is seen as a function of the interaction of the political context (actors and institutions involved in policy-making processes), evidence (actors and institutions involved in research), links between researchers and policymakers (such as networks), and external forces (such as international policy agendas) (Court et al., 2005).

The political context includes actors and institutions involved in policymaking processes. It is seen as the most important domain as regards affecting the degree to which research has an impact on policy. It is important to note that the focus in the political context is on the dynamics around certain policy domains (such as development cooperation, and its sub-policy domains such as ‘health’ or ‘agriculture’). Account is also taken of the political nature of these dynamics, which occur in the negotiations processes from agenda setting to the implementation of policies. The term political context does not, therefore, refer merely to the political system and the way politicians act in it. Other policymakers, most importantly the staff of ministries, are also involved in policymaking.

There are three dimensions of the political context that play a decisive role as regards the uptake of research by policymakers. Firstly, the extent to which policymakers demand new ideas from the researchers depends on the nature of political culture and their degree of openness. Secondly, how policymakers think and regard research is influenced by the prevailing (often outdated) narratives and discourses. Following Weiss (1977), the RAPID model assumes that research may exert a powerful indirect influence by introducing new terms and shaping the policy discourse. For researchers it is useful to engage with these narratives – either by retelling or improving them – instead of ignoring them (e.g. Roe, 1994). Thirdly, the degree of political contestation is an important factor: significant debate on an issue makes it generally very difficult to influence policy with research results. On the other hand, if demand is considerable, and provoked particularly by a ‘crisis’ for which policymakers are seeking a solution, the chances of research being used are much greater. Overall, researchers need to understand the politics of policy processes, identify key individuals and look for policy opportunities (or so-called ‘windows’) in order to make research influence policy and practice (Kingdon, 1984).

The evidence domain relates to the type and quality of research and how it is communicated. Three dimensions are important in this regard. Firstly, working on research that is relevant for policymakers and providing solutions to a problem makes it easier to engage with them. Research that is operationally useful, i.e. that suggests how a policymaker may do something differently in his work, has a greater chance of influencing policy. Secondly, uptake is influenced by the credibility of the research approaches and methods, and of researchers themselves (i.e. whether they are recognised as experts). Thirdly, there is a need for good communication strategies, i.e. researchers should be willing to listen to policymakers and engage them in the research process.

The links domain relates to the bridging mechanisms that are intended to incorporate evidence into the policy process. Researchers are said to be more influential if they interact with policymakers, especially in network settings. Links should be established between the two groups, which involve feedback, dialogue and collaboration. Networks are defined as *‘Formal or informal structures that link actors (individuals or organisations) who share a common interest on a specific issue or a general set of values’* (Perkin and Court 2005: 2). Policy networks are a specific focus of this study and can be defined as *‘networks that are related to the policy process’* (Ibid.). The relationships between the two groups depend on issues of trust, legitimacy and participation. It is important to get to know the other actors and establish partnerships between them. In this context it is helpful to work with key networkers and ‘salesmen’ who can convince sceptics and use informal contacts. The links domain also addresses the ways in which information can best be transferred between researchers and policymakers (i.e. face-to-face or through the media or campaigns).

Lastly, the external influences concern international politics and processes and donor funding. First and foremost because policy processes are becoming increasingly global, with international agendas increasingly affecting policy and how research and evidence is used. Secondly, donor policies on how research is funded also affect what research is considered useful for policy.

The different domains of the framework should be understood in relation to each other and not be viewed in isolation. The framework presented above, whereby the three domains overlap, can be regarded as ideal. In some situations there will not be much overlap between the different domains, for example when there is little political will for change (no overlap

between the political context and evidence domains), or when research takes place in ivory towers (the evidence domain stands apart). Furthermore, the relative importance of each of the domains may be different in different situations, and may change over time. Therefore, it is suggested that the framework can best be seen as a trio of floating spheres of variable size and degree of overlap (Court et al., 2005).

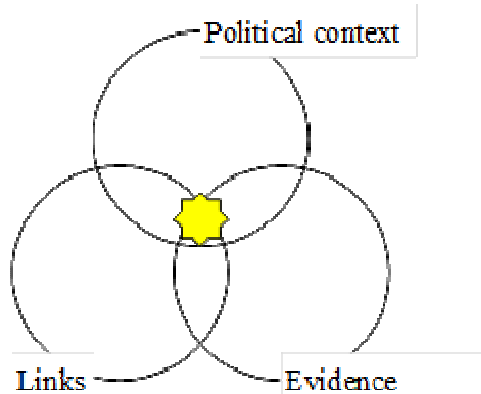
Box 2 – DPRN in the CEL framework

The DPRN definitions relating to research and policy are partly congruent with those of the CEL framework.

Concerning ‘research’, DPRN agrees with the definition of RAPID in that it can be produced by various actors. However, and this stems from the fact that DPRN has CERES roots, DPRN prefers research to include a scientific component. Through its focus on intersectoral cooperation, DPRN recognises the relevance of integrating multiple sources of knowledge (from the four identified sectors) and it therefore regards scientific research as only one of the many inputs (c.f. Jones et al. (2009). According to Jones et al. (2009: 7) research-based knowledge ‘*can be scientific in nature, involving rigorous investigation to enhance the stock of knowledge about the world*’ and it ‘*can also be policy oriented, using systematic methods to examine problems for formulating and implementing policy*’. Both of these are important to DPRN.

To DPRN, ‘policy’ primarily means ‘policy made by the national and international governmental organisations’, but can also refer to policy of development organisations. However, in this study, policy is used to refer specifically to the first category and policymakers are therefore seen as those who work for ministries.

Like RAPID, DPRN acknowledges the nonlinearity of policymaking processes. Moreover, the flow of knowledge into policy is not taken as a given, but is seen as an explicit effort on the part of various actors. The framework situates DPRN, as a policy network, in the links domain, and from there account can be taken of the interrelatedness with other domains. The research-based knowledge that is channelled through DPRN, and the organisations that produce this knowledge, can be located in the evidence domain. The development policy as put forward by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the policymakers that are involved in the implementation of it, are situated in the political context domain. External influences, i.e. international policy agendas, are not a specific part of this study as DPRN focuses mostly on intersectoral cooperation within the Dutch context.



The political context

This section describes the policy sector’s view on knowledge and research for development cooperation from a historical perspective and examines knowledge building among policymakers.

A changing perspective on knowledge and research

Dutch development policy has been characterised by considerable attention for research and knowledge over the past two decades, following the general recognition of the importance of knowledge for policy and practice in the development sector since the publication of the World Bank report entitled ‘Knowledge for development’ in 1998. The interpretation of this policy, and ideas about the actors who should play a role in the development of knowledge, have fundamentally changed over the years. This shift can be characterised as one from the production of supply-driven research until the 1980s, via a demand-driven approach and a

focus on local ownership in the 1990s, to the use of embedded knowledge and partnerships since the turn of the century.

The first research policy memorandum entitled '*Onderzoek en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking*' ('Research and Development Cooperation') (DGIS, 1992) can be considered a paradigm shift for the throwing overboard of the hitherto dominant supply-driven approach in which Dutch researchers and institutions had a strong say about the research agenda (Molenaar, 2009). Instead, the focus was on the demands and needs of developing countries. The Ministry devised Multi-annual Multidisciplinary Research Programmes (MMRPs) in order to strengthen the research capacity of developing countries. These programmes were designed and implemented in developing countries and coordinated by the DGIS Research Bureau, which itself was largely shielded from the rest of the Ministry based on the idea that the programmes had to be protected from Dutch interests (Wiedenhof and Molenaar, 2006).

The research policy was commended for its pioneering approach based on a focus on the demands and needs of developing countries, but also led to much criticism. IOB (2007), which evaluated the research policy of the period 1992-2005, indicated that the demand-driven approach had been applied dogmatically. This not only led to fragmented programmes which insufficiently built on previous experiences, but also to a 'development paradox'. By discouraging interaction with Dutch and other researchers in the North, developing countries were unable to benefit from their knowledge. Furthermore, as mentioned in the ministry's response to the evaluation report, the deliberate withholding of this knowledge did not do justice to the concept of ownership. In fact, the DGIS Research Bureau decided on the meaning of ownership (DGIS/DCO, 2007). The research policy was also rather paternalistic, as some policymakers mentioned, because it implicitly assumed that the ministry itself had nothing to learn (Wiedenhof and Molenaar, 2006).

Even though the vast majority of research programmes that were undertaken before 1992, and in which Dutch researchers and institutions did play a major role, continued under the new research policy, the policy still led to a great deal of dissatisfaction among the Dutch research community (DGIS/DCO, 2007). They feared being pushed aside and were also offended by the assumption that they would only pursue their own interests (IOB, 2007).

In 2004, the ministry decided to end the MMRPs. This was mainly because the approach had not evolved in line with other developments at the ministry during the latter half of the 1990s, namely the introduction of decentralisation, the sector-wide approach and the emphasis on donor harmonisation and national ownership in the form of Poverty Reduction Strategies (Molenaar, 2009). Furthermore, because the Research Bureau was largely working in isolation from the rest of the ministry, a gap had emerged between research and policy. Lessons learned within the programmes were not shared within the wider ministry, and the Research Bureau hardly played a role in its strategic development (Wiedenhof and Molenaar, 2006).

A new research strategy was set out in 2005 in the policy memorandum '*Onderzoek in ontwikkeling*' ('Research in Development') (DGIS, 2005). This policy emphasises the idea that knowledge is of crucial importance for development, even more so than it had been in the early 1990s. Knowledge is broadly understood, and as such the production of it is seen as not only belonging to researchers but also to other actors (such as policymakers, practitioners, the corporate sector, and end users) who are involved. Based on the increased understanding that

development cooperation is an intrinsically complex challenge due to lack of consensus on values or facts, broad stakeholder involvement is considered to be necessary (Wiedenhof and Rijniers, 2008).⁸ Interaction between various actors, especially in networks, is therefore of great concern, assuming this can spur innovation (e.g. Koenders, 2008). It is also argued that knowledge is of importance for development when it can be put to use and, as such, the focus is on the use rather than the production of knowledge (DGIS, 2005).

The memorandum states that merely focussing on demand orientation and local ownership is not a panacea. The existence of mutual interests and responsibilities means that the donor should also invest in knowledge, and this shifts the focus from ownership to partnership. Knowledge has to be an integral element of policy processes and, as such, policymakers must use it more effectively. This also means that investments should be made in knowledge management strategies at the ministry (Wiedenhof and Molenaar, 2006). For this reason, the decision was also taken to embed research more in the various ministry programmes, with departments having to write knowledge and research strategies (*'Kennissen onderzoeksstrategie', KOS*). However, the interviewees mentioned that by no means enough progress had been made in this respect. Furthermore, policymakers are expected to make greater use of research in policy development, and research agendas should be influenced more by questions arising from policy.⁹

The new policy also brought Dutch research institutions back into view, even though their role was clearly stated as being based on added value (DGIS/DCO, 2007). The reaction of the Dutch research community to the new policy was generally favourable (IOB, 2007). However, some also mentioned that the policy had been developed mostly without the involvement of Southern research organisations and so no real partnership had been established (Dietz and Maan in Van Beurden, 2006). It was also suggested that the ministry would create a much more clearly structured 'knowledge architecture', and put more effort in involving the embassies in the process of knowledge creation (Dietz, 2006).

Knowledge building within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Even though the ministry's new research policy emphasises that increased attention needs to be paid to the use of knowledge and research and interaction with other stakeholders, the interviewees for this research do not consider the ministry to be a knowledge-intensive organisation.

Most of the criticism is directed at the ministry's personnel policy which is characterised by a rotating transfer system in which a large proportion of the staff change jobs within the ministry every three to four years. The idea behind this is that employees can learn from being based in varying positions and that knowledge can spread through the organisation.

⁸ The increasingly complex nature of problems the government is faced with has led the Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR, 2006) to advise the Dutch government to invest in a more open attitude to learning. Entering into relationships with external partners is considered to be crucial when addressing these complex (or what the Council terms 'untamed') problems. The Council argues that policymakers should therefore act as networkers, connecting links between various experts and interest groups to gather the knowledge necessary to assess and decide on the ways to address a problem.

⁹ The main programme entitled 'Research and Innovation' supports a number of strategic alliances (such as the IS academy which is a cooperation programme between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and academic and knowledge institutes in the Netherlands), networks (such as DPRN or the MDG Profs Platform, hosted by the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) and WOTRO and dedicated to the Millennium Development Goals) and intermediary organisations (such as WOTRO) that focus on the use of research and knowledge for policymaking.

This policy means that the ministry tends to prioritise generalist rather than specialist knowledge, assuming that generalists are able to participate in many different discussions. By contrast, specialists have in-depth knowledge about certain regional or thematic fields (e.g. on the Middle East and Arabic culture or health systems in developing countries) and focus mostly on issues related to their specialist areas.

The respondents unanimously agreed that the ministry has taken things too far in this respect. Substantive knowledge building about development processes would be insufficient because ministry staff do not necessarily need or use this knowledge in their subsequent positions.¹⁰ The frequent staff changes were also said to hinder trust building and longer-term relationships (see also Stremmelaar et al., 2009). Furthermore, the preference for generalist knowledge was believed to hinder the ministry as regards attracting enough personnel who are primarily interested in development cooperation. While policymakers themselves find the system refreshing and believe that it may preclude rigidity, they also acknowledge that the unstructured nature of the system means that insufficient lessons are learned from the past. People from outside the ministry and policymakers themselves argue that there should be a better balance of hiring generalists and specialists (see also Koopman, 2007; Brouwer in Bieckmann, 2009). This would also benefit the transfer system. As one respondent argued, ‘Increased investment in specialist knowledge also means that there is more and better knowledge to spread throughout the organisation’.¹¹

Within the jobs themselves the development of knowledge is further inhibited because, as one respondent said, “*At the ministry there is a culture dominated by production first.*” High work pressure causes employees to focus first on meeting deadlines, leaving little time for reflection and learning.¹² Furthermore, the reward system is not geared towards learning or investing in knowledge production, and there are few positions in which employees can concentrate purely on knowledge building (see also Wiedenhof and Molenaar, 2006).¹³

Even though the ministry’s personnel policy and reward system may not be directed towards learning and developing substantive knowledge, many of the policymakers stress they are indeed very interested in it. They argue that they are already doing a lot, often in their own time, and would like to do more. However, practical reasons, particularly shortage of time, prevent them from doing this. They also argue that for policymakers to invest in substantive knowledge, it should first and foremost be relevant to their work and they should be able to apply it.

The criticism of the administration’s functioning with regard to learning is being addressed by the ministry.¹⁴ One respondent stated, “*The ministry is beginning to realise the*

¹⁰ However, as one policymaker argued, “*we should not exaggerate this as many employees who have been working on development cooperation- related matters, are willing to continue in this field, if only because people have a natural tendency to apply for positions in which they can use previously gained knowledge*”.

¹¹ The problems associated with the transfer system have also been highlighted by the Court of Audit (Algemene Rekenkamer, 2009).

¹² An additional side effect is that the ministry, especially in comparison with many other ministries, has a lot of money to spend. This creates situations whereby the emphasis in many jobs is on controlling spending rather than acquiring knowledge (see also Heres and Bieckmann, 2007).

¹³ For example, there is only one knowledge officer (*‘kennisfunctionaris’*) in the thematic policy units, positioned at the Environment and Water Department (DMW).

¹⁴ Even the former minister mentioned: “*I must admit that when I arrived at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a Minister, I was quite shocked by the poor attention present for knowledge-infrastructure and advice on concrete development issues*” (Koenders, 2008: 4).

importance of investing in knowledge. The idea that the ministry is different from other ministries – in the sense that it is an especially political and coordinating body, in which content knowledge is not necessarily needed – is no longer dominant.” The former minister (Koenders) was willing to put more emphasis on content knowledge and encourage a more critical attitude among policymakers (see also Bieckmann, 2009). In order to invest in knowledge, a number of people have been appointed to work on this. The most important factor for development cooperation is the new Ambassador in General Service of Development Cooperation (AMAD-OS), who is positioned at Directorate General level.¹⁵ The AMAD-OS, who was installed in 2009, is responsible for, among other things, DGIS’ knowledge policy. He intends to work on a new reward system with built-in incentives for employees to invest more in knowledge and create a better balance between generalists and specialists. He also worked towards setting up four knowledge platforms (*‘Kenniskringen’*), in which various experts and policymakers will be working together to define research questions on certain thematic policy areas.

The recent attention for investments in knowledge at the ministry is generally welcomed, although some respondents argued that it has been late coming. It was also said that the changes were inspired more by external influences – such as the recommendations for a learning government put forward by the Advisory Council for Science and Technology Policy (AWT, 2005) and the Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR, 2006), or the prominence that is given to the Netherlands as an innovation country – rather than being something that emerges from within the ministry itself.

Furthermore, respondents questioned whether the diplomatic culture of the ministry would allow for a more knowledge intensive and critical attitude among policymakers. Diplomats would not naturally tend to criticise the policy they have to implement, nor be that willing to disclose their information sources since such action does not go well together with exchanging scientific knowledge. In addition, respondents strongly believed that policymakers kept to the political line of reasoning too closely and were therefore insufficiently inclined to be critical of the policy they have to implement (see also Heres and Bieckmann, 2007). It was argued that policymakers made insufficient use of knowledge that questions current policies. As a result they adopt a rather defensive attitude. As a respondent mentioned, *“At the ministry there is a culture of avoidance, whereby critical knowledge is often put aside. Especially for diplomats who want to climb the career ladder it can be dangerous to express dissenting views.”*¹⁶

Knowledge building between different ministries

Since development cooperation has increasingly been defined as part of the broader International Cooperation agenda since the 1990s, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs currently cooperates with other Dutch ministries involved in this field. Even though the aim is to achieve policy coherence and a number of interdepartmental cooperation agreements and policy memoranda have been published, the fragmented organisational structure of international cooperation policy is often believed to impede knowledge development in this

¹⁵ The ministry also has a knowledge management officer (DGIS) and a scientific council advisor who serves under the Secretary General.

¹⁶ This issue is also raised by the WRR (2006). The Council therefore recommends redefining the role of policymakers, stating that less emphasis should be placed on the dominant role of the policymaker as a ‘process architect’ and that there should be a greater orientation towards content knowledge. Policymakers should not only be seen and judged as ‘subservients’ to the minister. Instead, policymakers should be appreciated for their content-related contributions and as loyal but critical counterparts to the politicians.

field. Apparently, knowledge is not easily exchanged between the various ministries whose staff were said to meet each other indirectly through political processes, but who would be reluctant to approach other ministries to exchange knowledge.

Besides the ministerial boundaries, sharing knowledge between ministries was thought to be hindered by cultural differences and dissimilar kinds of knowledge. Some policymakers even refer to the presence of stereotypes. Staff from other ministries regard staff from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as rather elitist, in the sense that they are not very willing to ask others for knowledge in the field which they consider to be primarily theirs.¹⁷ Besides that, policymakers from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were said to lack substantive knowledge. A policymaker from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also referred to this dissimilarity in kinds of knowledge but simultaneously advocated more complementarity by stating, *“It might be true that we have less substantive knowledge but, on the other hand, we have diplomatic knowledge which is also important. We know our languages, we know the rules and procedures and we are good negotiators. Indeed, this could be complementary.”*

The fact that policymakers from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are believed to possess less substantive knowledge is not necessarily due to the ministry's staffing policy which is based on a preference for hiring generalists, a path that other ministries also seem to have followed. Instead, other ministries are believed to have institutionalised learning to a greater degree due to more standard procedures and controls. Moreover, a difference in accountability was regarded as a significant factor that influenced the way knowledge was treated at the ministry. In contrast to staff at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, staff at other ministries are in more direct contact with their (mainly Dutch) target audiences and consequently they can, and will, be held more directly accountable. They will also be called to account if their policies are based on inadequate knowledge. This feedback loop is not that easily established in the case of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs since the distance to the (primarily Southern) target audience is much greater. Besides that, the beneficiaries themselves are often disorganised and not empowered enough to present appropriate arguments to donors. Wiedenhof and Rijniers (2008: 6) also state that this is a reason for *‘relative insensitivity to changing circumstances and contexts’*.

Cooperation between various ministries is not only hindered by the fact that knowledge is not readily exchanged, but also by the financial mechanisms. Almost all Official Development Assistance money is spent by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (DGIS in particular), while other ministries which often have very valuable substantive knowledge of developing countries, are allowed to spend only a minor proportion of the same budget. This may cause frustration at other ministries given that, in terms of policy coherence, a lot may be required from them by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. However, at the same time hardly any commitments are made regarding the provision of funds. Of course the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also has a reason for not transferring most of these funds. Other ministries are often much more focused on defending Dutch interests and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs fears that this will play too great a role in how the budget is spent. For many DGIS policymakers the subordination of Dutch interests to those of the South is still a matter of principle.

¹⁷ The elitist and non-critical attitude was believed to be exacerbated because staff from the ministry do not switch to other ministries very often. The ministry employs new personnel mostly via an internal recruitment procedure. Furthermore, the top officials at the ministry are excluded from the rotating interdepartmental transfer system of the Senior Civil Service (*Algemene Bestuursdienst*).

Overall, it was argued that the ministry is still often perceived as not being very open to sharing knowledge with other Dutch actors (e.g. DGIS/DCO, 2007a). This was agreed upon by a policymaker of the ministry who stated, *The ministry has a closed culture in which people think they know best.* In general, policymakers have little time and they have to be very selective as regards the knowledge they use. In this sense, it was argued that a lot of the knowledge produced by Dutch organisations was not considered to be very usable, especially because it does not provide enough clear solutions. Knowledge from international organisations (like the World Bank, UNDP, OECD/DAC and other donors) was thought to be of greater value. As one respondent mentioned, *“Policymakers tend to look ‘outside’ rather than ‘inside’ the Netherlands. The knowledge of NGOs, the media, and science, is regarded mostly as background noise and something rather time-consuming.”*

The evidence domain

It is clear that the Dutch academic development-oriented research landscape is very varied and, as some also say, fragmented. Although the richness of this diversity is widely acknowledged, it is felt that there is a need to coordinate the various research projects more effectively.

First of all, it is apparent that organisations in the sector tend to be too ignorant of what other organisations are doing and that this may lead to a duplication of research (Ros-Tonen and De Vries, 2008). There is a need for greater cooperation among research organisations in the Netherlands, as this will also sharpen the focus and increase the visibility of Dutch research (RAWOO, 2005). In this light, the recent trend whereby universities that participate in national research school like CERES have established their own graduate schools in PhD training and Research Masters, might hinder this cooperation.

Secondly, it was noted that the fragmentation also hindered the application of knowledge in policy. The Netherlands does not have a centralised research institute specialised in development-oriented research for policy as exists in other countries (e.g. the Overseas Development Institute in the United Kingdom), and the ministry has not encouraged the pooling of knowledge within one institute. Instead, the ministry stimulates the creation of networks or platforms in which various actors exchange knowledge. Even though these networks enable various development experts to meet, the main picture is still one of a lot of research organisations being separately in contact with, and funded by, the ministry. As one respondent argued, *“There are no natural knowledge lines.”* This not only means an extra management burden for the ministry, but also a poor overview of existing knowledge.

Many respondents from the academic research community felt that the ministry was insufficiently interested in Dutch research and that policymakers did not make a lot of use of the available knowledge. They were of the opinion that the ministry should do more to include the Dutch research community. During the interviews references were made to the existing stereotypes. The common perception was that policymakers regard them as only asking for funds and their work as not being useful to them.

For policymakers it is important that research results are translated into operational solutions and presented in a useful format, which is often not the case. As one respondent mentioned, *“We don’t read long reports, there is simply no time for that”.* Another perceived disadvantage of research was that it was often not up-to-date and focuses on excessively specialist areas. The incentive structure for research funds in which publications in journals and academic excellence are the central goals, was referred to as hampering the production of

policy-relevant research. One solution could be to allow development relevance to be included as a criterion on which excellence is judged (see also Stremmelaar et al., 2009).¹⁸

However, policymakers involved in knowledge management at the Ministry of foreign Affairs have also learned that “*Science needs free scope. Policymakers should provide it, and scientists should claim it. Terms of reference which are too strict defy the nature of scientific work*” (Wiedenhof and Rijniers, 2006: 337).

A second component of the evidence domain, the Dutch development-oriented NGOs, is also known for its diversity. This can be considered a strength (Partos, 2008), but it is also believed to lead to fragmentation (e.g. Ros-Tonen and De Vries, 2008). A special concern in this respect is that the Dutch cofinancing system stimulates competition and waiting behaviour, which is not conducive to knowledge-sharing. Plans to bundle knowledge in this sector, possibly in a knowledge centre, have been recently drawn up, but not yet put into practice (Aangeenbrug, 2008). While some NGOs have invested in joint knowledge programmes with research organisations, the knowledge exchange with policymakers has not really got off the ground. Even though some contacts with policymakers do exist, these are still mostly the result of personal relations.

Within the practitioner sector there is increasing recognition of the fact that knowledge and its management are important and, indeed, this is an area in which many organisations have invested (Lock et al., 2008, Heres, 2007). However, practitioners seem to be especially ambivalent towards these investments, because they represent a time-consuming process whose benefits cannot be easily defined in term of poverty alleviation (Stremmelaar, 2009). Moreover, as one respondent stated, “*Practitioners are more in a to-do mode and this leaves little time for reflection.*”

It must be pointed out that a lot of practitioners feel that their skills are undervalued in the other sectors. The knowledge policy of the ministry is still felt to be based on an excessively narrow definition of knowledge and knowledge holders, in the sense that it still focuses primarily on academic research. On the other hand, it was claimed that many practitioners themselves would not be very willing to share their knowledge with policymakers because of distrust between them. The primary objection is that information on what went wrong in their projects, or where money was not spent successfully, might harm their position. In this sense the dependence on subsidies from the ministry could be said to have an adverse effect. However, one respondent also stated that NGOs that do not receive funds from the ministry were not that open to sharing their knowledge with policymakers either.

The third sector that is part of the evidence domain, the corporate sector, is a relatively new player in the discussion on knowledge for development policy. Even though it is increasingly recognised that the corporate sector has a wealth of knowledge in relation to innovation, structural knowledge relations between businesses and the other sectors involved in development cooperation have not yet been formed to any substantial degree.

While the ministry aims to establish more enduring links with the corporate sector, there is a considerable gap that needs to be bridged. Many policymakers are not directly engaged in knowledge relations with the corporate sector, and the benefits of such relations

¹⁸ It is to be noted that the CERES system of valuation of research output recognises both academic excellence as well as societal relevance (CERES, 2007).

were not that clear to them. The latter makes clear that there is a need to define the knowledge available in the corporate sector.

The links domain: the role of DPRN in stimulating policy-research interactions

The above suggests that, overall, there is a need for parties to get to know each other better and to exchange knowledge in a more structured way. It is in this that DPRN can play a role. This section highlights the problems and opportunities that DPRN encountered when stimulating intersectoral cooperation during its second phase. We specifically examine the way policymakers have been involved in DPRN activities.

DPRN's approach to stimulate intersectoral cooperation

In its first phase (2004-2007) DPRN facilitated regional expert meetings which were organised once a year by knowledge institutes specialised in that particular region. This led to annual meetings being organised for thirteen regions, resulting in a total of thirty-nine meetings during the first phase (DPRN, 2008). In addition, the DPRN Task Force instigated one thematic meeting per year. In the second phase (2008-2010) the approach shifted towards thematic processes organised by consortia consisting of at least two organisations representing different sectors. The processes can take one or more years depending on the year in which they start. As explained in the introduction, these processes were selected by the DPRN Task Force through a yearly open call for proposals.

Table 1 – Overview of DPRN processes 2008-2010

Name of the process (duration)	Coordinating agency	
1. Structure follows strategy (3 yrs) 2. Understanding development better (1 yr) 3. Stimulating business development: another side of microfinance (1 yr) 4. Value chain governance: how can NGOs, firms and governments achieve social inclusions and poverty reduction? (2.5 yrs) 5. Gender mainstreaming trajectory (3 yrs) 6. The GM soy debate: risks and benefits to sustainability and livelihoods of genetically modified soy in Latin America (1 yr)	DPRN Task Force MDF Training & Consultancy BV Triodos Facet Institute of Social Studies CIDIN Solidaridad/Aidenvironment	CALL 2008
7. Supporting developing countries' ability to raise tax revenues (1 yr) 8. Commercial pressures on land: rethinking policy and practice for development (1 yr) 9. Phosphorus depletion: the invisible crisis (1 yr) 10. Fuelling knowledge on the social and ecological impacts of agrofuel production: the generation of intersectoral debate and interdisciplinary analysis (1 yr) 11. Singing a new policy tune (1 yr)	SOMO Centre for Development Studies (CDS/RUG) Netherlands Water Partnership Both Ends MDF Training & Consultancy BV	CALL 2009
12. The knowledge triangle in developing countries: a missed opportunity in university development cooperation? (1 yr) 13. Civic Driven Change: implications for policymakers and practitioners (1 yr) 14. Afghan-Central Asian water cooperation on management of the Amu Darya river: connecting experts and policymakers in the Lowlands (1 yr) 15. Strengthening monitoring and evaluation in development projects that deal with complex social contexts (1 yr)	Ghent University Hivos East West Institute Research Institute for Labour and Society, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (HIVA-KUL)	CALL 2010

DPRN set several conditions to guarantee that meetings in the second phase were relevant for policymakers and oriented much more towards multisectoral agenda setting and cooperation beyond the subsidy period. As a result, meetings in the second phase are embedded much more effectively into processes that also include online information exchange, policy analysis, and a synthesis of policy-relevant research activities and development interventions (DPRN, 2007). With a view to stimulating the involvement of policymakers, it was a precondition for funding for them to be involved in agenda setting at an early stage of process programming (with it being preferable for them to be consulted in the proposal writing process) and to use relevant policy documents and policy relevant research as an input throughout the process. Outputs are required to include the identification of opportunities for future intersectoral cooperation (e.g. policy relevant research or other follow-up activities) and a policy statement, policy brief, or policy review. The processes can take one or more years depending on the year in which they start, and the budget of each process is around EUR 50,000 a year.

DPRN facilitated fourteen processes in its second phase with forty-five organisations having been involved as organising parties. These processes were selected from a total of sixty-eight submitted proposals. In addition to these processes, the DPRN Task Force continued to put general debates on the agenda, which in the second phase centred on the development architecture under the motto ‘Structure follows strategy’. This brings the total of DPRN processes in the second phase (2008-2010) to fifteen (Table 1).

The relevance of DPRN for the different sectors

Generally, DPRN is thought of as relevant by the respondents.¹⁹ They argue that the strength of DPRN lies mainly in creating ‘shared values’ among the different sectors. Getting to know each other and working together during a certain period in an output and outcome oriented way (the process approach) is regarded as beneficial for bridging knowledge divides and for breaking down stereotypes which, as stated in the previous section, are still very much present in the field of Dutch development cooperation (see also Stremmelaar et al., 2009). This applies to both the Task Force and to the parties that organise the processes facilitated by DPRN. The fact that DPRN is considered relevant is also confirmed by the large number of proposals received in the three application rounds and a recent external evaluation (Greijn, 2010).

While, during the first phase, most of the meetings were organised primarily by research organisations, there has been more variety in the second phase. Of the fifty-four organisations involved in the organisation of the fifteen processes, the largest proportion (46%) is formed by practitioners. They are represented by twenty-five organisations, of which four are involved in more than one process. The research community is represented by eighteen organisations (33%), of which four are involved in more than one process. The private (for profit) sector is represented by six organisations (11%), of which one is involved two processes. Policymakers are represented by four organisations (8%). The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs is involved as a co-organiser in three processes. In addition, there is one organisation (Lokaal Mondiaal/Vice Versa) which can be categorised as ‘other’ (2%), and which is involved in two processes.

The coordination of the fourteen facilitated processes is in the hands of six practitioner organisations, five research organisations, and two private organisations (one of which is

¹⁹ It should be kept in mind here that the interviewees were directly or indirectly involved in DPRN and hence were already open to bridging research-policy divides.

responsible for two processes) (Table 1). The broadening scope with regard to the organising parties under the new approach was generally appreciated and the various sectors were said to now have more ownership in the processes.

The twenty-three meetings that have been organised in the first two and a half years of the second phase have attracted a large number of participants (a total of 1,300 until August 2010), of which 33% were practitioners, 32% were researchers, 17% were people from the private sector, and 14% were policymakers. Comparing these figures to those of DPRN's first phase shows that the percentages of practitioners (34%) and researchers (37%) were quite similar and these can therefore still be regarded as being the main target groups. The involvement of the corporate sector, which was not included as a separate target group in DPRN's first phase, can be regarded as a success. Even though this category still includes many consultants, the involvement of larger companies has increased. The figure for policymakers has gone up slightly (from 10% to 14%) although, as in Phase I, it is still the category with the lowest level of participant involvement.

The participant ratings of the meetings provide an indication of the involvement of the different sectors, although it has to be said that meetings are just one of the activities carried out during DPRN's second phase. Through the process approach, in which DPRN (2007: 9) intends to move '*beyond meeting each other and set the stage for exploring common ground and opportunities for multi-sector agenda setting and cooperation*', a whole other range of activities are also part of the processes.²⁰

Policymakers' involvement

Policymakers have been involved in all DPRN processes, either as co-organisers, agenda setters or participants.²¹ In four processes policymakers were involved as co-organisers.

(i) In the 'Structure follows strategy' process that discussed the future Dutch strategy and organisation for International Cooperation, the DGIS observer in the DPRN Task Force was heavily involved in the inception of the process. In the second year of this process, the AMAD-OS, a high-level policymaker at DGIS, chaired several discussion groups and played a major role during a public meeting. The involvement of the AMAD-OS helped to raise the interest and involvement of other policymakers (including the Minister of Development Cooperation) in the process. A total of eleven policymakers from various DGIS departments²² participated in the working group meetings (19% of the total), and twenty six policymakers and politicians in the public meeting (28%).

(ii) In the 'Gender mainstreaming' process that is aimed at reviewing and stimulating informed debate on women's empowerment and gender equality strategies, DGIS' Emancipation Unit of the Human Rights, Emancipation and Peacebuilding Department

²⁰ Such as report and (research) paper writing, drawing up inventories of related research and policy documents, organising research write shops and online discussion forums, writing policy briefs and summaries of research reports, and preparing documentary materials.

²¹ This section discusses the eleven processes that were approved in the first and second call for proposals. The four processes that were approved in the third call, and which started in April 2010, are still at too much of an early stage to assess here.

²² The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has six regional departments and ten policy theme departments, six of which are specifically relevant to international cooperation. These six deal with Human Rights, Emancipation and Humanitarian Aid (DMH), Sustainable Economic Development (DDE), Climate, Energy, Environment and Water (DME), Social Development (DSO), Effectiveness and Coherence (DEC), and Fragility and Peacebuilding (EFV).

(DMH)²³ was involved in proposal writing. Staff from this department sit on the process's steering committee, and are involved as such in every step of the process. Eight policymakers from various departments of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were interviewed for papers that were written in the first year of the process. Five DMH staff (10% of the total) were present at the expert meeting, and one (2% of the total) at the public meeting. In the second stage of this process, which examines gender mainstreaming in different policy areas, efforts are being made to involve policymakers from other departments.

(iii) In the 'Tax revenues' process, which aims to stimulate and advance initiatives of various actors to raise developing countries' tax-raising capacity for development, DGIS staff from the Effectiveness and Coherence Department (DEC) were involved in proposal writing. They significantly influenced the selection of themes for the three research papers that were written for this process. Although the policymakers had hardly any information about the research during paper writing, contact was re-established when an expert meeting was organised at the end of the process. The DEC policymakers played an active role during the meeting, which they greatly appreciated. A total of nine policymakers (23% of the total) (including three from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, one from the European Union and three politicians) participated in the expert meeting.

(iv) In the 'Value chain governance' process, which addresses the question of how NGOs, firms and governments can achieve inclusion and poverty reduction through a value chain approach, the International Affairs department of the Ministry of LNV was involved as a co-organisator, but most intensive contacts were maintained from the beginning with the DGIS Sustainable Economic Development Department (DDE). Six policymakers participated in the first meeting (12% of the total), four from DGIS/DDE, one from LNV, and one from the Ministry of Economic Affairs. Contacts with them loosened during the phase in which scientists wrote several research papers. The final event, scheduled for September 2010, will re-establish the contacts with policymakers and discuss a future joint knowledge agenda on the issue of value chains.

In four other processes the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was involved in the agenda setting of the processes.

(i) In the 'Understanding development better' process, which centred around a three-day conference on development perspectives and the aid-development link, two DGIS officials were involved in the design of the conference and the writing of position papers. Each of them led a workshop and another one, the current AMAD-OS, sat on a panel on the closing day of the conference. A total of ten (10%) policymakers participated, nine of whom came from various DGIS departments and one from a foreign ministry. This relatively low proportion can probably be attributed to the large time investment and the lack of direct operational use of the process outcomes.

(ii) The 'Singing a new policy tune' process, a follow-up to the 'Understanding development' process, attracted considerable interest from DGIS from the beginning, as it aimed to formulate a policy theory. Consequently, quite a number of policymakers, mostly from several departments of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, were actively involved in the first two meetings: eleven (35%) and thirteen (21%), respectively. The meeting structure and outcomes were, however, disappointing for most of them, and their interest waned. Their

²³ Before October 2009 the Emancipation unit was part of the Social and Institutional Development Department (DSI).

participation in the last three meetings – one centring on a policy theory on fragile states and two general debates on policy theory and global citizenship, respectively – dropped from 17% in the third meeting to 5% in the last one (which was appreciated more by participants from other sectors, particularly NGOs).

(iii) In the ‘Microfinance’ process, a debate on how microfinance can be linked to business development services, the organisers consulted a senior official from DGIS/DDE in the proposal writing phase on the ministry’s knowledge needs, and he was actively involved in the three seminars that were organised. However, when reflecting on the process, he considered the themes addressed as insufficiently innovative and relevant to the ministry. Representatives from the Ministry of Economic Affairs were also involved in the meetings, which allowed them to receive an update on microfinance discussions in the field of development cooperation. The proportion of policymakers in each of the three seminars was restricted to 5-8%.

(iv) In the ‘Commercial pressure on land’ process which aimed to rethink land policies and practice for development and to find a coordinated response to effects of increasing commercial value of and interest in land worldwide, the organisers consulted DGIS/DDE staff during proposal writing who considered the topic to be of interest to the ministry. A policymaker from the department participated in the seminar and the AMAD-OS gave an opening speech. Although only two Dutch policymakers participated, twenty-one foreign policymakers from developed and developing countries took part in the seminar, bringing the total proportion of policymakers to 23%. Most of the international participants came from the International Land Coalition (ILC) network, one of the process organisers. Although the seminar attracted a lot of policymakers, communication with them stopped after the seminar and the policy recommendations generated by the process was not followed up.

Lastly, there were three processes in which policymakers acted as participants or target groups.

(i) In the ‘Agrofuels’ process that was intended to ensure that policymakers were informed more effectively about the effects of agrofuel production on people and the environment, policymakers from various ministries participated. The link with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was established mainly through one of the organisers, Mekon Ecology, that was hired by the ministry to coordinate an interdepartmental consultation on biomass. The process organisers produced a review paper on agrofuel policies and their underlying assumptions, for which policymakers from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Economic Affairs, LNV and VROM were interviewed. Four officials belonging to three of these ministries (not LNV) participated in a seminar (15% of the participants). The ministries were keen on participating because the Netherlands is supposed to adopt a position in the lively EU debate on agrofuels. The research revealed striking differences between the viewpoints of the ministries and thereby highlighted the need for more coherent policies.

(ii) In the ‘GM soy debate’, which aimed to facilitate an informed debate about genetically modified soy, the participation of policymakers from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was problematic for two reasons. The organisers aimed to involve them from the start, and offered then a seat on the process steering committee. However, the policymakers refused because they believed that the agenda of the process would be dominated too much by

Northern interests²⁴ and that it would bypass the Round Table on Responsible Soy, which is co-facilitated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.²⁵ This is an example of what in the CEL framework is referred to as diverging narratives or discourses. The organisers were unable to convince the ministry with a ‘narrative’ that corresponded with their own discourse, as a consequence of which they were not seen as legitimate partners. Even though ministry staff were not that enthusiastic about the process, two other ministries (LNV and VROM) were, primarily because these ministries were expected to propose sustainability criteria for the admission of GM crops to the European Parliament by December 2009. In this sense the organisers benefited from this policy opportunity while their narrative was in line with that of these other two ministries and their research operationally useful. Indeed, three of the five policymakers present at the stakeholder conference came from LNV and two others came from VROM and DGIS. Together they formed 7% of all participants.

(iii) Finally, the ‘Phosphorous depletion’ process, which was aimed at raising policy awareness of the threats of phosphorous scarcity as an essential nutrient for farming, was primarily targeted at the Ministries of LNV and VROM. These ministries were already represented in the Nutrient Flow Task Group (NFTG), on behalf of which the organisers implemented the process. The relations with policymakers at the start of the process were, however, poor. An interesting policy opportunity arose when the organisers partnered the Technology Assessment Steering Committee that was appointed by LNV to advise the minister directly on important strategic issues. The Steering Committee became interested in the research carried out by one of the NFTG members and decided to publish a policy memorandum on the topic. The organisers of the phosphorous process took the opportunity to organise a seminar right after the Steering Committee’s press event in which the policy memorandum and research were presented. Seven policymakers (17% of the total) participated in the seminar, four from LNV, one from VROM, one from Economic Affairs, and one from a Swedish ministry. At the end of the process another seminar was organised in Brussels at which fourteen policymakers were present (30% of the total). Most of these were European politicians, plus German and Swedish ministry staff and one person from the Ministry of LNV.

Perceptions as regards policymakers’ involvement

All the processes show that it is effective to link up with specific policy opportunities (for example the ‘Agrofuel’ process that aligned with an EU debate on biofuels in which the Netherlands had to take a position). With regard to this, policymakers proposed that processes could be more strategically aligned with other knowledge projects in which they are involved, such as issues discussed in interdepartmental working groups. They argued that this would be more beneficial in terms of their time investments. On the other hand it must be said that DPRN has succeeded in placing new topics on the policy agenda, especially through processes in which policymakers had not been involved from the start. Related to this is the fact DPRN can act as a catalyst to inspire stakeholders to organise or finance new activities related to the process. This was the case with regard to at least six out of the eleven processes discussed.

²⁴ They argued that Southern partners were not sufficiently involved in the process, despite the fact that three members of the steering committee were from Brazil and Argentina, the research was carried out with two partners from the same countries, and eight people from developing countries participated in the stakeholder conference.

²⁵ The organisers argued, however, that the GM soy process was merely meant to seek a scientific basis for the discussion on GM soy, so that the discussion in the RTRS could be more clarified and strengthened – a standpoint shared by stakeholders involved in both the RTRS and the DPRN process.

Most of the interviewed policymakers think of DPRN as relevant. As one of them mentioned, *“There are enough seminars where we meet each other, but DPRN offers the opportunity to work with each other in-depth”*. They state that they especially need scientific underpinning of their work but, at the same time, they stress that it has to be useful in practice. They argued that more concrete policy advice could be given and that these should be made clearer in DPRN reports. Tension was also discernable between the output that scientists and policymakers prefer (publications in journals versus policy briefs), and the fact that it may take considerable time for organisers to resolve this (e.g. by rewriting policy papers as journal articles, as in the ‘Gender mainstreaming’ process, and by translating a scientific report into policy briefs and popular publications as occurred in the ‘GM Soy debate’).

Overall, for most of the processes, the organisers were content with the policymakers’ involvement. Especially in the thematically specialised processes, intensive contacts evolved with policymakers from thematic policy departments. Because most relationships are established with policymakers from specific divisions or units, it is often not realistic to expect policymakers to make up 25% of the meeting participants (as being one of DPRN’s four target groups). For that reason we have to keep in mind that the quality of the established research-policy linkages is more important than the quantity of participating policymakers.

The involvement of policymakers in more general processes (‘Structure follows strategy’, ‘Understanding development better’, and ‘Singing a new policy tune’) was more complicated. Even though DPRN was fortunate enough to have the AMAD-OS and a number of other high-positioned policymakers involved, convincing DGIS staff to join these processes required extra effort mostly because many see this as not being directly useful for their daily work. Even though policymakers argued that these processes are potentially very useful as they allow discussions on the future direction of development policy as a whole, they also mentioned that more thought must be devoted to the setup of these processes. In particular, the planning of in-depth discussions would require more preparation time. Respondents also identified a dilemma between the need to involve well-informed experts for in-depth discussions about development cooperation and the need to broaden the scope of the discussion to international cooperation involving new actors, which contributes to the superficiality of the discussions. New actors (particularly from the corporate sector) that were involved in the discussions often felt that they were excluded for not being familiar with conventional development jargon.

Discussion: the way forward

As stated in the recent Scientific Council for Government Policy report about the future directions of development cooperation (WWR, 2010), professional aid is to be based on profound knowledge – both in the diagnosis, implementation and evaluation. However, this study has shown that effective research-policy links cannot be taken for granted and require deliberate efforts to bring development experts from different sectors together and promote development-relevant research and its uptake into policy. These efforts are also needed when DPRN in its current setup comes to a closure after 2010. This requires political will, funding and brokerage.

A recent external evaluation recommended continuing some of DPRN’s functions which were regarded as very useful in the field of development and international cooperation (Greijn, 2010). The report specifically mentions the *‘niche for a low-threshold window to support inspired and dedicated individuals from the research, NGOs or corporate sector to initiate processes with the aim being to get important issues on the policy agenda or to*

develop innovative ideas that can contribute to more effective policies and practices’ (Ibid.: 19). The report therefore recommends maintaining a DPRN-style call for proposals that can act as an incubator for more substantial follow-up. WOTRO is suggested as a channel for such a mechanism because it provides a context that permits funding for follow-up research.

Complying with this recommendation would help ensure that research is properly embedded in the policy and practitioners’ domains and that it aligns better with policy narratives and responds to issues for which policymakers are seeking a solution. It also coincides with WOTRO’s task as a broker of policy-relevant knowledge in Knowledge Platforms (*Kenniskringen*), where policy opportunities can be identified. However, a few pitfalls need to be pointed out.

First, in order to enhance the chances for uptake by policymakers, special thematic calls may be needed that address specific knowledge needs in processes that are to be aligned with certain interdepartmental consultation groups (which would also contribute to greater policy coherence) or which are targeted at specific policy opportunities. This may lead to a more strategic approach and a more systematic way of knowledge building and exchange. However, room must also be reserved for processes that address innovative themes which do not necessarily fit into the predefined policy areas of interest, but aim to place new issues on the political agenda.

Second, there is the question of whose knowledge is channelled to policy. The majority of the facilitated DPRN processes in the second phase – nine out of fourteen – are coordinated by non-academic institutions (NGOs and private organisations), which are generally more inclined towards generating policy and practice-oriented debate than academic institutions, whose activities tend to be oriented primarily towards publications. The question arises of whether embedding a DPRN-like initiative in WOTRO, whose mission is focussed on research, is not going to stifle innovative ideas from organisations which aim to influence the policy agenda through lobbying and awareness-raising rather than through research. Installing a steering committee in which representatives from the policy and practitioners’ sector are well represented could help prevent this.

Third, embedding a DPRN-style structure in the scientific community requires specific attention to be paid to ways of channelling scientific information to policy and practice in order to make it operationally useful to these sectors. As mentioned before, knowledge relevant to policy and practice brought together in DPRN-like processes requires repackaging in a form and language that is ‘digestible’ for policymakers and practitioners. Specific incentives and expertise are needed to this end, since researchers are valued on the basis of academic excellence and do not always have the time and capacity to get the results of their work to the end users in development cooperation. The Broker (a Dutch journal which is intended to contribute to evidence-based policy making) and specialised freelance science writers could play a role here.

Fourth, research is not the only relevant follow-up activity to DPRN-like processes. Sometimes more time is needed for awareness raising and lobbying to get or maintain an important issue on the policy agenda – not only in the Netherlands but also at EU level. In such cases the mobilisation of multisectoral platforms is a more logical follow up than a research proposal. It would mean that additional channels need to be created and it also requires a flexible attitude on the part of the financing organisation with regard to predefined outcomes and follow-up plans.

Finally, effective research-policy links require more ‘commitment to knowledge’ in policy than is actually the case (WRR, 2010: 207). Despite considerable improvements in the past five years, knowledge management within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs needs further improvement based on increased openness towards learning from other ministries and sectors, a more critical attitude, and more investments in the ministry’s institutional memory.

Conclusions

In order to assess the hurdles faced when fostering more effective research-policy linkages in the field of Dutch Development Cooperation, this paper analysed the functioning of DPRN and the context within which it operates employing the RAPID CEL framework. Within this framework, research uptake is seen as a function of the interaction of the political context (actors and institutions involved in policy making), evidence (actors and institutions involved in research), links between researchers and policymakers (such as policy networks), and external forces (such as international policy agendas) (Court et al., 2005). This paper did not pay a lot of attention to the external context and focused instead on the factors that help or hinder effective research-policy links in the Netherlands.

With regard to the political context, the focus on embedded knowledge and partnerships within current Dutch development-oriented research policy paved the way for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to formally address the growing gap between research and policy and to foster the interaction with and between knowledge holders from different sectors. In terms of the CEL framework the ministry focused again on the evidence and links domains and this resulted in a revaluation at the ministry of research produced by Dutch institutions and to financial support to DPRN and related initiatives like the IS Academies and The Broker aimed at bridging the science-policy gap. At the same time, the ministry’s internal knowledge management is having a negative effect on the engagement of policymakers in knowledge activities and policy-science interactions. The ministry’s personnel strategy lacks incentives for learning and does not account for a structured spread of knowledge throughout the organisation. The ministry’s political culture and lack of openness are neither conducive to learning from other sectors, or other ministries for that matter. The appointment of the Ambassador in General Service of Development Cooperation (AMAD-OS), whose task it is to address these aspects, might improve the situation.

As far as the evidence domain is concerned, the fragmented knowledge infrastructure and the knowledge divides between the different sectors hinder effective research-policy linkages. The knowledge generated by scientific, practitioner and corporate organisations does not flow between them and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in a very structured manner. All too often, stereotypes hamper knowledge exchange between the sectors and effective research-policy links. Another hindrance is the presentation of research results in a form that is not useful nor ‘digestible’ for policymakers.

A key factor identified as being crucial for the fostering of effective research-policy linkages in the links domain, is the capacity of organisers to align with policy narratives or discourses and identify specific policy opportunities. Second, the ministry must regard the organisations involved as legitimate partners. For most DPRN processes this was the case, with the exception of the GM Soy debate in which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs abstained from participating as a result. Third, a sense of urgency might help. For example, the need to propose sustainability criteria for the admission of GM crops to the European Parliament stimulated the Ministries of VROM and LNV to become involved in the ‘GM Soy debate’.

Finally, the processes show the importance of continuous communication and feedback with policymakers. While the commitment of policymakers to contribute in most of the processes is quite high, policymakers were not informed continuously throughout some processes, especially those which initially focus on paper writing or around one event. Letting policymakers participate in a steering committee of the process, as in the case of the ‘Gender mainstreaming’ process, is one possible solution. On the other hand, space must also be created for processes in which contacts with policymakers still have to be sought. DPRN provided this space for three processes (‘Phosphorus depletion’, ‘GM soy debate’ and ‘Agrofuels’), which succeeded in putting new issues on the policy agenda. Improving communication in the sense of making DPRN reports more accessible for policymakers by translating scientific information into concrete policy recommendations and operational knowledge, is also a point of concern.

Interestingly, the fact that staff from other ministries (VROM, LNV, Economic Affairs, Finance and Defence), also become involved in DPRN processes shows that DPRN processes potentially contribute to interdepartmental cooperation. Four processes specifically helped policy coherency issues to be addressed. This is particularly important with regard to the trend to consider Development Cooperation as part of a broader International Cooperation strategy. It also helps overcome the difficulties related to knowledge exchange between different ministries involved in International Cooperation.

At least 1,300 participants were involved in DPRN processes between January 2008 and August 2010. Although practitioners and researchers are still the main target groups, considerable progress has been made as regards increasing the involvement of the policy and business sectors. Policymakers are involved in all DPRN processes and they generally collaborate quite well. Once successful in raising the interest of its target groups, the DPRN processes often act as a catalyst by enhancing the organisation of parallel and follow-up activities. When this is translated to the CEL framework, DPRN can be seen to be increasing the importance of the links domain and bringing the political context and evidence domains closer together.

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