

Dutch Africa Policy 1998-2006: What for?

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A volume of some 500 pages of analysis and findings on Dutch aid to Africa² (600 if you include the appendices), a hefty report to parliament, an accompanying 11-page letter from the ministers responsible for foreign affairs and development cooperation outlining their responses to the report, a series of recommendations by the development industry in the Netherlands, and the comments and opinions of 400 participants in a one-day conference in Rotterdam: this year the Dutch Africa policy was in the minds of many people.

This article examines the recent evaluation of Dutch bilateral cooperation with Africa from 1998 to 2006 conducted by the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department at the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (IOB). The evaluation was initiated following an agreement between the Minister for Development Cooperation and parliament in late 2004. It took an IOB team nearly two years to compile the report but, in typical Dutch style, it received little in the way of praise but was, above all, criticised by the international cooperation audience in the Netherlands. The critics included both ministers responsible for the policy. On closer examination, however, many commentators only used the report to formulate a few general remarks as a prelude to introducing their own subjects of concern³. This contribution pays tribute to the IOB's efforts by focusing on the methodological substance of the report, and then builds on that to enable a presentation of its main critique of Dutch development policy in Africa.

The IOB report

We should start by acknowledging the perfect timing of the evaluation, at a point when development strategies on Africa are deadlocked and African societies are changing rapidly. The IOB's general mandate was to carry out an independent evaluation of all aspects of foreign policy. Usually, the minister gives a policy response on the basis of the reports the IOB sends to the Lower House of the Dutch Parliament. In 2004 the Minister for Development Cooperation promised the Parliamentary Permanent Committee on Foreign Affairs an evaluation of Dutch policy on Africa from 1998 onwards. In 1998, following a thorough policy review known in Dutch as the *Herijking*, foreign policy was officially integrated. As a result, development cooperation was no longer separate from general foreign policy and new forms of cooperation were pursued with

the Ministries of Finance and Defence. It also led to a reorganisation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and to budgets being allocated to individual embassies.

The evaluation was mainly limited to bilateral cooperation, which accounted for about a third of the annual ODA budget (€4.3 billion in 2006)⁴. Multilateral cooperation and Dutch cofinancing organisations were also allocated a third each. Sub-Saharan Africa was the most important recipient region in all three categories but certainly not the only one. Aid went to virtually all 48 Sub-Saharan African countries but mainly to fifteen partner countries, which received roughly two-thirds of the total budget in the evaluation period, and also to another nine non-partner countries.

The evaluation aimed to clarify the way Dutch Africa policy was shaped, how it was implemented, and what results could be expected. Regarding the design of the policy, the focus was on coherence in the field of poverty reduction, particularly regarding trade and agriculture, on the integration of development cooperation and peace and security, and on ownership, i.e. providing space for the recipient countries to set their own policy priorities. In terms of implementation, the emphasis lay on factual implementation and expenditure, whether an integrated application of policy instruments was based on problem analysis, whether the policy priorities of the recipient country played a role in selecting activities and, finally, whether coherent reinforcing measures were taken. As far as results were concerned, the evaluation concentrated on the extent to which activities were actually implemented and whether they created preconditions for poverty reduction, peace and security, contributed to poverty reduction, or reinforced local capacity. Finally, the evaluation focused on whether the results had been positively stimulated by the new integrated approach.

The evaluation consisted of a general reconstruction and analysis of policy developments and an assessment of expenditure over the 1998-2006 period, followed by a series of thirteen monographs on debt relief, general budget support, sectoral support, primary education, rural development, urban poverty, HIV/AIDS, good governance, the rule of law, conflict prevention and management, humanitarian assistance, and trade and coherence for flowers and cotton.

The degree to which the evaluation represented Dutch Africa policy as a whole is arguable. Despite the large number of sectors, themes and aid modalities included, sectors like energy, health and the environment were ignored or were only partially dealt with. The evaluation was limited to bilateral cooperation and excluded multilateral aid and cofinancing, though Dutch contributions to the WTO and European decision-making processes with respect to market access for cotton and flowers were included in the analysis of trade and coherence and cofinancing was addressed in a number of other monographs.⁵ Geographically, only the first two studies (on policy objectives and expenditures) cover all the countries concerned, while each of thirteen monographs is devoted to a different set of countries. Three partner countries, accounting for only 4% of total expenditure, were not included at all, while five non-partner countries, which received about 30% of the total budget, were included, for obvious reasons.

Overall, the evaluation considered 50% of total current expenditure on bilateral aid in the 1998-2006 period, but again with variations per category. The evaluation of

general budget support analysed 85% of the expenditure in that category, 70% in the debt relief category and 45% in the humanitarian assistance category. All the other monographs fell below that percentage in their specific categories.

As a general justification for the methodology used in the evaluation, a brief explanation is given of the usual difficulties encountered with impact assessment, such as a lack of counterfactual evidence and problems of attribution. These were addressed with procedures of triangulation and with combinations of quantitative and qualitative analysis techniques. Following this general account, the report discusses the methodology applied for each of the separate monographs but these accounts only list the different sources from which data were collected, such as reports and interviews. Only in two or three cases are the methods and techniques of data collection or analysis clarified.

To summarise, it is clear that the IOB's evaluation of the Netherlands' Africa policy is a combination of 'old and new' in the sense that it is made up of both new and original fact-finding and analysis, and recapitulations and summaries of other evaluations, some conducted by foreign evaluation units.

The methodology reassessed

The lion's share of the discussion following the report's publication concerned the pros and cons of Dutch aid to Africa, and the course it should take in the future. A conference in Rotterdam, timed to coincide with the report's release, was primarily an excuse to discuss opinions that were barely touched on in the report and that would probably emerge as prospective policies. The conference mainly looked ahead and hardly focused on the past, with only half of the workshops dealing with themes addressed in the evaluation. Astonishingly, little was said about the quality of the evaluation or about the solidity of its findings and recommendations. This is food for thought if one considers the ease with which comments are made and new avenues for aid are propagated. It is probably proof of the predominantly political nature of the arena in which the solidity of findings and arguments are of minor importance.

While being praised by some foreign commentators as a paragon of independent analysis and reflection⁶ – which is unique in the field of development cooperation – the evaluation resembles a kind of meta study, combining information from previous evaluations with new data. In principle, such an approach is to be encouraged, although certain pitfalls must be avoided.

Normally a meta analysis makes use of a systematic framework that synthesises and compares past studies. Meta-studies are undertaken to extend and re-examine the results of available analysis, re-using data from earlier studies to produce more general results than those from earlier attempts. Quantitative meta-analysis places high demands on the quality of underlying studies, in terms of units of analysis, standard size, relevant means and standard deviations or correlations in order to compute the effect size. Usually meta-regression analysis is then applied to generate meaningful comparative results and statistical tests are subsequently carried out to assess effect sizes and the accuracy of the results. It is obvious that neither the nature of the earlier studies

underlying the IOB evaluation nor the new studies would allow for a quantitative meta-analysis. However, a meta-analysis of qualitative studies would follow the same replicable procedure and aim to produce a new interpretation.

Meta-analysis is not just a synthesis of insights from previous studies. Qualitative meta-analysis also penetrates the theoretical and methodological points of departure of underlying studies, because their findings and conclusions depend on this and any comparison of these findings would otherwise only be illusory. Meta-analysis, quantitative or qualitative, involves research of previous research, and not just a synthesis of past results.

In this sense, the IOB's Africa evaluation as a whole is not a real meta-analysis and, with the wide variety of themes covered, this would not have been recommended in any case. In addition, some of the monographs – such as those on humanitarian aid and sectoral support – are simply summaries of recently completed evaluations or slightly extended studies. But the other monographs draw on earlier studies and are often even expanded on by additional data collection. It is surprising that no acknowledgment of the methods used in these monographs is available. As already noted, this should be part of the ABC of meta-analysis and its omission gives the impression that much of the study is more of a synthesis than anything else, though one would hope that there is more methodological substance behind it. Given the scope and ambition of the report, it would have been desirable if these methodologies had been made clear.

However, even with the information provided, questions about methodological solidity can still be raised. The evaluators address the extent to which the study represents Dutch Africa policy as a whole, although their conclusions are not clear. For example, is it admissible or a weakness that only the chapters on policy objectives and expenditures cover all the countries concerned, while each of the thirteen monographs covers a different set of countries, so that neither themes nor countries are covered comprehensively? The same applies to expenditure. Except for general budget support, debt relief and humanitarian assistance, all the monographs cover less than 45% of total expenditures. Is this a problem? Is there a standard to compare it with? In this respect the IOB leaves us in the dark.

The evaluation correctly emphasises the context in which development cooperation with Africa has taken place. The second chapter discusses economic, political and social trends on the continent. Comments on this chapter expressed concerns about, for example, the underexposure of Africa's economic growth, recession and position in the world economy and the impact of the policies of the Bretton Woods institutions or the Washington Consensus⁷. These comments may be justified but a much more important criticism is that this context is barely featured in the analysis. When attribution is addressed, the context would normally be the first factor to consider⁸, while the earlier discussion on meta-analysis also stresses the importance of clarifying the context in which earlier studies were carried out. This chapter would therefore be expected to offer, for example, country-specific contexts within which the conclusions of earlier studies and analyses of new data were placed.

The same goes for the following chapter, on Dutch policy in Africa. Although it is criticised for its lack of analysis of policy instruments to lay a solid foundation for the

evaluation⁹ – which in fact turns out better than anticipated – the premises on which interventions are based are not discussed, let alone questioned. For example, without mentioning it explicitly, the evaluation clearly confirms that Dutch development policies complied with the Washington Consensus. They abandoned the developmental state in Africa that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, discarding it as ineffective and inefficient because it was stranded in corruption, patronage and clientelism. All the development interventions in Africa that the IOB evaluates here are oriented towards the formation of a slimmed-down night-watchman state, the reinforcement of civil society and the functioning of economic markets.

The African state has had to become accountable and deal with donor funds efficiently as aid has been shifted from projects and programmes to budget support. However, donor funds turned out to be an important – sometimes the most important – resource and were, in fact, keeping the patronage system going. This is the principal reason why the ‘neo-patrimonial state’ has become such an important issue. To get out of the driver’s seat, donors needed accountable and efficient states that would do on their own what the donors wanted them to do anyway. However, most African states are considered to be neo-patrimonial and were thought to be doing different things with donor funds than the donors themselves wanted. The evaluation makes it clear that Dutch development policies with respect to Africa mesh perfectly with neo-liberal premises on the African state. Whatever one might think about the accuracy of this premise, the fact is that once again the evaluation made various recommendations about continuing established avenues of cooperation and following new directions. These cannot be formulated or assessed properly without a discussion about the underlying premises, as the example of the role of the state in Africa demonstrates. More generally, historical perspective and context, and analysis of supposed changes or continuity in policy goals, should have been an explicate point of departure.

Africa policy: What for?

There is a catchphrase based on the acronyms of the various peacekeeping forces in former Yugoslavia: IFOR, SFOR, KFOR, What FOR? The same question could be applied to the Dutch Africa policy: what is it good for? For some this is a straightforward question with a simple answer: poverty alleviation is the ultimate goal of Dutch development cooperation, so in the final instance it is the contribution all the different themes make to poverty alleviation that should be assessed. Though this assumption is attractive in its simplicity, it is unrealistic. Dutch development cooperation, like the peacekeeping acronyms, has become a many-headed monster. Temporarily hidden by a façade of Millennium Development Goals, it consists of an inextricable set of strategies and concepts embedded in contradicting assumptions and theories. In isolation, some of these theories may indeed make sense as partial explanations of societal realities, and strategies based on them may be plausible as planning instruments. Taken together, however, it does not amount to much.

Take the famous 3Ds of development, diplomacy and defence. The IOB evaluation is positive about the way strategies for diplomacy, peace and security and emergency aid were organised in the Great Lakes Region and the Horn of Africa and concluded

that, by working together, they contributed to stabilisation in the region. However, it admits that it is hard to measure the impact of the various means employed. So far so good: the objective of the intervention was to contribute to security and stability in the region, and the IOB judged this as being at least partially successful. However, somehow there is always the explicit need to view a wider objective, in this case security and stability, as a necessary precondition to development. This is hardly contested politically, though historical models of development would not necessarily agree. However, the overriding point is that the precondition is satisfied by the development context, both in terms of budget and political mandate, in which it is formulated. Where Africa is concerned, the Dutch Minister for Development Cooperation wants a say in matters of security and has a sizeable budget to back up that claim. As a result, security and stability objectives need to be assessed in terms of development or poverty alleviation, which belong to a different field. The result is confusion, causing the IOB to criticise security and stability policies for failing to ensure a smooth transition to structural aid, which is supposed to achieve clear-cut development goals. What the IOB should have questioned is the compulsory link between stabilisation and development.

The same confusion is created with respect to interventions aimed at promoting the rule of law, such as the formulation of legislation, the training of legal experts and the construction of prisons. All are respectable goals and the interventions intended to achieve them were more or less successful. But the IOB criticises them for not devoting attention to superior goals, such as poverty alleviation and economic development. Conceptually, however, there is a tenuous link between promoting the rule of law on the one hand and poverty alleviation and economic development on the other hand. The same argument can be applied to humanitarian aid, which the IOB considers on the whole, relevant and effective but as not bridging the gap with structural aid.

Finally, coherence policies, for example the policies on cut flowers and cotton analysed in the evaluation, take as their point of departure the assumption that trade is more effective than aid. But effective in what sense? Trade liberalisation is supposed to trigger economic growth and may have a positive effect on poverty alleviation later on. Producers of certain agricultural commodities, such as cotton, may be poor but their incomes depend more on local market institutions than on access to international markets. While the evaluation appreciates efforts to strengthen the position of developing countries in trade negotiations and to improve their access to world markets, it found few positive effects on poverty alleviation. How realistic is that expectation?

Dutch policies on Africa are numerous and wide-ranging. Interventions and instruments to achieve their objectives sometimes have a weak theoretical foundation and linking them to 'development' or more specifically to 'poverty alleviation' becomes a questionable undertaking. It is high time that objectives in different spheres are acknowledged as intrinsically valuable without it being necessary to link them directly to development¹⁰. They include humanitarian assistance, security and stability, and coherence, and perhaps even good governance and debt cancellation. We should depart from the unrealistic assumption that everything should move in one 'development' direction, given that we are talking about different spheres, with different drivers, interests and objectives. For those who want to work on overall societal change, even in

that more realistic and less pretentious perspective, there are still more than enough issues of coherence and coordination left to worry about.

However, the final issue with respect to evaluating Dutch bilateral cooperation with Africa remains unresolved. Taken together, Dutch development cooperation can best be characterised as a chain of political arenas, extending from Dutch public opinion and policy-making to interventions in Africa, ranging from debt relief to the construction of prisons and schools. In all of these arenas, objectives and interventions are contested, compromised and subsequently passed on to the next arena. Policies on Africa formulated in the Netherlands are usually a compromise between the different views and interests of a multitude of actors. The original views themselves may not have been realistic and conceptually solid, but the compromise is above all political and therefore – most probably – conceptually even less solid. In subsequent arenas in Africa – national, regional and local – the policies are again contested and then adjusted or even completely restyled. The IOB Africa evaluation sometimes lifts a corner of the veil concealing these arenas, by elaborating on the deliberations of Dutch embassies. However, it usually discusses this issue in the neutral terms of options and choices, with the original Dutch policy objectives in mind. The rest of the chain and its political nature are underexposed. This would have been very useful for a real understanding of Dutch Africa policy, instead of simply leapfrogging directly to outcomes and impacts.

Notes

- 1 Director of the African Studies Centre Leiden and professor in development of Sub-Saharan Africa at Leiden University
- 2 Het Nederlandse Afrikabeleid 1998-2006; evaluatie van de bilaterale samenwerking. IOB Evaluaties 308, Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken. Den Haag, 2008.
- 3 For example, in The Broker On Line (6 Feb. 2008) both Buhl and van Dijk pleaded for increased investments in agriculture and Nyamnjoh for eradicating cultural poverty, while in the workshop on fragile states at the February conference in Rotterdam representatives of NGOs pointed at the indispensable role of civil society organizations in building stability.
- 4 Nevertheless multilateral cooperation was included in number of monographs, for instance in general budget support, trade and coherence and the rule of law.
- 5 Het Nederlandse Afrikabeleid 1998-2006, p.51.
- 6 In The Broker On Line (6 Feb. 2008), Buhl, Ayittey, as well as Maxwell underpin the seriousness with which aid is assessed in the Netherlands and de Haan welcomes the attempt towards a meta-study.
- 7 Both Hoebink and Boer in The Broker On Line (6 Feb. 2008)
- 8 See als Ellis In The Broker On Line (6 Feb. 2008)
- 9 Again Hoebink in The Broker On Line (6 Feb. 2008)
- 10 see also Bieckmann & Dietz (Waartoe dient onze hulp?) in Vice Versa april 2008, p.8 and Dijkstra (Schuldkwijtschelding is goed, maar geen hulp) in Afrika ter discussie; het Afrikacongres 2008, bijdragen en uitkomsten. Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken. Den Haag, 2008.