

Research partnerships: who decides?

Review of a design process

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Scope and purpose of the review

In 2005, RAWOO decided to conduct a desk review of its activities regarding the establishment of two North-South research partnerships (the Ghanaian-Dutch Programme of Health Research for Development, HRP, and the Philippine-Dutch Programme of Biodiversity Research for Development, BRP).

This review concerns an independent assessment and synopsis of the manner in which RAWOO facilitated the conceptualisation, preparation and design process; in the light of its mission, objectives and principles. Where possible, this review also identifies lessons that have been learnt for future programming of research and capacity enhancement for development.

The review takes into account a vast amount of public and grey information collected during the programming period. A limited number of in-depth interviews and email consultations were also done with key participants in the process. The scope of this study did not include field work or a close look at the implementation of the programmes. Naturally, the views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of any particular stakeholder involved.

Introduction

The European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) was asked to perform an independent review of the way in which RAWOO facilitated the conceptualisation, preparation and design of two North-South research partnerships.

The purpose of the review

- ✚ To perform an independent assessment and synopsis of:
- ✚ The way in which RAWOO facilitated the conceptualisation, preparation and design process of North-South research partnerships
- ✚ To identify lessons for future programming of research and capacity enhancement

This report does not pretend to be an exhaustive summary of what happened, when and why. Instead, it zooms in on a number of practical issues that may help to draw lessons and consequently, improve our understanding of the way North-South research partnerships for development can be constructed. Its structure is similar, to that of the presentation of ‘key findings’ to the RAWOO Council at its plenary meeting on the 26th October 2005. The first part of the report highlights initial objectives and ambitions of the RAWOO, as well as some emerging outcomes of the programmes so far. The second part, concentrates on the dilemmas RAWOO and other participants in the process faced when striving to create effective research partnerships between the Netherlands and the Philippines and Ghana. In the third part, a number of issues are proposed, which reflect on RAWOO’s role in building North-South research partnerships. Finally, lessons are drawn to contribute to the wider debate on improving the funding of North-South research partnerships for development.

This report briefly touches upon

- ✚ The purpose of the review
- ✚ What did RAWOO set out to do? Initial objectives and ambitions
- ✚ What were the results? Some emerging outcomes
- ✚ Dilemmas “en route” towards building innovative North-South research partnerships
- ✚ A reflection on the role of RAWOO
- ✚ Emerging lessons

The foundation for the analysis presented in this report is a systematic review of all written documentation available on the conceptualisation, preparation and design of the Philippine and Ghanaian projects. This includes: formal letters and printed emails collected by the RAWOO Secretary, documented outcomes of the three phases, formatted in proposals, minutes, reports, framework documents and literature relating to the research partnerships. Besides this, a limited number of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with various key programming actors were held. These actors included the Secretary and the former Chair of the RAWOO plus two Southern programme participants. Finally, exchanges with various other key actors involved in the

implementation of the two partnerships allowed for contextualisation of the programming analysis.

The authors would like to thank all those, who provided information and shared their personal experiences with us and by doing so contributed to this review. The responsibility for the content of this report is of course entirely ours.

1. What did RAWOO set out to do?

1.1 Initial objectives

RAWOO's aim was not just to help conceptualise, prepare and design, but also to promote commitment from all relevant parties in the Netherlands and the South to the research partnerships.

RAWOO stated objectives

1. To initiate a process of conceptualising, preparing and designing two North-South research partnerships
2. To promote commitment from all relevant parties in the Netherlands and the South

The policy context for this initiative was set in a letter sent on the 26th April 1991, by the then Minister for Development Cooperation, Jan Pronk. He asked RAWOO to advise him on the availability of Dutch research capacity for the benefit of development cooperation. The minister noted that the advice might also be of importance to the Ministers of Education, Culture & Science and Agriculture, Nature & Food Quality, who are responsible for financing a considerable portion of the Dutch scientific research and knowledge infrastructure. The ensuing RAWOO advisory report, entitled 'A Medium-Term Perspective on Research for Development', incorporated a selection of the lessons learnt from the experience with Multi-Annual Multidisciplinary Research Programs (MMRPs), as well as the results of two International Conferences on Research for Development held in Groningen in 1989 and 1992. The main part of the document was used to present an overview of priority areas for development research.

Box 1. ‘Reverse programming’ and the RAWOO

The quest for North-South research partnerships can be seen as an out growth of the Multi-Annual Multidisciplinary Research Programs (MMRPs). These research programmes, managed autonomously by Southern partners, provided long-term support for demand-driven, location-specific, multidisciplinary research for sustainable development (Bautista 2001). The programmes were supported financially by the Netherlands and aimed at contributing to the sustainable development of the respective countries. Strengthening of national research capacity was an important dimension in these programmes.

The dialogue on ‘reversed programming’ was met with resistance from a number of Dutch researchers, who were sceptical about moving into this demand-led direction. They believed that Southern research lacked the capacity to operate the programmes independently. Many also actively lobbied for continued access to DGIS research funding in order to maintain control on funding and prioritisation.

RAWOO was invited to be an independent observer of this initiative. Alongside this role, the Council also developed its own ideas about demand-driven research. While the RAWOO Council members at that time had mixed opinions, the RAWOO as a whole supported the Minister in his efforts to promote ‘reversed programming’. The Council’s concerns focused on changing the power relations in partnerships between researchers in the North and the South. For instance, how to formulate research proposals that reflect Southern societal and research needs and how to support research infrastructure in developing countries in such a way that dependency relations can be modified.

In its 1995 advice to the Minister of Development Cooperation, RAWOO recommended the building of North-South research partnerships, next to the already existing fully de-centralised Southern research programmes (MMRP, see Box 1). The reasons for suggesting such a program included:

- creating awareness among Dutch researchers about innovative approaches in demand-driven research
- re-organising research cooperation so that correspondence with the Southern research and capacity-building agenda’s is amended.

The gist of the Council’s advice is laid down in recommendation number 12:

“The Council renews its plea for the creation of a limited number of long-term strategic research programmes focusing on important areas of attention related to development. Set up and carried out with close cooperation between parties in developing countries and in the Netherlands, the management of which would rest with intermediary organizations at arms-length from the authorities”.

The Council supported the demand-orientated approach of the MMRPs, yet, in view of the uncertainties and risks involved in such novel programmes, it recommended a differentiated policy with scope for other instruments and modalities as well. In this light, the Council pleads for innovative small-scale research and medium to long-term strategic research programmes; based on cooperation between partners in the North and South. It also emphasises that *'research programming and research & technology policies should be better coordinated and geared more closely to policy areas such as development cooperation, the environment, agriculture, and energy'*.¹

RAWOO's advice in 1995 was somewhat ambiguous in the sense that it was not clear whether the intermediary organisations referred to in recommendation 12 should be located in the North or the South. This fuelled some of the debates, which continued to emerge during the programme and are described, in more detail later in this report.

It is also pertinent to note that during the course of 1996, the composition of the RAWOO Council was drastically reformed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' decision, to appoint at least one third of its members from Southern countries. As a result of this institutional transformation, Dutch national research interests played a lesser role in the considerations and decisions of RAWOO. This also brought the positions of the RAWOO and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs/DGIS more in line with each other. In fact, the Minister entrusted the reformed RAWOO with safeguarding the Southern demand-led character of two new North-South research partnership programmes.²

1.2 RAWOO sets ambitious standards

In RAWOO's advice, unambiguous criteria for the qualification of North-South partnerships for support had already been defined. North-South research should be demand-led, society-driven, inter-disciplinary³ and it should contribute to capacity development. It should also entail cooperation between people that are on the same footing. In other words, partnerships should be able to create a level playing field between peers.

¹ On page five and six of the report, it is argued that "The relationship between development, on the one hand and issues concerned with peace and security, transformation processes, the environment, economics and international commerce and technology, on the other, necessitates a broader, more integrated approach to research policy. The Council strives to reinforce the collaboration with other Sector Councils and where possible, to bring about joint initiatives which go beyond individual spheres of activity."

² On page 3 of Pronk's letter of June 1996, the Minister entrusts the RAWOO to watch over the listed and other conditions for 'genuine cooperation'; in consultation with DGIS.

³ No distinction is made here between the term sinter-disciplinary, trans-disciplinary and multidisciplinary.

RAWOO ambitions...

-  N-S research should be demand-led,
-  N-S research should be society-driven,
-  N-S research should be inter-disciplinary,
-  N-S research should contribute to research capacity development in developing countries and
-  N-S research partnerships should entail cooperation based on equal footing

In his 1996 June letter, Minister Pronk of Development Cooperation⁴ attaches five conditions to the financing and implementation of the North-South research partnership programmes:

- (1) Preference will be given to partnerships with developing countries that have longstanding relationships with the Netherlands; in the area of development cooperation, but where no support is given or will be given through an MMRP.
- (2) The thematic focus of the programme is to be well-defined and limited in scope to just some of the priorities suggested by RAWOO. Furthermore, it should be development-orientated and development policy relevant, however, it is not necessary for it to be in line with Dutch policy on development cooperation.
- (3) The preparation and management structure of the programme should prevent the domination of Dutch research supply and interests. In addition, it should guarantee an actual contribution from the developing countries in the articulation of the demands, as well as in the implementation phase; by doing so, promoting a genuine cooperation. It is stipulated that RAWOO guards these and other conditions for cooperation, in consultation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs/DGIS.
- (4) The financing structure should be tripartite, with (a) basic funding from DGIS (b) reallocation of existing research-capacity and (c) co-financing from for example, the Ministries of Education, Culture & Science and Agriculture, Nature & Food Quality. The use of other Dutch and international funding avenues was also envisaged, in particular from the EU.
- (5) The implementation modality should be efficient and effective, also regarding the cooperation relationships with researchers from developing countries.

1.3 What were the results? Some emerging outcomes

RAWOO's criteria combined with the conditions submitted by the Ministers set ambitious standards. In the process that followed, RAWOO applied these to its support to the conceptualisation, preparation and design of the two North-South research partnerships. In the eyes of Southern partners, it does so with much success. Southern participants in the research programmes in the Philippines and in Ghana accentuate that, it is the collaboration on an equal footing that makes these research programmes different. Furthermore, they express that they feel effective ownership of the research agenda and the programmatic frameworks established with the support of RAWOO. They feel they are really in charge of agenda setting within the research programme. Southern

⁴ Also on behalf of his colleagues from Education, Culture & Science and Agriculture, Nature & Food Quality,

partners, therefore, remark that within the two research programmes in the Philippines and Ghana, a significant improvement in North-South research relationships was achieved.

Some emerging outcomes

-  Biodiversity research programme in the Philippines
-  Health research programme in Ghana
-  Demonstrated ownership by Southern partners of research agenda, programmatic frameworks and research programmes

However, ensuring the commitment of Dutch researchers and mainstream research financing to the partnerships became the “*pièce de résistance*” during the process. The documents suggest that the main issue, in the long and intense debates that took place in the Netherlands, focussed on the degree of control that the Dutch research establishment would have on the programmes. The intensity of the debates on the management of the research programmes was a clear indicator to this point. ‘Ownership’ clearly meant different things to different participants. It proved to be challenging to keep Dutch non-development researchers on board. Moreover, to commit the Dutch research financing institutions to finance North-South research partnerships, in such a way that the ambitious agenda of RAWOO and the Minister of Development Cooperation was fully upheld.

Eventually, some complementary funding was attracted to the programme from the Ministry of Education, Culture & Science (WOTRO/NWO), in the form of a one-time PhD programme, supporting health research in Ghana. Dutch researchers have been and continue to be actively involved in both programmes. Most of these were development-orientated researchers before the partnership programmes started. Networking has occurred and new contacts have been made between Dutch and Southern researchers, yet few publications have been jointly written. The joint publications that have been released almost exclusively focus on the research partnership programming process and not on the substantial outcomes of the research itself. Some publications on the latter are now being prepared for publication.

The first phase of these programmes was scheduled to conclude in December 2005 (Biodiversity Research Programme, Philippines) and July 2006 (Health Research Programme, Ghana). Follow-up has yet to be secured. Both programmes did however, raise considerable interest on the part of international donors.

2. Dilemmas “en route” towards building innovative North-South research partnerships

The road to multi-stakeholder innovation is littered with stumbling blocks: conceptual, procedural, organizational and technological. North-South research partnerships are no exception. In the following, we will focus on four dilemmas we consider to be central to understanding the process of preparing demand-led North-South research partnerships.

Central dilemmas

- ✚ A meeting of minds or a clash of perspectives?
- ✚ Agenda setting and implementation of North-South research: who decides?
- ✚ How to stimulate an ambitious change of focus in research partnerships?
- ✚ Funding North-South research: tied aid versus partnership development?

When studying the documentation and listening to the participants, there is one question that persistently springs to mind: Which key issues are at the core of the interactive process of preparing, conceptualising and designing a partnership between RAWOO, Southern and Dutch partners, funding agencies and government officials?

A second question relates to the setting and implementation of the research agenda: who really decides on it? Is it the Dutch Minister of Development Cooperation, the Southern partners or the Dutch research institutions? How is it possible to effectively stimulate ownership in the South when Dutch stakeholders are perceived to be so much “closer to the fire” and how can Southern ownership be institutionally anchored? How can research for the development of science versus research for the development of societies be consolidated? Finally, what really is the added value of Western researchers in North-South research partnerships? Do the potential benefits outweigh the additional costs?

A third question relates to the approach chosen by RAWOO. The Council clearly chooses a consensus building approach: if we are able to get all these different actors to talk to each other, they will be willing and able to define a research programme that complies with our development orientated criteria and simultaneously endorses a feeling of ownership. The different financial agencies will then chip in from different sources, articulating their funding directly to the relevant demands and institutional structures in the developing countries. However, were the key conditions to warrant the success of such an approach ensured? What role did the RAWOO play: incubator, facilitator, reformer, stakeholder, catalyst, mediator or observer? And what were some of the, unintended, effects of the criteria applied by RAWOO?

This leaves us with a fourth question concerning financing. Is it possible to achieve consensus between the different Sector Ministries in the Netherlands, regarding a research agenda set mostly by Southern partners, which includes no other form of financing than development funding? Wouldn't this, in the European sense, amount to a form of tied aid, which nobody wants anymore?

2.1 A clash of perspectives

An enormous amount of letters, papers, messages and minutes of meetings testify to the fact that RAWOO has tried extremely hard to convince its Dutch partners that this new way of approaching partnerships with the South was an opportunity, not a problem. Interest existed amongst Southern partners to determine an agenda and to work with Dutch colleagues on the implementation of that agenda. The interest of their counterparts in the Netherlands was clearly less straightforward: “Do we now have to do the research that they define; it may not even be interesting or challenging to us”. The evidence shows that a number of clashes of perspective occurred, three of which we will describe in the context of this report; the first one is on research itself.

2.1.1 Research

Differences of opinion between research stakeholders ranged from the choice of country to the correct approach for identifying relevant research themes (local/institutional versus international agendas). From the alleged ‘one-sidedness’ of agenda setting and research programming to the need to make this programme part of a larger national and/or international health and biodiversity research programme. Finally, to who should implement the programme?

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|  | Social problem versus scientific theory orientated research design |
|  | Knowledge production versus the need for institutionalised solutions |
|  | Inter-disciplinary versus disciplinary science |
|  | The role of scientific method, rigour and quality |

Two different rationales seem to pervade the debates on research programming. They seem to be rooted in four dimensions: the first has to do with the *problem orientation* of research: do you design research to address societal problems or do you design it to tackle scientific problems? The second relates to the *objectives of research*, whether research is mainly about knowledge production or about creating solutions to what, in many countries, are institutional problems? The Ghana project is a good example to elaborate on this point. In the framework programme, the Ghanaians proposed to address management problems in the health system. Some Dutch scientists voiced critique on this prioritisation of Ghanaian research, as well as on the inclusion of applied research. Dutch researchers seemed initially interested in the functioning of health ‘treatments’, rather than the health ‘system’ and particularly in the more fundamental vector/illness related research. It proved very difficult to assimilate these two preferences. In some ways, the HRP was ahead of its time; proposing for interdisciplinary research that today has been fully accepted in the Netherlands, but at that time was still rather controversial. As a result, some of the more fundamental vector/illness orientated researchers bowed out and

more development, management orientated Dutch researchers stayed or climbed on board during the programming exercise.⁵

Another dimension sets those advocating for *disciplinary* research against those in favour of a more *interdisciplinary* inquiry. For obvious reasons, those addressing societal issues often advocate for interdisciplinary science, while those inclined to focus on scientific interests first, defend a more disciplinary perspective.

The argument of *scientific quality* was also used. Many Dutch researchers – formally or informally – shared doubts on the quality of research in the South. At the root of the discussion, apart from lack of knowledge, seemed to be the status quo of research financing in the Netherlands, including the way “universal” criteria are applied to assess the work of Dutch researchers.

2.1.2 Partnership

The next clash of perspective was on partnership itself. What does a partnership mean? What does *joint decision making* imply? Does it mean you go to a seminar, you talk and at a certain moment somebody, probably from the North, writes it all up? Who determines what you talk about, who decides whose opinion is included and whose is not? And how do you deal with historic, *fundamentally asymmetric* relationships? The intention to share ownership with Southern partners, to bring the Southern agenda and research needs forward, is laudable. Sharing of ownership is however, complicated and frustrating because Northern researchers are engaged in many different ways with relevant governmental departments and development agencies in the Netherlands, to whom their Southern counterparts have no access. On the other hand, Southern decision-making and institutional procedures are often beyond comprehension to Dutch participants. Hence, the first determining factor in an asymmetric relationship is trust, or lack of it: will they really do what they say or are they just trying to get me to cooperate? In particular Northern partners need to demonstrate that they do listen carefully and comply with joint agreements, before the necessary trust is built to develop a real partnership.

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|  | How to deal with asymmetric relationships? |
|  | What is ‘joint decision making’ in such a context? |
|  | Substantive versus institutional research steering mechanisms |
|  | Added value versus the cost of getting different parties involved |

Through its pro-active support and respect for national processes of priority setting and elaboration of research frameworks, RAWOO gained the recognition from Southern partners of being trustworthy. By the same token, RAWOO representatives were often perceived in the Netherlands as being blind to the interests of Dutch researchers and biased in favour of Southern demands “should our role be reduced to mere capacity

⁵ Given its focus, the review’s analysis here focuses on the programming of the HRP. The situation described was later on improved during the implementation of the programme, as the Dutch members of the Joint Programme Committee were (and are) actively involved in scientific research in the Netherlands.

development and to just investigating what they tell us to?" In short, an asymmetric relationship breeds asymmetric views on power and influence. These have to be recognised and dealt with from the very beginning.

The approach of RAWOO to overcome these and other difficulties was to lightly facilitate the programming process, while not getting involved in the substantive issues that had to be decided upon. Those decisions were left to the (would be) research partners themselves; in the respective co-ordinating bodies. This choice seems logical at first sight: who would like to take over the researchers' own role in determining the content of the research? Yet it brings consequences: would more insistence on RAWOO's part, have created an incentive to elaborate and strengthen joint analytical frameworks, rather than accepting that partnerships were based mostly, on programmatic and institutional agreements? Would a more pro-active role have helped to address the challenge laid down by the Dutch Minister Ritzen (Education, Culture & Science), who suggested that there must be scientific challenges for both the Southern and Dutch scientists in these programmes, not just for the Southern partners? Would joint publications have been more forthcoming if discussions on research content had been more intense? Does a research partnership, like any research programme, not require a joint analytical framework to start with, even if it is completely overhauled or even abandoned later on? Besides, if substantial discussions are avoided, institutional issues may take too much prominence, to ascertain power over substantive decisions that have to be taken along the way? In this light, the choice of RAWOO not to insist on facilitating the content side of research programming may be questioned.

A fourth emerging issue on partnership is the actual added value of Dutch vis-à-vis Southern researchers. Do we need Dutch researchers to improve the health system in Ghana? What are Dutch scientists going to add to local biodiversity research in the Philippines? They are very costly and while we strive for local impact, they might be more inclined to underline the importance of publications in referenced journals. Dutch researchers naturally ask themselves the same sort of questions: what can I add? What do I know that they don't? And what do I get out of it? Does it help me score on Dutch scientific performance criteria? In other words, another central issue on the mind of everyone engaged in forming a research partnership, even if not always explicitly so, is what is in it for me? And do the benefits outweigh the costs, in terms of finance, time and effort? With both groups of scientists belonging to research systems, in which, both incentives and performance criteria might differ enormously, these are not trivial questions.

A final question is the degree to which, one must invest to keep institutional partners on board. One may ask how important it is to keep all relevant institutional stakeholders engaged in the process. For example, in the case of the Dutch institutions RAWOO spent a lot of energy on accommodating the programme to the interests of the Ministry of Education, Culture & Science; the specific added value of this was not immediately apparent. This brings us to the third clash of perspectives patent in RAWOO's support to designing North-South research partnerships.

2.1.3 What “society-driven” means in practice

The third clash of perspectives concerns our understanding of what “society-driven” research means in practice. How do we recognise it when we see it? Who are the relevant parties; how are they going to be involved? Do they have to participate in decision making or just be consulted once in a while? When a Governmental agency confirms the importance of a research proposal, can this be taken as proof, regarding its necessity? Is participation of civil society organisations always necessary? Are democratic institutions such as parliaments important? And perhaps more importantly: how do we organise a research programme in such a way that it becomes society-driven? In what way should different stakeholders participate? What sort of procedures do you need to have? And how do you ensure the involvement of end-users if these are not represented or even misrepresented by any organisations?

- ✚ When is a research programme society-driven?
- ✚ Who are the relevant parties involved?
- ✚ How are they involved? When should they be influential and at what level of in the decision-making?
- ✚ Who represents whom? What does ‘representative’ mean in research programming practice?

Given the lack of a clear definition of the concept and its complexity, it was no wonder that research partners chose a pragmatic approach to organising society-driven research. Likewise, frequent staff and institutional changes made it difficult to see just who was involved; how and at which stage. In the Philippines, NGO’s dropped out of the programme after some time. In Ghana and the Philippines, the question whether or not civil society organisations adequately represent the end-users of research was not put to the test systematically (neither was the question on how end-users ‘used’ research outcomes). In the Philippines end-users did not play a significant role during the programming phase, but they were consulted during the pre-implementation phase and did participate in the collection of research data during the implementation phase. In both cases, this also meant that the debate on who should participate in which way was never completely resolved; the involvement or not of end-users, civil society and non-governmental organisations continues to hold a prominent position on the partnerships’ agenda’s.

2.2 Setting the agenda and implementing it

By applying the explicitly agreed principles described in the letter from Minister Pronk of Development Cooperation in 1996, RAWOO intended to use development funds as leverage, to attract complementary funds from Dutch mainstream scientific funding agencies for research in the South. This from a development policy point of view is an interesting perspective as it paves the way for untying development research assistance. Dutch researchers would then be able to participate in international development orientated research partnerships and be paid from their own national research funds rather than through official development assistance (ODA).

Agenda setting and implementation

- ✚ Is joint, mutually inspiring scientific cooperation possible when the research agenda has been set by Southern partners?
- ✚ What are the intellectual challenges beyond research capacity enhancement in the South?
- ✚ Is a comparative development perspective between South and North scientifically relevant and productive? And if so, does it go both ways?

However, a majority of the Dutch mainstream research institutions and researchers were not interested in linking their funding to a Southern agenda, nor can Northern institutional requirements necessarily be met by Southern partners. In this case, the Ministry of Education, Culture & Science set two conditions for financial support to the programmes: (1) a good balance between research cooperation on the one hand, and local research capacity building on the other and (2) the NWO should be involved, which meant allocating resources according to criteria laid down in its general policy “Kennis Verrijkt” [Knowledge Enriches]. This meant for example, that the budget item that could be financed by NWO/WOTRO would be PhD students, not institutional costs of Southern research institutions.

An important underlying assumption for striving for partnerships is that Northern researchers should not just be asked to contribute to research that is relevant to stakeholders in the South, but that by working with Southern research partners they may actually learn something that is useful to science and/or practice in the North as well. During the programming exercises, not all Dutch researchers necessarily subscribed to this idea. Yet it is reflected in the importance attached by the Minister of Education, Culture & Science to achieving a balance between research capacity building and doing actual research. Intriguingly, among Dutch researchers, capacity development is often seen as something completely different from research itself, in addition, its direction is mostly assumed to be North-South, not vice versa. Modern developments in participatory action research and learning by doing do not seem to be accepted as part of a recognised research practice in the Netherlands. Significantly, part of the preparatory phase of the research programming exercise in the Philippines was dedicated to learning to apply such collaborative research methods. A number of Dutch researchers took part in this ‘on the job research training’, showing a keen interest in developing their skills in this respect.

One more important fundamental issue is the potential benefit of a comparative research perspective between the countries in the North and in the South. In a globalized world, people from the South need more and more information on how things are done in the North, as it directly affects their lives. Similarly, people from the North may benefit increasingly from information from the South. Not only specific data on for example, health, food and security risks, but also increasingly on institutional issues; the ways things are organised. This, while not equally accepted by both parties, provides a new basis for joint comparative research.

2.3 Choosing the correct approach to designing North-South research partnerships

Working with research partners in the South has been regarded as capacity building for far too long: “What we can do (in the South) is capacity building but that’s not scientific research”. It has probably led many Dutch mainstream researchers to believe that there is no mutually inspiring scientific challenge in development cooperation. Yet for both countries involved in the RAWOO programme, a well-defined country research framework was developed. These frameworks, proposed both scientifically challenging and developmentally relevant specifications of what needed to be researched in each country. Nevertheless, the Dutch research community came to perceive these frameworks as imposed upon them by the Southern partners. Here, the choice of RAWOO not to enter into a debate on substantive scientific issues may have played against its intention to keep the Dutch research parties on board. On the other hand, RAWOO was, and had to be, fully committed to upholding the joint product that its Southern partners had developed with at least some Dutch colleagues. All the same, a joint North-South analysis of the country’s framework and further specification of the theoretical approaches required to answer the key scientific questions involved, could have been a way to challenge the Dutch research community to coming up with relevant, challenging conceptual alternatives.

Approaches towards designing partnerships

-  Do researchers feel they belong to the same soft knowledge system? Is this necessary for research partners?
-  What prevents N-S research partnerships the most from operating effectively: scientific or institutional barriers?
-  Is a consensus on research for development objectives necessary and possible in the international research community?
-  Is a consensus building approach the only way to design research partnerships?

At the same time, the task of identifying the right partners was arduous. Some emerging research partnerships may have simply targeted the wrong research departments or the wrong researchers in the Netherlands. The Ghanaian Health Programme case is illustrative of this. In the preparation phase, the Ghanaian partners found it hard to capture the interest of their Dutch counterparts. Simultaneously, health service management issues were at the top of the agenda for many new health research and teaching departments in the Netherlands. It took time for these two parties to make the connection. In the Philippines Biodiversity Research Programme case, aligning the interest of Dutch biodiversity researchers with the local Mindanao biodiversity agenda proved equally hard.

It proved at the time, to be a too big a step for the majority of Dutch scientific financing institutions, to fully engage with a demand-led Southern agenda. In part, this was due to institutional incompatibilities. Evidently, it was impossible for mainstream research financing institutions in the Netherlands to contribute to a joint fund to finance research partnerships. They are bound to strict rules of disbursement embedded in formal policy documents such as “Knowledge Enriches”. As a result, they seemed considerably less

flexible than the Ministry of Development Cooperation in allocating funds to North-South research partnerships. Strict adherence to Dutch and/or international research programming processes also played a role. Division in the opinions of the Philippines' programme committee was caused by a divergence of conviction concerning the study's objectives. Some felt that there should be one integrated biodiversity programme, to be implemented by the NOW and in line with the international research agenda on biodiversity. Others argued that the programme should be autonomous and have its own joint management structure and budget.

At the heart of the debates were the issues of conformity with Dutch research policy and the control of funds. Whereas, in NOW's opinion, the research programmes could not do without the scientific leadership of Dutch researchers and institutions, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs/DGIS insisted that the intermediary organisation, responsible for co-ordinating and managing the activities under the research partnership, should be a Southern one. Thus, to formally agree on management principles meant dealing with important differences about how to allocate and control Dutch national and international research funds.

Interestingly, Dutch researchers who continued to participate actively in the research partnerships preparations expressed that besides results relevant to the developing country; they also learnt lessons relevant to Dutch research practice.

“We learnt a lot about our Dutch health system because we went out to think about the health system in Ghana, how it was managed and how it should be improved. We found out that many of these things happened in the Netherlands as well. So we started formulating new research questions about the Netherlands...”

Captivatingly, these researchers found an inspiring research agenda on topics, initially defined by their Southern partners and started learning lessons, which they could apply to their research in the Netherlands.

Another important issue to be discussed is the approach chosen by RAWOO to facilitate the conceptualisation, preparation and design of the research partnerships. Did the “would be” partners – in the Netherlands, in the developing countries and between the Netherlands and the Philippines and Ghana – have enough in common? Did they recognise that they shared a common understanding of what “scientific research” represents? And throughout the process were they able to develop common interests? More importantly perhaps: did they come to feel that they needed each other to be successful? RAWOO's input concerning the Southern partners in the conceptualisation of the research programmes, induced the effective addressing of the existing asymmetry between the Northern and Southern partners. However, excluding all but a few Dutch scientists from active involvement in the preparatory process also endangered the emergence of “ownership” on the Dutch part. The “informative” meetings in the Netherlands, during which the research frameworks, elaborated in the Philippines and Ghana were presented to the Dutch research partners, could have given that impression.

The fundamental question seems to be, whether people who perceive they belong to different knowledge systems can become research partners and to what extent such a process can be managed? ⁶ Practical experience in participatory action-research as well as with research on innovation, suggests that one can not assume that putting people from different systems together will result in them relating effortlessly with each other. It requires a lot of hard work to facilitate such meetings, to identify and overcome traditional biases and communication barriers and to develop a conceptual and institutional foundation for effectively working together. RAWOO left this task mainly in the hands of the programme study committees; a good choice from the point of view of delegation of responsibilities and ownership, yet a questionable one, in view of the need to provide a strong, professional facilitation input.

The net result was that eventually, with few exceptions, the researchers who continued on the programmes were development⁷ researchers rather than mainstream researchers from the Netherlands.⁸ This “self-selection” is not necessarily negative, but it can impose limitations on the partnership. These researchers are not automatically, the ones who possess the best knowledge of how things work in the Netherlands or what relevant research has been done, in the Netherlands or Europe for that matter. So, if the aim of a North-South research partnership is also, for the Southern partners to access research on developments in the Netherlands, to only include development researchers and their institutions doesn't necessarily suffice.

2.4 Can mainstream research funding be used to complement development finance in research partnerships?

There is not just one type of research in the Netherlands. For instance, development researchers have executed modest research in the Netherlands and as a result, know the Dutch political and institutional environment only from a citizens' perspective. Hence, drawing in Dutch development researchers does not necessarily pave the way for comparisons on institutional issues or socio-economic realities between the Netherlands and developing countries. A development orientated partnership will therefore, have to make an informative decision regarding, which type of researchers it wants to involve in order to meet its objectives; both in the developing country and in the Netherlands.

⁶ In the context of this report, we define knowledge systems as *an articulated set of actors, networks and organizations expected or managed to support knowledge processes* (Röling 1992 in Engel 1997: 19). Innovation is an emergent property of such systems; it is not a linear process, but rather gradual, continuous learning process (Engel, 1997). A knowledge system's functioning is affected by the particularities, the official and unofficial 'rules of the game' of institutional research policy settings.

Engel, P.G.H. (1997) *The Social Organisation of Innovation*. Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) Press.

Also available at: http://www.kit.nl/specials/html/rk_raaks.asp

⁷ In this context development researchers refers to people that are professionally interested in studying what happens in the South; who know how development cooperation works, who have their networks in developing countries and who are accustomed to work with colleagues in the South.

⁸ For the purpose of this analysis we distinguish between *mainstream* research dealing with topics on the Dutch or (Northern) international research agendas and *development* research, specialized in issues of (Southern) development.

Funding N-S research partnerships

- ✚ Do development policy and national research policies match; in the NL and partner countries?
- ✚ Are institutional architectures for mainstream and development research programming, funding and performance evaluation compatible?
- ✚ What is the role of national research agendas, both in the Netherlands and in the partner country?
- ✚ What is the role played by international research agendas in the Netherlands?

During the review we asked what prevented these partnerships from operating more effectively. Was it the scientific substance or the institutional set up? Our conclusion is that institutional issues were at the root of the difficulties, encountered in the RAWOO demand-led research programming exercise. In the Netherlands, instruments used to finance research on “development in the Netherlands” and for “development research” abroad are generally different. They respond to different Government policies and are managed by different Government Departments as is illustrated by the three Dutch Ministries involved in the preparation of North-South research partnerships. During the preparation phase in Ghana and the Philippines, a clear match was achieved between (national) development priorities, research policy and the partnership research framework. In the Netherlands the adjustment was more complicated; at the very least, it was more time-consuming. This was exaggerated by the fact that the national policy agenda in the Netherlands is not perceived as a “development agenda”. Consequently, “research for development” is not seen as a national issue, but purely as an international one. Of course, this does not mean that research is not carried out, on for example, institutional regional development in the Netherlands; it is simply not categorised nor funded as “development research”.

Similarly, a number of institutional rigidities surfaced, with regard to research financing in the Netherlands, which negatively affected the ability of the relevant institutions to take part successfully. The impossibility of Dutch mainstream research donors to finance institutional costs, their strict adherence to national research priorities, their focus on PhD’s and disciplinary research rather than interdisciplinary inquiry and the strict definition of scientific objectives, methods and quality, precluded support to some more innovative, internationally accepted research approaches. On the other hand, RAWOO and the Ministry of Development Cooperation adhered strictly to demand-led research partnerships criteria for development (as we have seen above). As a result, it can be concluded that institutional incompatibilities did play a key role in complicating the elaboration of North-South research partnerships in these two cases.

Eventually, institutional barriers contributed to the mainstream research people and institutions to drop out. In reality, this process of “self-selection” heralded the transition of trying to keep all actors ‘on board’ to a more selective approach towards North-South research partnership building.

3. A reflection on the role of RAWOO

- ✚ RAWOO was effective in creating and maintaining political and financial space for a new approach towards building North-South research partnerships.
- ✚ Based upon its own considerations and supported by a letter from the Minister of DC, also on behalf of his colleagues from OC&W and LNFQ, RAWOO chooses an inclusive approach towards designing partnerships.
- ✚ RAWOO formulates ambitious standards for addressing asymmetries in research partnerships and sticks to them, allowing the design of two new programmes to take place and important lessons to be gained.
- ✚ However, the shift towards Southern demand-led, inter-disciplinary research for development on the part of mainstream Dutch research institutions (i.e. non-development researchers) is yet to occur.
- ✚ Actual process management is left to co-ordinating bodies of scientists. RAWOO chooses not to be represented in any advisory bodies during implementation. Yet during the preparatory and design phases RAWOO does play an active, brokering role in defence of the principles it has formulated, to guide the process and to ensure Southern ownership.
- ✚ Southern participants experience both research programmes to be dissimilar from other international programmes: in this case, as a partnership among peers, while rooted in a country-led research agenda.
- ✚ However, the clash of perspectives on research and partnership in the Netherlands is explained by *de facto* reducing the range of Dutch research partners, abandoning the idea of broad institutional and also financial collaboration across sectors.
- ✚ The debate on how to organise the “society-drive” in the North-South research partnerships continues.

RAWOO was effective in creating and upholding political and financial space for experimentation with a new approach towards building North-South research partnerships. Its objectives and standards were ambitious, yet effective in pushing for a new, innovative way of North-South research collaboration. Southern and Northern participants alike, recognise that the two research partnerships that resulted from its efforts as innovative, are different in both content and method from other international programmes. Southern participants feel a strong sense of ownership. They characterise the programmes as partnerships among peers, firmly routed in a country-led agenda. This is a very significant achievement.

The expectations raised by the letter from the Minister of Development Cooperation et al in June 1996 did seem to warrant a broad, consensus building approach towards research and financial partnership building. Hence, RAWOO worked closely with the relevant Sector Research Councils and actively sought the involvement of both mainstream and development research institutions and researchers in the Netherlands. These ambitions however, met with both policy and institutional entanglements that could not be entirely resolved. To effectively pool resources across Dutch sector boundaries proved extremely complicated, in particular due to institutional limitations. With very few exceptions,

Dutch mainstream research financing institutions proved rather inflexible in finding ways to join hands with their Southern counterparts on developing a country-led research agenda, to the point that they were forced to deliver or withdraw. Ultimately, the researchers who continued in the programmes were mostly development researchers. Simultaneously, a few promising initiatives were also observed, for instance, one Dutch University joined one of the programmes on the basis of its own resources. However, the reduction of the range of Dutch partners heralded, the transition from a broad-based consensus building approach to a more selective, functional partnership approach. One conclusion, therefore, may be that to build a strong research partnership the choice of would-be partners is essential.

RAWOO decided not to provide strong facilitation input as well as leaving the management of the consensus building process to the future partners. It did however; keep in close touch with the joint programme committees. During the preparatory phase and especially during the pre-implementation activities (which took place during the design phase), RAWOO took a more active, brokering role to help overcome existing South-North asymmetries. These choices are consistent with the position taken by the RAWOO and its Secretariat not to interfere in process management themselves.

It can be argued that this also had to do with limitations on the part of RAWOO itself. The Council's networking, both in the Netherlands and in the South, seemed to depend on a relatively small number of individuals. Dialogue between some of the Ministries, Foreign Affairs/DGIS and Education, Culture & Science in particular, was negatively affected when they left. Besides this, provision of information for stakeholders (also in the South) was rather ad-hoc and unsystematic. During the preparatory and design phases, a Newsletter could have helped to improve the flow of information, especially between the North and the South. Moreover, it could have helped to facilitate networking between different stakeholders; the researchers from the North and South only exchanged views during a couple of workshops, and were not always well informed about each other's work.

The debate on what exactly a "society-driven" research programme is still manifests in each of the partnership programs. Interestingly, Dutch researchers seem to be the ones pushing for a more active role in civil society. Southern counterparts on the contrary, argue that this may affect the quality of the research. This would appear to be a very "Dutch" argument; used frequently at the start of the research partnership programming exercise, by Dutch researchers when referring to their Southern counterparts. It reiterates the central role of building trust among "would be" partners as part of a preparation programme. The debate also shows that North-South did not constitute the only divide in international research cooperation, but that differing perspectives on the relation between research and society – which are not geographically divided – play an important role as well.

4. Some emerging lessons

Its involvement in the creation of North-South research partnerships has demonstrated a “unique selling point” of RAWOO, as an independent Development Research Council. It highlights its ability to create political and financial space for research innovation and the strengthening of development policy orientation. Dutch scientists remarked that the RAWOO “provided them with a space to talk about research in ways that were atypical in the Netherlands”. Also, the Council provided ample opportunity to listen, to connect with colleagues from the South and to learn from what happens there.

- ✚ RAWOO’s “unique selling point” is its political clout and development policy orientation; this allows the Council to create space and to yield operating principles for effective North-South research collaboration for development.
- ✚ Institutional commitment to Southern demand-led research for development on the part of other sector research councils and ministries in the Netherlands was overrated; institutional as well as conceptual barriers were undervalued.
- ✚ RAWOO has played a key role in balancing existing N-S asymmetries by actively supporting Southern country-led agenda setting. While successful in terms of promoting Southern ownership, this did affect its independence as perceived by the other Dutch sector research councils.
- ✚ The establishment of a ***Dutch Fund for Demand-led North-South Research Partnerships*** would increase the effectiveness of the process of designing and funding such partnerships. This way partner selection, preparation and design can be left to the future research partners themselves, thus producing a separation of institutional roles and more transparency in programming.
- ✚ ***Instructions for Applicants*** regarding grants from such a fund should clearly outline relevant policy priorities, country preferences and proposal selection criteria and should spell out key design concepts and required procedures, including those for stakeholder participation.
- ✚ To allow for the required participatory processes at the national and international level, would-be applicants for grants would have to be supported in doing a ***Programme Preparation Phase***, for example through starter subsidies for those who have submitted a successful proposal outline.

Political and institutional commitment to demand-led research for development, amongst mainstream research institutions in the Netherlands was overrated. The letter from the Minister of Development Cooperation et al in June 1996, proved less of an incentive than was expected, whilst existing institutional and conceptual barriers proved substantial. Notwithstanding the considerable efforts of the Council and its Secretary, some of these factors as yet, have proved impossible to overcome.

RAWOO played a key role in levelling out traditional North-South asymmetries by actively supporting Southern country-led agenda setting; by stimulating in-country planning processes, by building trust relations with relevant Southern institutions and researchers and by publishing the country framework documents. This role however was

not well understood by all Dutch players, some of whom felt RAWOO lacked impartiality.

On the basis of this review, the following suggestions for future action can be made:

- (1) To stimulate the emergence of effective partnerships, RAWOO should concentrate on what it does best: creating space for research innovation and development policy orientation in research partnerships. In view of the renewed interest for development orientated research in the Netherlands, it may benefit from refining its objectives and the principles such partnerships should abide by.
- (2) Instead of taking an active role itself in the facilitation of such partnerships, RAWOO may recommend the establishment of a ***Fund for Demand-led North-South Research Partnerships***. Its board could consist of Dutch research financing institutions, Northern and Southern partners and could define a distinct set of conditions and procedures to be respected in order to obtain funding. In line with accepted international donor practice. This would permit the Ministry of Development Cooperation and possibly, other Ministries and Sector Councils, to upscale the lessons learned during the programming exercise. By applying, on a larger scale the objectives and working principles that proved effective for building demand-led research programmes in the Philippines and Ghana. At the same time, it would leave the choice of partners, the building of relationships and trust, the development of societal and academic focus as well as the elaboration of country frameworks and proposals firmly in the hands of “would be” partners, rather than in those of institutional actors.
- (3) The ***Fund may be decentralised to the country level*** and its execution put in the hands of a national intermediary institution in close consultation with the Dutch Embassy. For practical reasons, cooperation is best organised with countries that already have a development cooperation relationship with the Netherlands, so that one can build on existing capacity and relationships at the embassy level.
- (4) The ***Instruction for Applicants*** for grants from this fund would have to clearly outline development policy aspects, such as country and sector choices and plainly define what is meant by key design concepts, such as, *demand-led research, society-driven research, reciprocal relationships* and *local and national ownership*. It would have to clearly chart what applicants ought to do in terms of *stakeholder participation, articulation with national policy processes* and *involvement of end-users*, etc.
- (5) To allow for innovative partnerships, a ***Programme Preparation Phase*** is strongly recommended. By means of a ***starter subsidy***, granted on the basis of a preliminary proposal. Potential partners can invest the necessary time and energy to duly organise and manage the local, national and international consultations and participatory processes required and by doing so achieving a balanced North-South partnership proposal, which respects the objectives and principles laid down by the Fund.