THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE AND RELIGION ON DEVELOPMENT

STIMULUS OR STAGNATION?

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Foreword

On 30 January 2004, the Minister for Development Cooperation asked the Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV) to produce a report on the influence of cultural and religious factors on development processes. This request arose from a promise the minister had made in a parliamentary debate on 17 November 2003 on the policy memorandum 'Mutual interests, mutual responsibilities' during which a discussion had arisen about whether culture and religion were a help or a hindrance to development.

The AIV was asked to respond to the following questions:
- What is the influence, in the Council's view, of cultural and religious value systems on development processes in the context of continuing globalisation of political, economic and cultural factors?
- Is it possible to identify positive and negative factors that can be taken into account when formulating strategies for sustainable and stable socioeconomic development?
- How can the influence of these factors be incorporated into the formulation of development cooperation policies that are based on respect for human rights and the international legal order?

The first and second questions are general and mainly evaluative in nature, while the third expands upon the points raised in the previous two. The first question focuses on the possible consequences of ever-deepening globalisation on culture and religion and, by extension, on development processes. In chapter 1 of this report, the AIV explores in general the central concepts of culture, religion and development.

The second question demands a more specific elaboration of a recurrent theme: have the cultural and religious changes wrought by globalisation been so radical that the success or failure of development interventions is now partly dependent on them? In chapter II the AIV explains why it would be inappropriate to expect an all-inclusive list of universally applicable factors, either positive or negative: the influence of each factor depends on the chosen perspective, prevailing interests, and time constraints. Even so, the AIV will suggest a number of possible guidelines in this area.

The third question shifts the focus to the cultural dimension of policy in relation to respect for human rights and the principles of the international legal order, alongside efforts to produce stable and sustainable socioeconomic development. Can (and should) cultural and religious attitudes and processes of change be taken into account when formulating and implementing development policy? This issue is discussed in chapter III. The report ends with a number of conclusions and recommendations in chapter IV.

The AIV would observe that the ostensible simplicity of the minister's request is misleading: the issues concerned are extremely complex and difficult to analyse. In the first place culture, religion and development are not clear-cut concepts. They are always rooted in history, and their meaning is contingent on specific circumstances.[1] They are also interrelated, in that culture can embrace religion and views on religion and development are always culturally determined. Definitions of reality, coloured by culture and religion, always take shape in a context determined partly by power and power differentials. These definitions are also emotionally charged, thus giving rise to conflict and controversy. Those who have grown up with a certain definition of reality take it for granted, whereas others see this reality as a construct to which they may react with interest, amusement or irritation.[2] In order to arrive at some general observations and recommendations, the AIV has adopted an approach that relies on case studies, the aim being to make a complex reality more comprehensible. Human rights and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have been chosen as reference points in the discussions on value orientation.

The report was prepared by a working group consisting of Professor A. de Ruijter (chair), Professor B. de Gaay Fortman, H.A.J. Kruijssen, G.H.O. van Maanen, Professor A. Niehof, Ms E.M. Schoo and Professor I. Wolffers of the Development Cooperation Committee, along with Dr B.M. Oomen and J.G. van der Tas, both of the Human Rights Committee. The working group was assisted by civil service liaison officer Dr H.J. Voskamp, and the executive secretary was Ms J.A. Nederlof, with the assistance of trainees R.B. Palstra, Ms M.E. van Weelden and Ms E.C. Hulskamp.

Finally we would like to offer our thanks to those who were directly involved in establishing the Knowledge Forum for Religion and Development and were kind enough to share their views and expertise with the working group during the preparation of this report.

1   See A. Tsing, 'The Global Situation', *Cultural Anthropology* 15.3 (2000), 327-360.

2   P. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1991. 'What is at stake here is the power of imposing a vision of the symbolic world through principles of division.' (221).

I Culture, religion and development

I.1   Culture

Human beings do not experience the world directly, but through a sort of filter. To a large extent, this filter determines which stimuli in our environment we respond to. Our classification, interpretation and evaluation of the selected stimuli are also coloured by this filter. This process is not a random one. On the contrary, it follows patterns of learned actions and reactions which have developed over the course of time in specific circumstances. It is this interaction – between general mechanisms that control the capacity to learn and the specific circumstances in which this learning takes place – that engenders cultures and produces such a wide variety of them.

Given the versatile and dynamic nature of culture, the AIV would prefer not to give its own definition but would instead cite a slightly dated but often-used description of culture as 'a characteristic arrangement of customs, objects and behaviours which are linked to learned, shared and flexible rules, values, norms and ideas through which people respond to their surroundings'.[3] In other words: human beings' ability to create and interpret reality and to make it meaningful, to fashion ways of life and mores, and to tackle problems. There is no universally valid system of interpretation. People function in many different groups: in their families, at work, in sport, in religious or secular contexts, as inhabitants of a village, city or country, and as citizens of the world. Each of these groups has its own culture, to the extent that its members share certain ideas, knowledge and experience. That common basis gives the group and its members their characteristic identity, which overlaps with other identities they may have.

In general, people are very adept at playing multiple roles. Research has shown that switching roles normally entails a smooth transition back and forth between various identities. This is particularly true of identities that people choose more or less freely, by joining certain groups, such as professional associations, local organisations, clubs, religious groups and so on. Problems arise when people don't feel free to determine their own identity, have an identity imposed on them or find themselves placed in groups where they feel they don't belong.

Discrimination that forces people into a certain group on the basis of specific external or physical characteristics leads to friction between their own subjective identity and the imposed identity and limits their ability to function socially. In the field of development cooperation, these kinds of situations can crop up at any level of policy preparation or implementation and harm the development process.[4]

The difficulty in getting to know one's own culture lies in its seeming 'naturalness' and the fact that it is taken for granted. This can be seen, for example, in gender relations,

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3   Des Gasper, 'Culture and Three Levels in Development Ethics: From Advocacy to Analysis and from Analysis to Practice', in *Cultural Dynamics in Development Processes*, ed. Arie de Ruijter and Lieteke van Vucht Tijssen, Unesco Publishing, The Hague, 1994.

4   See also I. Wolffers, 'Cultuur en gezondheid: het plaatselijke en het globale' in *Cultuur en Gezondheid*, ed. I. Wolffers and A. van der Kwaak, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2004, and H.L. Moor, *A Passion for Difference: Essays in Anthropology and Gender*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1994.

which can seem so self-evident that one might expect to find the same attitudes across cultures, with confusing and harmful consequences. Evaluations of development interventions regularly attribute unexpected results to a failure to take account of local gender relations, as illustrated by a number of examples given later in this report.

Culture is always a double-edged sword: it is both a means of satisfying the need to belong (identification) and a vehicle for satisfying the equally powerful need to stand out from the crowd (differentiation). It is important for intercultural development specialists to recognise that this principle applies equally to individuals, groups and countries.

If we examine the way that academics have until recently attempted to interpret patterns of meanings, values, norms and actions, we can identify a number of prominent ideas. To begin with, they posited cultural units that more or less coincided with distinct social and geographical units. Secondly, they assumed that the members of each unit attributed certain shared, characteristic meanings to reality and engaged in actions and practices associated with them. Thirdly, they believed that these characteristics and actions were systematically interrelated within an all-encompassing 'culture' that could be distinguished from other 'cultures'. Fourthly, it was thought that these cultures could then be ranked hierarchically. The influence of globalisation has accelerated the collapse of this picture.[5] When flows of people, information, goods and capital increasingly span the world and no longer stop at any physical border, and when local events are influenced by other local events thousands of miles away, the classic unities of time, place and action no longer hold. The result is that cultural preferences are in constant flux and no longer coincide with well-defined groups, and therefore do not form an unequivocal basis for individual action.

The choices people make are inspired in part by the values, norms and traditions that have been deemed useful and valuable from one generation to the next. In times of change, people choose the appropriate solution for that particular problem and moment from the cultural arrangements familiar to them. They may be solutions from their own cultural orientation, but they can also come from other groups or even emerge from a completely new practice. This makes culture not only creative and flexible – by presenting solutions to the problems of survival at a particular point in time – but also dominant, in the sense that group members have difficulty extricating themselves from it.

A living culture does not provide a fixed programme but is continually subject to reinterpretations of reality and the need to coordinate with other cultures. What is more, it is definitely not the case that every country has only one culture. Countries are home to

5   For further reading on globalisation, see A. Appadurai: *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996; U. Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places*, Routledge, London/New York, 1996; A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1990; W. van Binsbergen, 'Globalization and Virtuality: Analytical Problems Posed by the Contemporary Transformation of African Society', in *Globalization and Identity: Dialectics of Flow and Closure*, ed. B. Meyer and P. Geschiere, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999: 272-303; C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, New York, 1973; C. Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays on Interpretative Anthropology*, Basic Books, New York, 1983; and C. Geertz, *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections upon Philosophical Topics*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 2000.

numerous cultures, some of which overlap while others are mutually exclusive. They relate to language, religion, territory, lifestyle, age, gender, education and occupation. In addition, countries have immigrants, who bring along the customs they grew up with in their countries of origin. They selectively blend these customs with the culture of their new surroundings to create a way of life that suits them. This means that multiculturalism can have many faces, depending on the degree to which 'the old' and 'the new' influence the new identity. The form this takes can even differ from one generation to the next.[6] Thus we have youth cultures, elite cultures, women's and men's cultures, shanty-town cultures and rural cultures. The process of competition and coordination between the various cultures and their interpretation of reality can result in a dominant culture and subcultures. The question of which culture is dominant and how subcultures relate to it is also susceptible to change.

With the pace and dynamics of change, today's hybrid cultures place heavy demands on the interpretive capacity of individuals and groups, thereby creating a climate ripe for alienation and opposition. Although globalisation leads to worldwide flows of ideas, capital and people, it also fuels the rise of new countercultures and the rebirth of nationalism, regionalism and ethnicity. Globalisation processes sometimes trigger 'localisation': a return to 'native culture' and religious traditions, which may or may not be presented as age-old. Those opposed to change and assimilation will come to identify more strongly with their – sometimes imaginary – ethnic, cultural or religious background.[7] In many cases this leads to a 'reinvention' of traditions.

I.2   Religion

Religion is one of the core components of culture, though at the same time it enjoys a relative degree of autonomy and is, in a sense, of a different order. Religion offers answers to the ultimate questions: human beings' place in the world and what happens after death. Religion can also inspire secular goals, prompting iconoclasm, crusades, wars and massacres, but also peace talks, human rights activism and humanitarianism. Religion also involves commandments and prohibitions of certain types of human behaviour, the relationship between faith communities and those outside, and the organisation of society.

Religions are characterised by messages which, in the eyes of believers, come from a higher power and for that reason must not be diluted. Yet religions are not immobile monoliths. They are coloured by culture in the sense that religious interpretations are influenced by their specific cultural context and the power relationships embedded with-

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6   See T. Eriksen: Small Places, Large Issues: An Introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology, Pluto Press, London, 2001; T. Friedman, The Lexus and the Olive Tree, Anchor Books, New York, 2000; J. Friedman, Cultural Identity & Global Process, Sage Publications, London, 1994; B. Anderson, Long-Distance Nationalism: World Capitalism and the Rise of Identity Politics, 1992; E.J. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (ed.), The Invention of Tradition, Cambridge University Press, 1983; and E. Roosens, Creating Ethnicity: the Process of Ethnogenesis, Sage Publications, London, 1989.

7   G. Baumann, 'Dominant and Demotic Discourses of Culture: Their Relevance to Multi-Ethnic Alliance', in Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multicultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism, ed. P. Werbner and T. Modood, Zed Books, London, 1997, 213, and S. Hall, 'The Local and the Global: Globalisation and Ethnicity', in Culture, Globalisation and the World System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity, ed. A.D. King, Macmillan, London, 19-39.

in it. For example, Christianity preaches equality, but in Kerala (India) there are church-
es reserved for particular castes. Islam is practised differently in Indonesia than in
Turkey or France. Buddhism in Japan belongs to a different school from Buddhism in
Tibet or Sri Lanka. Religions change according to time and place, though in theory they
are more resistant to passing fashions than other expressions of culture. Belief in eter-
nal truths sometimes limits people's ability to engage in dialogue, make compromises
or find a happy medium.

In this report the AIV defines religion as the belief in a non-empirically determined reali-
ty (powers or forces, mostly called God or gods) that makes life meaningful and
inspires human behaviour. From a cultural-historical perspective, the social establish-
ment of religion in the form of institutions, buildings and officials is part of the domain
of religion, as are collective expressions like symbols, rituals, dogmas and taboos.
However, religion also encompasses an attitude towards life. Rules of conduct that reli-
gions impose on believers not only affect their spiritual lives but also influence their
outlook on many other aspects of their private and public life, including, for instance,
the state, development cooperation or human rights. There are believers who are
avowedly conservative, and there are others who are open to change. Concepts like
peace, justice, reconciliation and environmental conservation play an important part in
determining these attitudes.

Followers of fundamentalist movements have committed themselves to rules of behav-
iour that impede their ability to adapt to developments that have become generally
accepted by the rest of society. They have their own identity and a single-mindedness
which makes them difficult negotiating partners. It should be noted that fundamental-
ism and orthodoxy are by no means specific to religion; they can also be found in the
sphere of ideology.

For many, religion has apparently become more attractive as a source of identity and
social cohesion in response to the gathering pace of change in the world and the blur-
ring of dividing lines between countries, generations, men and women, and economic
classes. Religion seems to flourish in times of uncertainty and repression, particularly
among those who feel excluded, threatened by rival lifestyles, or confronted by anomie
and a lack of opportunity. For many people, religion apparently fulfils the need for
meaning and a sense of community, particularly in an ever more complex and frag-
mented world. Religion can be a framework either for embracing that complex reality or
for making it more narrow and rigid, for example, by seeing the world solely in black-
and-white terms: God vs. Satan, good vs. evil, believers vs. infidels et cetera. This kind
of language can be misused by some political groups as a pretext and justification for
political mobilisation. Politicised extremism in its most radical form can foster terror-
ism. The danger here is that the actions of a few extremists can lead to the polarisa-
tion and alienation of different segments of the population, parts of the world and
religions.

I.3   Development

For the purposes of this report, the concept of development is understood to mean
systematically raising the level of human well-being. In principle, development coopera-
tion is about removing barriers to progress (with the responsibility for defining
'progress' resting in principle with those involved). Development never takes place in a
vacuum but always within the ongoing process of interpretation and negotiation which

is part and parcel of the power struggle between different groups in society, each of which interprets and organises reality on the basis of its own specific cultural outlook.

The concept of development has evolved over time. In the aftermath of World War II, development was generally seen as economic growth. This 'Western' interpretation of the concept equated development with modernisation, emphasising the transition from traditional to modern means of production. At the same time, people understood that development involved more than simply transforming the economic structure; it also had to do with growing differentiation, rationalisation and individualisation.[8] According to the ideas of the time, development could be planned, managed and fostered through certain interventions, a process that accorded a central role to the nation state. At that time it was also generally assumed that economic progress would gradually result in more prosperity for the entire population (the trickle-down effect).

As time wore on, more and more experts came to reject the notion that the trickle-down effect would automatically mean that everyone would share in the new prosperity. The focus shifted to "bottom-up" development, emphasising the basic needs of developing countries and the right to political and social self-determination, not only for governments but also for society's poor.

Alongside economic growth, the redistribution of scarce resources moved to the foreground in the effort to achieve long-term poverty reduction. In seeking the causes of poverty, people began looking beyond the national level, to the global balance of power. Gradually, more and more non-material conditions were identified for sustainable socioeconomic development, like gender equality, environmental management, political democratisation, including recognising and respecting human rights, building and maintaining civil society, good governance and self-actualisation. This implied a shift in emphasis, in both analysis and policy, from exploitation to exclusion. Another aspect of this shift is the concept of entitlements: people's legally protected claims to what is necessary to meet their most basic needs.[9]

Among academics and policymakers there was a growing realisation that development involved issues of such complexity that planning and management were only going to be partially effective. Development-related problems could never be separated from power differentials and social conflicts, even if they initially appeared under the guise of different cultural and religious orientations. All kinds of unintended, unexpected and even undesirable effects may ensue, robbing policy initiatives of their effectiveness. In a situation like this, the lifespan of these policies will gradually shrink, possibly leading to a plethora of equally short-lived corrective measures.

8   See H. van der Loo and W. van Reijen, *Paradoxen van modernisering*, Coutinho, Bussum, 1997, and J.W. Schoorl: *Sociologie der modernisering: een inleiding in de sociologie der niet-westerse volken*, Van Loghum Slaterus, Deventer, 1974.

9   This issue attracted considerable media attention after the publication of *Poverty and Famines: an Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1982) by the Indian scholar A.S. Sen. See also T. Allen and A. Thomas, *Poverty and Development into the 21st Century*, Oxford University Press, 2000, and M. Hajez and H. Wagenaar (ed.), *Deliberative Policy Analyses: Understanding Governance in the Network Society*, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Frustration about limited results of development interventions and the intractable nature of development problems prompted a re-evaluation of the trickle-down principle. For example, negative side-effects like imperfect redistribution were to some extent counteracted by giving a greater role to international organisations, which – like a quasi-global government – were expected to bear responsibility for ensuring justice and effectiveness. However, this 'world government' was riven by conflicts of interest and was unable to manage development processes at either national or global level. This led to more questions about the effectiveness, efficiency, workability and even legitimacy of development policy. Reality proved to be more intractable, multifaceted and diffuse than had been supposed. The consequence of this was a realisation that the conceptual frameworks, intervention methodologies and implementation schemes were falling short of the mark. In this sense the changing meaning of 'development' can be ascribed mainly to a greater understanding and knowledge of the complexity of the problem.

There is now a growing realisation that there is no one single universally applicable method for increasing well-being; instead, there are numerous possible approaches. This can be seen in the 2004 UNDP report, which describes development as broadening the range of choices and proposes formally recognising multiculturalism as an international organisational principle.[10]

I.4   The culture-bound nature of concepts

If development is defined as elevating the level of human well-being over the long term or lending support to this process, development cooperation can be seen as working together to achieve these aims. Obviously, concepts like well-being or progress are, to a large extent, culturally determined. This is why donors and partners have trouble agreeing on definitions. After all, our views on culture, religion and development are determined by our own value patterns. In encounters between different cultures and religions (such as those that occur in development cooperation), friction arises when people fail to recognise that their own values, norms and customs are not obvious or necessarily shared by others. This is especially apparent when values important to development ossify into dogmas, which are not open to debate and brook no deviations.

I.5   Conclusion

The AIV subscribes to the somewhat paradoxical view that globalisation, instead of creating a more unified culture, has heightened the importance of different cultures and religions. Contrary to what might have been expected, people have reacted to globalisation along cultural and religious lines, whether by embracing the developments, by appropriating the powers of globalisation and giving them a local twist, or by rejecting these powers altogether. The globalisation of communication technology has made it easier to propagate one's own cultural and religious identity, through the international media or transnational networks. We therefore live in a time in which more attention needs to be paid to differences in cultural and religious orientations. The question remains though, of how these elements can be incorporated into policy.

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10 UNDP, *Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World* (Development Report), 2004.

II   Clash of values

As has already been said, development interventions are never value-free. They do not take place in a vacuum, but in societies with certain cultural orientations, conflicts of interest and power relationships. But what happens if the parties concerned have different cultural orientations? What does it mean when one of the parties regards a certain practice as detrimental to the development process, while another sees it as part of a tradition, custom, culture or religion?

Before addressing these questions, this chapter will examine several cornerstones of current development policy, such as internationally recognised human rights and the MDGs and the objectives they embody, like poverty reduction. It will then seek to identify the circumstances in which interests or values conflict and create cultural and religious obstacles to the development process.

II.1   Human rights

Although the notion of the universality of human rights may, at first glance, seem to be at odds with cultural diversity, there is a growing international consensus that human rights, more than anything else, offer the best chance of safeguarding diversity. Human rights standards are laid down in international documents, like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), as well as many other international and regional treaties. The universality and cohesiveness of the various categories of rights was affirmed by almost every country in the world at the 1993 conference in Vienna.[11] Human rights have also started to play an ever greater role in development cooperation, in Dutch policy and at global level.[12] The so-called third generation of human rights (collective rights) has also gained in importance. This term refers to issues like the right to self-determination and the right to development. Under the heading of collective rights, certain groups (e.g. indigenous peoples) are granted certain rights, which are rooted in their cultural and religious identities.

At the same time, ever since the discourse on human rights began, a debate has raged over the universality of the concept. One thing to emerge from these debates has been the key importance of human dignity, as a basis for evaluating cultures and a way of bridging cultural differences. Not surprisingly, the tendency to elevate human rights to the status of universal rights, which take precedence over local values, has met with harsh criticism. This debate is not only about the universality of standards, but also about human experience and the international language in which human rights are communicated. This is why the dialogue on human rights is so essential, if only because it can help to establish which values are shared and which clash. This dia-

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11 Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, World Conference on Human Rights, 1993.

12 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Mutual interests, mutual responsibilities: Dutch development cooperation en route to 2015*, The Hague, 2003. See also AIV advisory report no. 30: *A human rights based approach to development cooperation*, The Hague, April 2003.

logue must take place before any development interventions are launched. Afterwards there will be time to see if (and to what extent) differences of opinion should lead to other choices, other emphases or perhaps even other partners, or – in the most extreme cases – to a termination of the partnership.

The majority of countries with which the Netherlands has a development relationship guarantee their citizens fundamental rights, at least on paper. At the same time, human rights are often flouted in these countries and dismissed as 'Western' by certain groups. Moreover, the way certain human rights standards have been formulated is often the result of a political compromise, and the language used is sometimes quite general and open to different interpretations. As the history of the Universal Declaration shows, human rights are an expression of culture and must always be applied in a specific context. Although countries generally agree about the universal validity of the essence of human rights, the debate goes on. In this context, the AIV would again refer to its 1998 report, which distinguishes between universality and uniformity of human rights. *Universality* is defined as the global legitimacy of the standards as such, while *uniformity* (or rather, *non-uniformity*) refers to the various ways that states apply these standards in practice (margins of discretion or 'appreciation', policy freedom).[13]

This is why it is important that those involved in development cooperation fully engage in the debate on human rights. The 'Rights at Home' project shows just how successful such a strategy can be. This project examines how Islamic law, the Sharia, operates in practice. By engaging in dialogue on themes like Islamic values, social justice and family law, attempts are being made to identify parallels between international human rights conventions and Islamic law. In Yemen, Tanzania and Southeast Asia, imams, human rights activists and ordinary citizens have been involved in this dialogue, and it has become clear that Islamic values and internationally recognised human rights are more compatible than had initially been thought. Using this approach, the international human rights conventions that have been adopted at national level can be implemented more effectively at local level. The most successful development projects are often those that seek to create legal literacy, making people aware of their rights and how to exercise them. These 'upstream rights' contribute to human dignity and are worth defending, according to the participants themselves. Upstream rights are at least as vital to development relationships as 'downstream rights', which are conferred from above but which are sometimes not tailored specifically enough to local conditions.

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13   AIV advisory report no. 4: *Universality of human rights and cultural diversity*, June 1998, 15-19.

Human rights in practice

To help fight AIDS, the Netherlands supports CARAM (Coordination of Action Research on AIDS and Migration), a network of organisations dealing with the health of migrants from a human rights perspective. UNAIDS, the UN organisation in this field, greatly appreciates CARAM's approach, because it carries out activities at different levels. For example, it organises AIDS awareness campaigns among the migrant population, while working for bilateral treaties at regional and national level protecting the right to health care. Another activity is the annual publication of the State of Health of Migrants, the first edition of which will appear in 2006. The report is an attempt to relate international human rights agreements to people's everyday lives. The countries participating collect data on the ratification of international agreements on migration and access to health care, and how these are translated into national legislation. With these facts in hand, CARAM then looks at what is going on in the field: what makes it so difficult to implement this legislation and the associated policy? What are the facilitating and inhibiting factors in the cultural confrontation between migrants and the recipient country? These questions are addressed not only in interviews with key figures but also in group sessions with migrants, who are given a chance to talk about access to health care, the impact policy has had on them and their heightened risk as migrants. In this way CARAM draws information from various levels in order to produce an analysis that looks not just at international agreements but also at everyday practice, which can sometimes be resistant to analysis.

In the view of the AIV, intervention and policy dialogue should take their lead not just from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but also from interpretations of human dignity in the country itself (recalling that universality is not necessarily uniformity), from treaties the country has ratified, and from the work of local NGOs and legal experts working in the field of human rights. The projects most deserving of support are those seeking to raise people's awareness of their rights ('upstream rights') and how they can exercise them.

II.2   Millennium Development Goals

In September 2000, 189 countries adopted a declaration at the UN Millennium Summit in which they resolved to work to reduce the most dire forms of poverty. This was a powerful impetus towards the recognition of universal human dignity. Not only had the urgency of concrete action been affirmed at the highest political level, but the use of clear benchmarks would make it easier to follow the necessary steps. This made it possible to chart progress not only at global level, but also at the level of each developing country. Although the social and economic rights and the Millennium Development Goals cannot be equated, meeting the MDGs is a major step towards a full realisation of these rights. In January 2005 the Millennium Project report (or Sachs report,

as it is more commonly known) was published.[14] This document takes stock of progress made towards the MDGs and concludes that it is still possible to meet the goals by 2015, but that serious commitments will be necessary from both developing countries and donors. The report mentions several specific steps that must be taken for this to happen. The AIV has already discussed the Sachs report in a separate advisory letter.[15]

The AIV sees the MDGs as important catalysts for sustainable poverty reduction. However, they should not be viewed solely from a global perspective, as they ignore the significant differences between and within countries in the level of poverty and the ways it manifests itself. The MDGs should actually impact on the individual target groups. They were never intended to replace the goals of development cooperation; on the contrary they are integral to the overall development effort.[16]

The MDGs have a clear advantage in the present context: since they are expressed in quantitative targets, they can, in theory, act as a basis for intercultural cooperation.

II.3   Values and conditions

An important condition for achieving the development objectives of the MDGs is good governance. The AIV interprets this concept broadly. Good governance is more than just the presence of democratic 'checks and balances' and a government that respects human rights and generally accepted legal principles. There must also be scope for values and standards rooted in indigenous cultural traditions and historical developments – provided, of course, that they don't run contrary to the aforementioned legal principles and human rights. Finally, good governance is characterised by participation, safeguards for property rights and predictability.

Donors also want the implementation of development programmes to be marked by transparency, effectiveness, accountability and a sense of purpose. It should be clear that allowing these standards to occupy a place in the intercultural relationship between partners does not infringe upon cultural identity. This state can be achieved through an open dialogue in which all parties are aware of their own cultural assumptions. It should be clear what values and standards underlie the donor's actions, why they are deemed important, what interests are at stake and what consequences their implementation would have for the parties involved.

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14   J.D. Sachs, *Investing in Development: A Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals*, New York, 2005.

15   AIV-advisory letter, *Response to the Sachs Report: how do we attain the Millennium Development Goals?*, April 2005.

16   Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Mutual interests, mutual responsibilities: Development Cooperation en route to 2015*, The Hague, April 2003.

Land in Ghana: a goldmine for chiefs?

Land in Ghana can be divided into two categories: state land and communal land. Eighty to ninety per cent of all uncultivated land in Ghana is communal, and is administered by traditional authorities: tribal chiefs, heads of families, and in the north, *tendambas*, the priests of the land. In the Ashanti region, communal land is called 'stool land' after the chief's wooden chair which is believed to contain the souls of the tribe's ancestors. The constitution recognises the chiefs as stewards of the stool land and states that the chiefs must follow customary law in administering it. The chiefs are elected according to customary law, and the state has no authority to intervene. According to Ashanti customary law, the members of a community enjoy joint ownership of stool land. The chief is thus expected to administer the land for the common good. As long as land is available, every member of the community has the right to raise crops or build on it. This right to use the land can be passed down from generation to generation and can only be lost through abandonment of the land, denial of the communal title or by permission of the person in question.

With the sharp increase in population and urbanisation, demand for building land in the areas around Ghana's main cities is on the rise. The same applies to the villages surrounding Kumasi, the capital of the Ashanti region. In response to this trend, chiefs are leasing out stool land to outsiders – in violation of Ashanti customary law – even though the land is intended for members of the community, who use it to grow their crops. In the villages, the chiefs' actions are costing people their farmland, and hence their livelihoods, food supply and income. This conversion of farmland into building land is also driving up food prices in the villages. Although some chiefs use the proceeds to develop their villages, most communities and farmers receive little or no benefit from the money.

Although there is considerable local opposition to the chiefs' actions, it seldom has any effect. This is largely because of the erosion of traditional structures for control and accountability, such as procedures for deposing corrupt chiefs and the provision that chiefs' decisions must be approved by their council of elders. These traditional checks and balances had already dissipated in the colonial period, when the British assumed the ultimate authority to appoint and dismiss chiefs. At the same time, however, the colonial administrators ensured that the chiefs did not abuse their power to appropriate the proceeds from communal land. They thus introduced a measure of state control over the chiefs to replace the traditional controls.

The present government exerts no such control. It insists that the state has no say in the administration of the stool land, as it is the domain of the chiefs. It further maintains that intervention is unnecessary, since there are a range of local structures in place to monitor the local land management system. Despite all the evidence that these structures no longer work, the state continues to hide behind them. In doing so, it can avoid a confrontation with the chiefs, who are still powerful figures. In the end it is the small farmers who are the victims, caught between an inaccessible government and greedy chiefs.[17]

17 With thanks to J. Ubink, University of Leiden.

II.4   Where are the clashes?

On the basis of the definitions of culture, religion and development given in the first chapter, it should be clear that it is not easy to draw up a list of cultural or religious factors with a clear-cut influence on development. On top of that, what might have seemed to have a negative effect at one point can appear in a very different light at a later stage. Sometimes it can even be hard to tell whose interests are being harmed by a development intervention and whose are being served.

The following examples show how certain important aspects of development can some-times be at odds with local values or traditions that are valuable and deserve recognition in their own right.

- In Africa the *extended family* is extremely important as a social safety net and a framework for care and support, particularly in countries where the state does little or nothing in the way of social security. At the same time, the extended family can stifle the individual development that could otherwise drive collective progress. For an individual to leave this social network means disrupting ties with his or her immediate community, and may lead to downright exclusion. This is a high price to pay.
- *Land*. Whereas donors stress the importance of entitlements protected by individual rights – proof of ownership that can serve, for instance, as collateral for loans – in some cultures land and water are communal property and appropriating land is seen as a violation of communal rights. Throughout Africa and parts of Southeast Asia, privatising communal land and including it in the land register has had unexpected negative effects, such as the loss of rights and the exclusion of women and foreigners.
- *Water management*. The sawahs of Indonesia are among the oldest systems of communal water management in the world and demand universal participation in order to be effective. The religious calendar in Bali indicates precisely when ceremonial offerings have to be made and which sluice should to be opened at which time. Without the Balinese being consciously aware of it, this method has in the past ensured that the water from the mountains irrigated the rice paddies evenly. When donors interfere with these patterns and divert the flow of water, the result can be serious internal conflicts.
- *Money*. There are cultures where money is not a goal in itself but a means to facilitate human interaction, and where bartering systems and investments in the social network are socially more advantageous. For Dalits in India, for instance, money is mainly necessary in their contacts with the outside world. Within their own community there is a much greater emphasis on social capital. Income-generating activities for women were launched in South Africa to improve the food security of rural households, but instead of selling the produce, the women distributed it to family and friends. In doing so they were investing in their social network, so that they would have people they could rely on in times of food scarcity. From the women's point of view, this was a perfectly rational decision, but it meant that the hoped-for increase in household income was not achieved.
- *Age*. In many developing countries, age, rather than knowledge, confers authority. What is more, knowledge is not a public good. Certain knowledge is reserved for the oldest generation, for example the history of the village, ritual knowledge or medicinal practices. In places of this kind, younger men and women do not have the social position to acquire or use this knowledge. This creates problems when young people leave the village and acquire modern knowledge elsewhere. When they return to their home countries, they are sometimes not given the senior positions their education

would warrant, because their superiors – who do not have the same level of education – would then lose their leadership (and personal) status.

- *Gender*. Projects in Africa to commercialise agriculture were successful in that they significantly increased people's monetary income. However, the money earned was at the disposal of the man of the house. The health and well-being of the women and children did not improve; on the contrary, it actually worsened. This is because, according to the prevailing division of gender roles within the family, women were typically expected to provide for the family's basic needs, while men were free to spend the money they had earned as they saw fit, which they did not always do in the family's best interests. Meanwhile, the level of production of their own vegetable gardens had fallen, since commercial farming required more time and work. A situation like this shows why gender analyses are so important in development interventions. The use of cheap labour is an advantage from the perspective of economic growth, but not from a development perspective, if it perpetuates the subordinate position of women.

- *Family planning*. In every society the position of women and the regulation of fertility are sensitive matters that impinge on fundamental values and traditions. At the same time, birth and fertility have economic consequences and political significance. The post-war period saw a huge increase in world population, primarily caused by explosive population growth in poor countries. As a result slowing population growth was defined as a top priority at the international conferences on population in 1974 and 1984. At the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo, the emphasis on curbing population growth was supplanted by a new paradigm, which stressed the sexual and reproductive rights and health of the individual. Implementing the Cairo agenda means recognising women's reproductive and sexual rights, regardless of their age or marital status. At first glance one might think that the Cairo agenda would be harder to implement in countries with a dominant religion, a strongly pro-natal bias or a problematic record on women's rights. Yet the numbers do not bear this out, as can be seen in the table below. According to a comparative study of Islamic countries, fertility is lowest and the use of modern contraception highest in the largest Muslim country in the world – Indonesia – and in Iran.[18]

18   The total fertility rate (TFR) indicates the average number of children that would be born per woman
     if all women lived to the end of their childbearing years and bore children according to the age-specific
     fertility rates for that area and period. UNFPA, *State of World Population 2004*, New York, 2004,
     p. 102-109.

Country	Total fertility rate	Prevalence of modern contraception (in %)
Iran	2.33	56
Indonesia	2.35	55
Turkey	2.43	38
Morocco	2.75	42
Egypt	3.29	54
Bangladesh	3.46	43
Saudi Arabia	4.53	29
Pakistan	5.08	20
Nigeria	5.42	9
Afghanistan	6.80	4

II.5   Where is it working?

Every culture and religion has certain negative aspects that can have an effect on large groups of people. One well-known example is female circumcision: a custom in certain African cultures which is given a religious slant and portrayed as a requirement for every respectable Muslim woman. In reality the Koran says nothing about female circumcision. The custom has more to do with curtailing a woman's sexual power. Other examples of legitimising inequalities of power in cultural or religious terms include honour killings, homophobia, the prohibition of condoms and discrimination against people with a different skin colour or belonging to a lower caste.

By contrast, there are also cultural and religious initiatives that aim to achieve the very opposite. After all, religion can also be an engine for change, generating a capacity for liberation and revitalisation and – like culture – promoting self-awareness and identity formation. This side of religion is probably more prominent in partner countries than in donor countries. In the Netherlands, for example, religion and faith have become largely a private matter. In developing countries, however, religion and its public expression are an unalienable part of society and culture. In processes of change, religion can play a major normative role, a role that can sometimes be of fundamental importance in a development relationship.

This is illustrated by the actions of visionary leaders like Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Oscar Romero and the Dalai Lama. Their role in de-escalating conflicts, fighting racial discrimination and advancing the cause of peace and development was and remains critically important.

Religious leaders and family planning in Iran

It is clear from the table above that there are no grounds for claiming that Islam as a religion is opposed to contraception or women's rights. Iran's successful family planning programme should be seen in the political and religious context from which it sprang. In 1967, under the rule of the last Shah, a family planning programme was set up to improve the position of women, among other reasons. Religious leaders opposed the programme. After the fall of the Shah and the proclamation of the Islamic Republic in 1979, the measures were repealed. By 1986 the war with Iraq had taken a heavy toll on the economy, resulting in a policy reversal. A new family planning programme was officially launched in 1989. People could choose from a range of methods. The drop in fertility came about much sooner than policymakers had anticipated, and with a TFR of 2.3, Iran has the lowest fertility rate of any Islamic country. This result must be attributed in part to successful policy in other fields. In rural areas, female literacy rose from 17% in 1976 to 62% in 1996. A second factor is the extensive system of primary health care which has included a large network of female volunteers since 1993. A third factor, which is at least as important as the other two, is the way that family planning has been embedded in religious frameworks from the outset and the way the normative guidelines were set out by religious leaders in consultation with others. Religious leaders were approached at all levels to actively promote family planning in the interest of preventing unwanted pregnancies and protecting the health of mothers and children. This approach was more pragmatic than ideological, and it caught on. The core of the Islamic family planning programme in Iran is connecting family planning with family values grounded in religion and culture.[19]

Religious leaders and institutions can also present themselves as champions of peace and justice. Almost immediately after Pinochet's coup in Chile, a body was established by the leadership of the Catholic Church there to support victims, take legal action against oppressive new legislation and document human rights violations so that the international community would be aware of them and take action wherever possible. The Vicaría de Solidaridad continued to function throughout the period of dictatorship, because the Church as an institution provided the necessary protection. It is no coincidence that the commission recently set up by the Chilean government to report on the extent of human rights violations was headed by a bishop who was one of the Vicaría's former leaders.

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19 The downside to this is a lack of attention to the sexual and reproductive rights and health of individuals. The taboo on premarital sex and the refusal to recognise the sexual and reproductive rights of adolescents are obstacles to an effective approach to AIDS.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa is another example of the positive influence religious ideas can have on social processes. The principles on which the Commission was established – admission of guilt followed by reconciliation – would not have found their way into the political realm had they not been deeply entrenched in the culture and religious consciousness of broad segments of the population. The fact that this Commission was not chaired by an eminent politician but by an archbishop went a long way to help bring about social reconciliation.

Often it is religious institutions that take on the role of care-givers, particularly in areas where the state falls short in this regard. In Ghana, 40% of all social services are in the hands of religious organisations. Religion can also foster other positive values like tolerance, solidarity or compassion. In Zambia, where the use of condoms has been frowned upon by Christian churches and is at odds with the local culture, it is churches, even so, that take it upon themselves to care for people with AIDS. The same value of compassion inspires Buddhist monks in various Thai monasteries to care for AIDS patients; monks have also opened a rehabilitation centre for another stigmatised group of people, drug addicts. In addition to these 'works of mercy', religion can also offer moral support, giving hope, comfort and strength to people living in poverty.[20]

Of course, it is not only religion but also culture that finds fitting responses in situations of change. Below is an example of a principle that was stated in more general terms in the first chapter.

20 Most of the examples in this paragraph are taken from the *Workshop Report on the Role of Religion in Development Processes*, the culmination of four workshops attended by representatives of the Dutch government and NGOs. The workshops were organised by ICCO, Prisma and Kerk in Actie and were held in The Hague between November 2003 and February 2004.

World Bank and tradition

In two fishing villages on the northern coast of Madura, Indonesia, modernisation of the fishing industry has changed the lives of fishermen, but in different ways. In both villages the division of labour and the distribution of the catch are governed by time-honoured principles. The first principle is the distinction between a share in the catch per expedition and a share in the total profit, which is paid out at the end of every month or season. The size of the share depends on the tasks performed by the crew member in question and the capital investments in the boat, engine and equipment. The second principle is the gender-based division of labour in the industry. Everything having to do with fishing itself and the technology that goes along with it is in the hands of men, but as soon as the fish reaches shore, the women take over. There is a fixed relationship (which remains in effect as long as the boat is in service) between the owner of the boat and the woman responsible for marketing the fish. She is compensated with 10% of the gross income. Women in this position also function as financial backers. In the 1980s, using money from the World Bank, the government tried to replace this system, which had been in operation since time immemorial, with a 'modern' system featuring a cooperative, a fish auction, and bank loans. In Village A, the plan was an utter failure: the female financiers and fishmongers refused to step aside and the fishermen themselves had no trust in the bank. Village B, on the other hand, recognised that as a result of technological change, the return on capital had increased at the expense of the return on labour, a development that was hurting ordinary fishermen. The World Bank project was seized upon as a way to readjust the system of remuneration. A charismatic leader from the village's fishing community took the initiative and managed to bring all parties together around the negotiating table. The result is a fairer distribution of income based on traditional principles anchored in the local culture which everyone can agree on.

II.6   Indigenous knowledge

One way of getting the most out of local cultural heritage is to recognise the importance of indigenous knowledge. After all, this is native knowledge that has been passed down from generation to generation, in response to the specific demands of local conditions. And it is for that reason that indigenous knowledge should be recognised as relevant, culturally generated knowledge.[21]

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21 For a comprehensive overview, please refer to the study conducted jointly by UNESCO and Nuffic. P. de Guchteneire (UNESCO) and I. Krukkert and G. van Liebenstein (Nuffic) (ed.), *Best Practices on Indigenous Knowledge*, Paris and The Hague, 1999.

> **Knowledge in context**
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> In southwestern Ethiopia, approximately 11 million people subsist on *enset*, a plant resembling a banana tree which is used to make flour, bread and porridge. Studies of the significance of enset for food security in the region have shown that the local classification system used for the different varieties of the plant is far more intricate than botanical categories based on genetic characteristics. The same studies showed that the knowledge of the women, who are responsible for feeding the household, is much more detailed than that of the men. Women try to cultivate the greatest number and variety of enset trees to safeguard the plant's other uses (e.g. medicine or animal fodder) and their family's food security. This preserves biodiversity, whereas scientific refinement would have combined a number of characteristics in a single variety, thereby losing the biological capital that had been accumulated using traditional methods and all the knowledge that went with it.[22]

In the interaction between culture/religion and development, context and local circumstances are critical to the success of the development intervention. A solution that turned out well in one case could have a crippling effect on development in another, and vice versa. Therefore the AIV would suggest that at every level of cooperation, policymakers take time to reflect on possible differences in opinion, perspective and interests for all participants, and then do the same with shared values. The AIV suggests performing an analysis of the relevant cultural orientations before selecting concrete activities. Since indigenous knowledge is an important source of information about local conditions, it should also be included in the analysis.

II.7   Conclusion

From this chapter it should be clear that the cultural and religious context in which development occurs greatly influences the success of development intervention. Despite the fact that the context is constantly changing, it is possible to identify culturally determined factors, which must always be taken into account in any development relationship.[23]

The AIV recommends incorporating the following factors into an analysis of the cultural context:
- *the extent to which cultural or religious leaders are open to dialogue;*
- *the influence and authority of the leadership;*
- *the extent to which a particular system or organisation promotes social cohesion;*
- *the scope for and opportunities available to women.*

22 A. Negash & A. Niehof, 'The Significance of Enset Culture and Biodiversity for Rural Household Food and Livelihood Security in Southwestern Ethiopia', in *Agriculture and Human Values*, 21.1, 2004, 61-71.

23 With thanks to the ICCO, Kerk in Actie and Prisma, *Workshop Report on the Role of Religion in Development Processes*, 2003/2004.

III Culture and religion in development cooperation policy

III.1 A review

The realisation that culture and religion influence development processes is not a recent one. For some time, experts have been convinced that the success of development interventions depends in part on issues that are quite distinct from macroeconomic prospects or donors' expectations, such as local circumstances, behaviour, ways of life and mentality. This realisation dawned when the dominant paradigms of the 1960s and 1970s, which were based on an economic and unilinear model of modernisation and development, proved to be out of step with the reality of the developing world.[24]

Academic studies in the 1980s and 1990s gave the cultural dimension of development a place of its own, a move that ultimately resulted in the 1992 DAC manual on effective aid, which recommends analysing sociocultural conditions, structures and traditions to give projects a better chance of success.[25] A year earlier the policy document *A world of difference*, the cornerstone of Dutch development cooperation in the 1990s, stressed that culture is not irrelevant or an obstacle to development but a basis for sustainable development. Culture was seen as being in constant flux – a positive, binding force in the pursuit of a sustainable world.[26] In terms of policy, this meant not only that preserving or adapting culture became a top priority, but also that development was redefined as 'ultimately a cultural project'.[27]

Incorporating these conclusions into policy was no easy task.[28] In 1993, after the transformations behind the former Iron Curtain, a much less optimistic policy memo-

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24 Over the course of time, development work – including policymaking, activism and political priorities – has been dominated by different schools of thought. Poverty is such a persistent and wide-ranging problem that the field of development cooperation has frequently changed its approach to 'keep its spirits up'. All these approaches can be assigned to one of two major schools of thought: macroeconomics and 'integral development'. The two schools go in and out of fashion, under a variety of names and sometimes with slightly different perspectives.

25 R. Cassen, *Does Aid Work?*, Oxford Clarendon, Oxford, 1986. C. Kottak, *The Cultural Dimension in Development*, 1986, which formed the basis for the DAC Manual, *DAC Principles for Effective Aid*, OECD, 1992, 42.

26 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *A world of difference*, The Hague, 1991.

27 Minister Jan Pronk in a speech delivered on the occasion of Culture and Democracy Day, 31 May 1991.

28 A. Niehof, 'The Problematic Relationship between Culture and Development in International Cooperation', in *Culture, Development and Communication*, ed. W.A. Shadid & P.J.M. Nas, Leiden, 1993, 27-42. See also the first chapter of IOB evaluation no. 289: *Cultuur en ontwikkeling: de evaluatie van een beleidsthema (1981-2001)*.

randum, *A world of dispute*, was released.[29] Although the document did not question the dynamic nature of culture, the reality of the time (the war in Yugoslavia, for example) compelled the document's authors to recognise the destructive power of violence sanctioned by culture and religion. The world had not been transformed into a peace-loving global village after all, and the differences in the cultural and religious assessment of conflict and violence had not been solved. There are still cultures that try to solve disagreements primarily with violence, or which even glorify violence, and other cultures that put more stock in dialogue and harmony, such as the musyawarah culture of consultation in Indonesia, or the Dutch polder model.

The recognition that culture and religion are indispensable to development policy and any analysis of that policy was not easy to translate into operational policy objectives, since both culture and religion are highly abstract concepts. Complicating matters further is the fact that the concept of culture is applied to two different things: the entire spectrum of values, standards and traditions, and the entire spectrum of artistic expression and cultural heritage. In Dutch development policy the International Cultural Policy Division runs the programme 'Culture and Development', which seeks to reinforce cultural identity and expertise in developing countries, promote intercultural exchange and preserve cultural heritage, in the sense of art and artistic expression, a topic which has little to do with the subject of this report. Culture as a system of values and meaningful traditions is integrated into policy through the so-called sector-wide approach, in which certain responsibilities are delegated to experts and authorities on the ground: organisations operating in this area are supported with multi-annual subsidies, and a number of embassies in developing countries are given a modest budget for these kinds of activities.[30]

One of the organisations supported by the Dutch government is the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development, founded in 1996. The fund tries to link the two aspects of culture, focusing mainly on promoting innovative, cultural initiatives with a broad social impact in developing countries. The fund also encourages intercultural cooperation between developing countries and fosters debate on culture and development.

In general, ambassadors and sector specialists accord low priority to culture and religion in the country where they have been stationed.[31] The AIV sees this as a regrettable tendency, especially as experience has shown time and again that ignoring culture and religion in development interventions can undermine local support and hence jeopardise the venture as a whole. This is an important signal for the AIV, although the Council realises that at this moment in time it is not as simple to prove that the converse would also apply. Because the renewed attention to culture (inspired in part by

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29 *A world of dispute*, The Hague, 1993.

30 They are the Dutch embassies in Pretoria, Cairo, Accra, Jakarta, Paramaribo, La Paz, Nairobi, Skopje and Bamako.

31 The AIV asked a number of ambassadors and sector specialists how they dealt with culture and religion (as related to development) at their embassies. The responses – like '[It's] something we keep in the back of our minds, but it doesn't appear explicitly in policy or…annual plans', and '[It] isn't discussed in PRSPs and [it's] rarely addressed at donor conferences' – confirm the low priority accorded to culture and religion in practice.

the 2004 UNDP report) is fairly recent, there are not enough examples yet of success-ful interventions achieved through cultural consultation.

The AIV believes that we are missing an opportunity if we do not take full advantage of new insights on the importance of culture and religion for development processes. The Council therefore recommends that the religious and cultural context be analysed prior to any development intervention, with a focus on the extent to which these elements can influence the success or failure of the intervention. An analysis of this kind relies on inter-cultural dialogue, with the help of local experts. The issues addressed must include the values underlying the donors' choices and the desires and expectations of both parties in the development relationship. After that, the donors and partners will need to identify the values that unite them. The challenge lies in striking a balance between acknowledging the other and holding on to what is one's own.

It is clear that the nature of the analysis will depend on the degree to which the devel-opment intervention affect people's lives. In the case of macro-level aid or debt relief, a detailed analysis of the cultural and religious context is less appropriate than in the case of a programme or intervention that directly affects people at the local level.

III.2 Culture and power

A policy dialogue is always more than just a discussion between donors and partners about policy, since the context inevitably includes power and skill differentials, preju-dice and ignorance, and possibly a colonial legacy as well. In the first place, donors act out of the conviction that they can add something to the developing country, that they really have something to offer. It should also be borne in mind that donors generally sit around the negotiating table with the country's elite, whose interpretation of reality dif-fers not only from that of the donors, but also, in many cases, from that of ordinary citizens.

To do justice to a country's cultural and social diversity in preparing a cultural analysis, the AIV would recommend speaking to representatives of as many groups and minorities as possible.

Promoting clear communication about each other's motives instead of making assump-tions could prevent significant differences of opinion. Clarity begins with the right termi-nology. The key question is: progress, in what sense, and for whom? In most instances the objectives of development projects reflect the donors' perspective, sometimes explicitly and sometimes because the partners elect to tailor their proposals to the pri-orities of the donor whose support they are seeking. The criteria for development pro-jects are often decidedly Western. In addition, terms and themes that are important to donors (like gender) are exported and incorporated into project proposals by partner countries. All this has to do with power differentials. Although in theory it is no longer true that 'he who pays the piper calls the tune', partners certainly haven't forgotten which side their bread is buttered on.

When it comes to making an analysis and engaging in policy dialogue, the AIV urges donors to be aware of their own values and standards and the way these influence their own views. For that reason, it is crucial that the terminology used be as precise as possi-ble. In talking with representatives of partner countries, donors also need to learn to 'lis-ten between the lines'.

If donors have clear values and a good sense of their partners' interpretations of religion and culture, they will be in a position to make more deliberate choices. For this to happen there must be knowledge available at the ministry and the missions about the role of culture and religion in development in general, and in the interaction between the various cultures in particular. In this context, intercultural sensitivity, which is now described in government manuals in only the most general terms, could be expanded upon to be more effective in situations where different cultures meet.[32] This competence involves integrating knowledge about individuals and groups in different situations, policy premises and practices. Cultural sensitivity encompasses a number of essential elements. Staff must appreciate diversity, have a capacity for cultural self-examination, be aware of the dynamics of cultural interaction, and be willing and able to incorporate that knowledge into a policy that reflects an understanding of diversity. At the level of the organisation, these elements should be expressed in the attitudes of the staff, in the policy and service.[33] The AIV feels that the single afternoon that is currently devoted to intercultural skills in the training programme for transferable officials is insufficient. Like learning a foreign language, acquiring these skills takes time and training.

To help staff members become acclimated to new cultures, the AIV would advise those responsible for formulating and implementing development policy to study the principles and methods of intercultural communication.[34] In addition to a brief module on intercultural skills, the training programme for policy officials should also include a more extensive course on religion and culture. This new module should explore intercultural sensitivity and conflict management, so staff are more adept at handling situations involving conflicting cultures. Whenever possible and useful, officials should also learn the local language.

Dealing with religion should also be given a more operational function in the Multi-annual Strategic Plans (MJSPs) drawn up by Dutch embassies in the bilateral partner countries. In just 7 of the 31 countries do the MJSPs devote any space to the role of religion, while only 5 embassies make any mention of religion in their poverty reduction strategies.[35]

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32 The Ministry of Foreign Affairs defines 'intercultural sensitivity' as 'being conscious of the customs and cultural backgrounds of people/organisations outside the ministry and abroad and coping effectively with such differences'.

33 <www.air.org/cecp/cultural/Q_integrated.htm#def>.

34 G. Hofstede, *Allemaal andersdenkenden: omgaan met cultuurverschillen*, Contact, 1991. For further reading, see D. Pinto, *Interculturele communicatie: drie stappenmethode voor het doeltreffend overbruggen en managen van cultuurverschillen*, Bohm Stafleu Van Loghum, Houten, 1990, and E. Hofmann: *Interculturele gespreksvorming, theorie en praktijk van het Topoi-model*, Bohm Stafleu Van Loghum, Houten, 2002. For an assessment of an organisation's cultural sensitivity, see I. Wolffers and M. Elteren, 'Cultural competences', in *Medisch Contact*, 2005.

35 Overview compiled by the Effectiveness and Quality Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the Religion and Development Knowledge Forum, March 2005.

To clarify cultural and religious subtleties and difficulties, embassies would be well-advised to include proposals for dealing with religious issues not only in the analysis, but also in the strategy section of their MJSPs.

III.3   Limits to dialogue

The intercultural dialogue between donor(s) and representatives of the partners furthers a greater understanding of the context in which the activities take place. Points of departure, levels and actors begin to crystallise, and the central question becomes which sectors or organisations are going to support the donor, and with what resources. There must be some latitude in deciding which objective should take precedence. The donor may opt for a politically correct, uncontroversial objective that doesn't conflict with his own values or with the principles of human rights. But when the premises of the donor and the partner are plainly incompatible, the dialogue can only go so far. Its natural boundaries are defined by human rights and to a lesser extent by the MDGs. If the partner's culture accepts unequal access to resources, refuses to respect the integrity of the body, or doesn't see the value in educating girls, the scope for cooperation with that partner is very limited.

A donor can then adopt one of two basic positions: a more moderate one or a more active one. A moderate position means acknowledging that the partner's desires and efforts are contrary to one's own objectives. At this point, both the dialogue and the relationship with this particular partner are terminated. A more active position is one in which the donor looks for other partners in the country he or she *can* do business with or encourages dialogue with other actors. Prior to any dialogue, the donor is advised to map out (in the MJSPs, for example) the existing power structure and to identify who the reformists are in the society.

Simply put, cultural and religious orientations and practices are just as likely to be in harmony with the fundamental values of Dutch development policy – and thus to strengthen them – as to be in conflict with them. Because culture is so flexible, it is possible to coax development and practices in a socially desirable direction by providing support that draws on these fundamental values.

The AIV cautions against losing sight of the limits to dialogue. This occurs when the basic principles laid down in the human rights conventions are ignored, or when the partner shows no intention of complying with other Western values and/or prerequisites for a fruitful partnership. In that case the AIV would suggest adopting a more active position and seeking out actors who do aspire to the desired outcome. This process will be simplified if the MJSPs contain an outline of the power relationships in the country and identify the reformists. A great deal can also be accomplished with supplementary enabling policy.

AIDS work

Because private interventions are indispensable in the fight against AIDS, activities must be initiated at the personal level in order to spread knowledge, change attitudes and empower individuals. One possibility is to disseminate information that can help to reduce vulnerability. In some cases officially recognised trade unions for sex workers may even be set up, as has happened in a number of Indian cities. Unions can strive to decriminalise the activities of sex workers and to create safer working conditions. Because such goals conflict with established interests and ideologies, the unions will require assistance. This includes supplementary programmes to rectify the damage that has already been done, an adequate supply of condoms, programmes to ensure that clientele recognise the importance of condoms, and gender programmes to raise awareness among underprivileged young women that prostitution is not their only option. This means that activities are also necessary at other levels. It is here that donors can really make a difference. During negotiations, are donors willing and able to emphasise the importance of this kind of supplementary policy to a successful approach to AIDS? Stakeholders must be consulted at all levels, because each level will have its own characteristics, prospects and practices when it comes to dialogue.

III.4 Conclusion

In answering the third question on operationalising cultural and religious factors in development policy, the AIV would first consider the problems of the 1990s, which unfortunately did not lead to any tangible changes in policy. In addition to the points for attention in the previous chapter, the AIV sees a chance for the ministry to adopt a more specialised and professional approach by developing a better and more focused programme to train transferable officials, and by cooperating purposefully with as many relevant institutions and external actors as possible.

IV Conclusions and recommendations

Experience has shown how important it is for development interventions and policy to be compatible with the complex and flexible belief systems of people in developing countries. It is only by taking account of the cultures and religions of all participants that the motivation and energy necessary for sustainable development can be mobilised. The effect of culture and religion on development is crucially bound to circumstances. Despite this, certain general points should still be kept in mind to improve the chance of success.

In the interaction between culture/religion and development, context and local circumstances are critical to the success of the development intervention. A solution that turned out well in one case could have a crippling effect on development in another, and vice versa. Therefore the AIV would suggest that at every level of cooperation, policymakers take time to reflect on possible differences in opinions, perspectives and interests for all participants, and then do the same with shared values. The AIV suggests performing an analysis of the relevant cultural orientations before selecting concrete activities. Since indigenous knowledge is an important source of information about local conditions, it should also be included in the analysis.

A study like the one envisioned here can only come about with the help of local experts and will have to be discussed with representatives of a wide variety of cultural and social groups from the partner country. The relevant civil society groups and NGOs in the Netherlands and – if possible – in the developing countries should be approached and consulted.

In the AIV's view, an analysis of the cultural context should include:
- *the extent to which cultural or religious leaders are open to dialogue;*
- *the influence and authority of the leadership;*
- *the extent to which a particular system or organisation promotes social cohesion;*
- *the scope for and opportunities available to women.*

The more direct the influence of a development intervention on people's daily lives, the more intensive the dialogue will have to be. Although a dialogue on cultural and religious orientation will be less specific for macro-aid or debt relief than for programmes or interventions that play out at local level, cultural differences must always be taken into account.

When the premises of donors and partners are plainly irreconcilable, the dialogue can only go so far. The donor will then have to weigh the pros and cons of pulling out versus trying a new tack. This may require a more active, even activist attitude on the donor's part. If it is decided to continue the open dialogue with people with very different views, the donor must be as clear as possible in the terminology used and should be prepared to account for its decisions.

The AIV cautions against losing sight of the limits to dialogue. This occurs when the basic principles laid down in the human rights conventions are ignored, or when the partner shows no intention of complying with other Western values and/or prerequisites for a fruitful partnership. In that case the AIV would suggest adopting a more active position and seeking out actors who do aspire to the desired outcome. Such actors should be support-

ed whenever it is feasible and responsible to do so. A great deal can also be accomplished with supplementary enabling policy.

It is not only in the developing countries themselves that the AIV sees fresh opportunities for improving the analysis of the cultural and religious context and the policy dialogue. Changes at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the missions could also generate a better understanding of the importance of culture and religion and a greater knowledge of the subject.

In preparing their Multi-annual Strategic Plans, embassies would be well advised to include proposals for dealing with religious issues in their strategies as well as their analyses. The AIV would also advise those at the ministry and the missions in charge of formulating and implementing development policy to study the principles and methods of intercultural communication. In addition to a brief module on intercultural skills, the training programme for policy officers should also include a more extensive course on religion and culture. This new module should explore intercultural sensitivity and conflict management, so staff are more adept at handling situations involving conflicting cultures. Whenever possible and useful, the official should also learn the local language.

Final comments

The AIV feels that an intercultural dialogue on the cultural and religious context will greatly increase the chances of a successful development intervention. Issues addressed in such a dialogue should include the values underlying the donors' choices and the desires and expectations of both parties in the development relationship. After that, donors and partners will need to find the values that unite them. Human rights and progress towards the MDGs should serve as the basis for this discussion. However there are limits to this dialogue. The challenge lies in striking a balance between acknowledging the other and standing one's ground.

The President of the House of Representatives
of the States General
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Re	Your request on the subject of development cooperation / the influence of cultural and religious factors

Dear Mr President,

During the debate with the Permanent Committee for Foreign Affairs of the House of Repre-
sentatives on 17 November 2003, I was requested to ask the Advisory Council on Internation-
al Affairs to assess which cultural manifestations have a positive or negative influence on
development and to incorporate the outcome into future plans for development cooperation.
During the debate, the permanent committee emphasised the influence of both cultural and
religious factors.

I have decided to request an advisory report on this subject in view of its importance and
complexity.

A copy of the request for advice addressed to the Chairman of the Advisory Council on Inter-
national Affairs is enclosed with this letter.

Yours sincerely,

A.M.A. van Ardenne-van der Hoeven
Minister for Development Cooperation

Mr F. Korthals Altes
Chairman of the Advisory Council on
International Affairs
Postbus 20061
2500 EB Den Haag

Cultural Cooperation, Education and
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International Cultural Policy Division
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2594 AC Den Haag

Dear Mr Korthals Altes/Dear Frits,

In response to the policy document 'Mutual interests, mutual responsibilities', I met with the Permanent Committee for Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives on 17 November 2003. One of the points raised during the debate was the positive and negative influence of religious and cultural factors on development processes, which should be taken into account when formulating policy on development cooperation.

I responded by stating my interest in this important issue. At the request of the House of Representatives, I have decided to ask the Advisory Council on International Affairs for advice on this matter.

This topic has received attention in recent decades, both in academic circles and within civil society. Though it has long been a subject of historical studies, few of them take sufficient account of the influence of increasing interaction between local, national and global developments in the economic and sociocultural fields. Research has generally focused on explaining development processes or finding reasons for enduring social problems at local and national level.

Against this background, I would ask the Council to produce an advisory report based on the following questions:
- What is the influence, in the Council's view, of cultural and religious value systems on development processes in the context of continuing globalisation of political, economic and cultural factors?
- Is it possible to identify positive and negative factors that can be taken into account when formulating strategies for sustainable and stable socioeconomic development?
- How can the influence of these factors be incorporated into the formulation of development cooperation policies that are based on respect for human rights and the international legal order?

In my view, the aims set out in the policy document 'Mutual interests, mutual responsibilities' make it particularly important to focus on ways of taking cultural and religious factors into account in formulating policy on development cooperation.

I am fully aware that these are complex issues and that there are no simple answers. But it is precisely because these issues are so complex and part of a wider problem that extends beyond the limits of development cooperation that I have decided to ask the AIV for advice. In view of the parliamentary agenda, I would ask you to produce the advisory report by autumn 2004, in time for the debate on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' budget.

I look forward to receiving your report.

Yours sincerely,

Agnes van Ardenne-van der Hoeven
Minister for Development Cooperation

List of abbreviations

AIV	Advisory Council on International Affairs
CARAM	Coordination of Action Research on AIDS and Migration
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
ICCO	Inter-church Organisation for Development Cooperation
ICPD	International Conference on Population and Development
IOB	Policy and Operations Evaluation Department
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MJSP	Multi-annual Strategic Plan
NUFFIC	Dutch organisation for international cooperation in higher education
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
UN	United Nations
UNAIDS	United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

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      August 2002

*   Issued jointly by the Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV) and the Advisory Committee
        on Issues of Public International Law (CAVV).

**   Also available in French and Russian.

Advisory letters issued by the Advisory Council on International Affairs

***   Joint report by the Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV) and the Advisory Committee on Aliens
       Affairs (ACVZ).