

# DPRN REPORT No. 31

## Regional expert meeting

### The Arab World 3

#### Final report



nederlands instituut voor internationale betrekkingen  
netherlands institute of international relations  
clingendael

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# Report of the DPRN–Clingendael Regional expert meeting 2007 for the Arab World – Culture to bridge the gap

**Compiled by:** Maurits Berger (Clingendael institute)  
**Date of event:** 16 November 2007  
**Responsible organisation:** Clingendael institute  
**Venue:** Clingendael institute

## Introduction

In line with the objectives of the Development Policy Review Network (DPRN), the purpose of the third regional expert meeting for the Arab World was fourfold:

- To facilitate and stimulate an exchange of information and experiences among a wide variety of experts on the Arab World, including researchers, policymakers and practitioners from academic institutions, ministries, co-financing organisations, embassies (embassies from the region in the Netherlands and *vice versa*), thematic co-financing (TMF) organisations, consultants and representatives from the region in the Netherlands;
- To present an overview of who's who and who is doing what in the region, including a presentation of outputs;
- To present an overview of current relevant political, economic, social and cultural issues and developments in the region that deserve attention from the policy, scientific and practical points of view – this time focussing on culture as an area of cooperation;
- To generate a discussion on, and provide an insight into, the challenges development policy and practice offer to research and *vice versa*

In total, 46 people registered for the regional expert meeting, 39 of whom actually participated. Of the registered people 15.2 percent were representing science, 10.9 percent were policymakers, 21.7 percent were affiliated to development organisations and other NGOs, 17.4 percent were consultants, and 10.9 percent belonged to other groups (media, arts, students, Diaspora, etc.). The professional background and institutional affiliation of 23.9 percent of the participants was unknown. A list of participants can be found in Appendix 1.

## Programme

The previous DPRN meetings on the Arab World have shown that mounting Arab suspicion of Western intentions is one of the main obstacles to various kinds of cooperation. It is suggested, however, that culture may prove to be a new and less sensitive area of cooperation. The premise 'Talking politics brings us nowhere, talking culture brings us to politics' is explored during this third expert meeting.

The previous Clingendael/DPRN expert meetings provided the following image of the Arab world from a perspective of international cooperation:

- Poverty is not a core concern. Even if it were, it is overshadowed by other varying problems like security, migration, democratization and energy;
- There is a distinct lack of knowledge of the region among Dutch and Flemish aid workers and policymakers, in particular regarding the issue of (political) Islam;
- Dutch/Flemish cooperation activities are limited and concentrate mostly on Israel/Palestine. In the case of the Netherlands, a lot of activities are also undertaken in Egypt and Yemen;
- There is a strong wish to expand cooperation activities in the region, but people are undecided about how to go about this, who might act as new partners in the region and, most importantly, how to overcome the defensive attitude that prevails in the Arab world vis-à-vis Western interventions.

The latter issue is the focus of the third Clingendael/DPRN regional expert meeting reported on here. Arab-Western relations are deadlocked in a sphere of mistrust. Time and time again, the numerous initiatives by Western governments and NGOs hit the granite wall of suspicion on the Arab side. This suspicion is mostly founded on prejudices, but that is exactly the reason why it is so hard to overcome them. Any reflection on new policies and activities therefore requires thinking, first and foremost, thinking about ways to break the deadlock.

One possible inroad may be culture, a relatively unknown field of cooperation vis-à-vis the Arab world. Here, culture does not mean the mere exchange of artists and museum pieces but a tool to achieve a deeper understanding of each other's living environment. This is the central topic of the third Clingendael/DPRN regional expert meeting that was intended to provide insights and ideas and reveal ways in which new contacts and dialogues can be established with the Arab world. The opening of new channels into, and the consolidation of old contacts with, the Arab world is currently a necessary condition for any successful and enduring activities.

The importance of culture as regards linking with political and social issues is not entirely new. In the Netherlands, the Prince Claus Fund is well-known for its activities that combine culture and politics.<sup>1</sup> The Dutch Minister of Education, Culture and Sciences has recognised the importance of culture in international relations in her policy document entitled *Choosing a Direction* ('Koers Kiezen'<sup>2</sup>), based on the efforts of the Dutch Council for Culture ('Raad van Cultuur') to link international culture policy with political, social and economical goals.<sup>3</sup> However, a lot of private initiatives are also taking place. Apparently there is a general mood that a different approach is needed and this is especially true for the Arab world.

The purpose of the third Clingendael/DPRN regional expert meeting is to provide ideas and

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<sup>1</sup> [www.princeclausfund.nl](http://www.princeclausfund.nl)

<sup>2</sup> [www.minocw.nl/documenten/19125a.pdf](http://www.minocw.nl/documenten/19125a.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Letter of 15 November 2005 to the Minister.

insights for new inroads, activities and contacts with the Arab world, and to see how the existing policies can be helpful in this respect.

## Plenary morning session

**Opening by Maurits Berger, senior research fellow at the Clingendael Institute, and Eric Korsten, SNV Netherlands Development Organisation and member of the DPRN Task Force.**

The speakers who opened the day stressed the importance of today's topic but also emphasised the vagueness that often accompanies it. The speakers acknowledged their lack of knowledge of the subject and expressed the hope that today would generate more clarity on the issue. They also raised the following considerations that may serve as guidelines for the day's seminar:

- If there is a gap, what is needed to bridge it?
- What is the relevance of culture in this respect?
- How do we define culture in this particular international usage?
- How do we go about the practice of 'culture to bridge the gap'?

## Thematic sessions

**Session 1: Presentation by Ms Els van der Plas, Director Prince Clause Fund**

*Title: Culture and politics in development issues*

Ms van der Plas emphasised that culture should never be a means to an end but an end in itself. According to Van der Plas, culture is relevant to *all* aspects of life ('even to road construction') and should therefore be recognised as relevant when dealing with any of these aspects. However, she questioned whether actively 'bridging the gap' might be the right way forward and suggested that the problem is sooner one of 'minding the gap'. She mentioned three functions of culture:

1. Culture creates beauty, and beauty generates hope that things will improve, creates respect for life and provides personal and social identity. It is not the idea of universal beauty that bonds – because everyone has his or her own idea of beauty – but the universal pleasure that exists in the perception of beauty.
2. Culture offers possibilities to say things that would otherwise remain hidden – politically, or as a social taboo or trauma.
3. Culture provides people with an identity and a place in the world. If people have a more confident image of oneself it is easier to respect and understand others.

*Definition:* Culture is dynamic and involves the way people go about their daily lives and the values and processes that make life meaningful.

*Action:* Focus on the development of ideas and ideals and the manner in which people shape them.

**Session 2: Presentation by Ms Charlotte Huygens, Curator Arts & Islamic World; Project curator National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden; Member of the Council for Culture (Museum Committee)**

*Title: Experiences of interaction between culture and politics in Iran, Turkey and Morocco*

The speaker limited the topic of culture to art and argued that art can create opportunities to transcend borders and widen horizons, although art can also be intertwined with politics. She gave several examples of the latter from her own professional life, namely: the Amazigh (Berber) identity as a key issue during the Moroccan cultural heritage exhibition in the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam (2004); the Armenian controversy during the Turkish art exhibition in the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam (2006); and art as an effective way of supporting relations with Iran. The speaker emphasised that cultural cooperation is – or ought to be – a two-way relationship based on equality and hence open to negotiation.

*Definition:* Culture is limited here to the arts: ‘Art mirrors society. Art reflects developments and comments situations. (...) Works of art can be deeply interfaced with political or social affairs. (...) They are an unequalled source of cultural information. However, most of all, art creates opportunities to transcend borders and widen horizons.’

*Action:* Engage in trans-cultural dialogue along thematic lines rather than a dialogue between fixed geographic entities.

**Session 3: Presentation by Ms Neila Akrimi, associate researcher at the Centre d’Etudes et de Recherches sur le Partenariat Euro-Méditerranéen (CERPEM) of Aix-en-Provence, and Regional Project Manager at the Agency of International Cooperation VNG international in the Hague**

*Title: Beyond building bridges: a new direction for culture and development*

The speaker agreed with the previous speakers ‘that culture constitutes the very basis of human development’ and that it should therefore not ‘be regarded purely as a means of promoting and sustaining material progress,’ but as ‘a valuable aim in itself.’ On the other hand the speaker argued, however, that culture has to be interpreted in a wider sense than arts, since it also includes issues like politics and governance.

The speaker approached the topic from a policy angle, in particular those of the EU and UNESCO. She is critical, however, of the lack of concrete results achieved by these two bodies that are still dwelling on internal discussions of the issue: ‘The potential of leverage of cultural diplomacy has not yet been fully realised by the EU.’

The speaker argued that the intercultural dialogue is in itself not new, but is merely receiving renewed attention and has been rephrased using new jargon. She advocates, however, that a

new approach needs to be adopted and that it should be reshaped and transformed from a 'dialogue of cultures' to a 'culture of dialogue.'

*Definition:* 'Culture is the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterise a society or social group. It includes not only arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs.' (UNESCO-definition).

*Action:* 'Dialogue is only possible if both sides desist, above all, from pointing fingers at each other and from presuming that their own ways of thinking and practices are self-evident.' Moreover, dialogue can only function successfully as an auxiliary function, i.e. in addition to the political and economical measures at hand. For example, the speaker argued strongly in favour of 'a genuine take-off to substantially increase trade and investment levels' between the northern and southern sides of the Mediterranean basin.

**Session 4: Workshop by Ms Erna Flokstra, Senior Lecturer Culture & Philosophy (Willem de Kooning Academy Rotterdam – Institute for Advanced Study in Art and Design)**

*Title: Culture to access development issues*

The speaker gave a brief lecture in which she argued that culture equals development itself and that 'one has to understand cultural development to direct its potential both in art as in politics.' Bridging the gap means communication about cultural values, she said. However, this communication can only be successful if the parties involved agree on some common values.

The speaker then held a workshop with the participants on methods of recognising cultural value, based on the methods developed by art psychologist Michael J. Parsons.

*Definition:* The speaker referred to the above-mentioned UNESCO definition, but indicated that the breadth in meaning of the definition will contribute to 'a Babel-like confusion. Rather than presenting definitions the speaker suggested focusing on the *function* of culture: 'Culture seen as the power to transition as the power to develop, is the target of cultural diplomacy in the broadest sense.'

*Action:* Bridging the gap means communication about cultural values.

## Outcome

The four speakers discussed the different angles from which culture and its function in dialogue and politics can be viewed. However, as some participants remarked, issues like political culture were not addressed. Several speakers responded by saying that such a division in separate cultural spheres misses the point of the meaning of 'culture'.

Among their many differences the speakers all agreed on the following:

- Culture is related to identity;
- Culture is inalienably linked to all human activities and hence to development;
- Culture can never be a means to an end, but should always be an end to itself;
- In any kind of activity towards another, other people's cultural backgrounds should be recognised and accepted before they are being acted upon.
- The basis of intercultural dialogue is mutual acceptance and hence, the equality of the parties involved.

Several interesting aspects were raised that are worth mentioning:

- 'Cultural security', i.e. the capacity of a society to conserve its specific character in spite of changing conditions and real or virtual threats. This concept may explain the defensive attitude of the Arab world vis-à-vis the Western world.
- The heavily promoted 'dialogue of cultures' would be more effective if transformed into a 'culture of dialogue'.
- In order for relations with others to be successful, people must recognise each other's values and then accept their mutual equality. They will then be prepared and willing to negotiate individual values.

## Plenary closing session

Each presentation was followed by a discussion. Most of the questions were related to definition(s) of culture although Maurits Berger, in his capacity of moderator, made a point of cutting these debates short in order to move the discussion on to more practical matters.

A lot of the questions referred to the relevance of culture to the practical work engaged in with regard to development issues. It was explained that all the activities take place in a cultural context which needs to be recognised and responded to in order to enhance the possibility of success.

A lot of the participants asked about the applicable criteria and how to value culture. The response was that criteria are 'the funder's wish' but are also quite impossible to set when it comes to culture. The same applied to the measurement of the 'value' of culture. However, as one speaker said, considering how much money is actually lost in development aid, one could argue that such losses would hardly ever apply to the funding of culture (unless, of course, the only measurement is that of tangible results).

## Reactions and evaluation

In total, 46 people registered for the regional expert meeting, 39 of whom actually participated. An evaluation form was distributed among the participants but none of these were filled in and returned to the organisers.

## Appendix 1 – List of participants

	Name	E-mail	Geographical expertise	Thematic expertise	Organisation
1.	Abbas	candoso@hotmail.com			
2.	Akrimi, Ms N.	neila.akrimi@vng.nl	Mediterranean countries, Northern Africa	Cultural policy; cultural international cooperation	Agency of International Cooperation VNG international in the Hague ; Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches sur le Partenariat Euro-Méditerranéen (CERPEM) of Aix-en-Provence
3.	Berger. Dr M..	berger@clingendael.nl	Arab World	Islamic law (Sharia); political Islam	Clingendael insitute
4.	Biezen, Mw. E. van der	brownsugahbabe@hotmail.com			
5.	Bouabid, S.	sobido@hotmail.com	Middle East; Europe; European Union; Algeria; North Africa	International relations; Islam; Arabic language; European organizations	Independent consultant
6.	Erkut-Yildiran, Drs G.	g.erkut@minocw.nl			Ministry of Education, Culture and Science
7.	Evers, Drs N.	nevers@nuffic.nl	Tanzania; Guatemala	Institutional framework; institution building; environment; business; education; training; capacity building; administrative reform; regional government	Nuffic
8.	Ewijk, Drs E. van	e.vanewijk@uva.nl	Turkey; Morocco; Suriname; Netherlands Antilles; Ghana; Cape Verde; Netherlands	International cooperation; governance	University of Amsterdam

9.	Fisseha-Tsion Menghistu	fisseha@planet.nl	Angola; China; Ethiopia; Eritrea; Ghana; Gambia; Kenya; Uganda; Malaysia; Nigeria; South Africa; Southern Africa; including Namibia, Mozambique; Sudan	International trade; investment and international transfer of technology for development policies; laws and practices; private enterprise development with particular focus on SMEs; innovative sources of finance for development; resources mobilisation for development; conflict prevention, peace & reconciliation; democratisation and good governance; human rights development; effectiveness of development aid; North-South & Global issues	University of Mekelle, Ethiopia; International Development Services
10.	Erna Flokstra	ejflokstra@hro.nl.	Arab World	Religion and culture image building and branding in the Western and Islamic world	Willem de Kooning Academy Rotterdam – Institute for Advanced Study in Art and Design
11.	Garcia Lechner, M.	m.garcialechner@sica.nl		International cultural activities and policy	SICA
12.	Gerlings, B.	b.gerlings@sica.nl		International cultural activities and policy	SICA

13.	Graaf, M. de	martin.graaf@mottmac.nl	Africa; Africa South of Sahara; Arab countries; Lao Pdr; Lebanon; Malawi; Asia; Azerbaijan; Bangladesh; Mekong Basin; Middle East; Nepal; Caribbean; Eritrea; European Union; India; Zimbabwe; World; Viet Nam; Syria; Swaziland; Sudan; South Asia; Southeast Asia; South Africa; Saint Vincent and the Grenadines; Papua New Guinea	Public sector; civil society; human resources development; aid coordination; evaluation techniques; evaluation	Mott Mac Donald
14.	Grit, E.	grit@ikvpaxchristi.nl		Conflict/peace/social change	IKV/Pax Christi
15.	Gulik, H. van	Henriette-van.gulik@minbuza.nl			Ministry of Foreign Affairs
16.	Hees, A. van	vanhees@bart.nl	Middle East; North Africa	Human right; democratisation; capacity building; gender	Mama Cash
17.	Heul, Drs M. van der	mvanderheul@nuffic.nl	Morocco		Nuffic
18.	Hond, Drs J. de	jgadehond@hotmail.com			
19.	Hoogland, Drs J.	j.hoogland@let.ru.nl.	Arab World	Arab languages	Radboud University
20.	Hummel, Drs H.	h.hummel@amnesty.nl	Colombia; Latin America	Strategic planning; capacity building; management; human rights; civil society; advocacy	Amnesty International
21.	Huygens, Drs. C.	chuygens@wereldmuseum.rotterdam.nl.	Islamic world	Curator Arts & Islamic World	Museum of Antiquities in Leiden and World Museum Rotterdam

22.	Illich, F.A.				
23.	Jonge, Drs J. de	Jacob- de.jonge@minbuza.nl			
24.	Korsten, Mr E.M.	erickorsten@snvworld.org	Africa; South America; Asia; Central and Eastern Europe; Middle East; World	Social development; institution building	SNV Netherlands Development organisation
25.	Korzelius, Monique	monique.korzelius@minbuza.nl		International culture policy	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
26.	Linssen BSc S.	sjelstah@gmail.com			
27.	Lopera, S.	loperis@yahoo.com	Latin America; Bolivia; Ecuador	Rural development; educational development	University of Amsterdam (master student International Development Studies)
28.	Mabrouk, Drs N.	n.mabrouk@chello.nl	Africa; Algeria; Arab Gulf States; Europe; European Union; France; Francophonie; French Speaking Africa; Morocco; Tunisia; United Arab Emirates; West Africa; Yemen; Kuwait; Italy; Turkey	Project development and/of management; art; culture	Euromed for Intercultural Dialogue & Exchanges
29.	Milo, Dhr T.	76414.727@compuserve.com	Arab World	Arab typography	Decotype, Amsterdam
30.	Nieuwenhuizen, Drs M.	m.nieuwenhuizen@donemus.nl			
31.	Nor, I.	idriss@doen.nl			
32.	Oosterzee, Drs J. van	jjvanoosterzee@ikv.nl	Maghreb; Middle East	Democracy; peace keeping	IKV Dutch PeaceCouncil
33.	Ottevanger, Dr W.J.W.	wjw.ottevanger@dienst.vu.nl	Sub-Saharan Africa; Yemen	Education	VU University Amsterdam
34.	Plas, E. van der	e.vanderplas@princeclausfund.nl		Art historian, critic and curator	Prince Clause Fund
35.	Pluijm, Drs T.W.H.A. van der	t.vanderpluijm@planet.nl	Latin America; Arab countries; Africa; Indonesia; Mexico; Sudan	Economics; economic analysis; project evaluation; development projects; development aid	Independent consultant

36.	Sabi, I.	imad.sabi@oxfamnovib.nl	Arab countries; Central Asia; Palestine; Liberia		Oxfam Novib
37.	Sar, J. van der	jacobienvds@hotmail.com			
38.	Seela, Drs U.	u.seela@hivos.nl		Knowledge management; pluralism	Hivos
39.	Slits, P.	peterslits@scarlet.nl	Africa; Ethiopia; Ghana; Japan; Kenya; Mali; Mauritius; Middle East; Balkan region; Namibia; Netherlands; North Africa; Palestine; Rwanda; Sahel; Senegal; Sierra Leone; South Africa; Tanzania; Tunisia; Uganda; West Africa; West Bank; Zambia; Zimbabwe	Development planning	Independent consultant
40.	Snijder, M.	msnijder@euroconsult.org			
41.	Spierings, C.H.B.M.	n.spierings@fm.ru.nl	Arab Countries; Southwestern Asia; Central Asia; North Africa; Southeast Asia; West Africa	Employment; employment statistics; gender equality; political science; women's participation	Radboud University Nijmegen
42.	Strijp, Dr R.A.	strijp@nwo.nl	Middle East	Islam	NWO
43.	Teijgeler, Drs R.	teijgeler@planet.nl	Africa; Ethiopia; Ghana; Japan; Kenya; Mali; Mauritius; Middle East; Balkan region; Namibia; Netherlands; North Africa; Palestine; Rwanda; Sahel; Senegal; Sierra Leone; South Africa; Tanzania; Tunisia; Uganda; West Africa; West Bank; Zambia; Zimbabwe	Cultural heritage	Research and Management Cultural Heritage
44.	Veenstra, B.	bart_veenstra@yahoo.com	Afghanistan; Syria; Palestine	Violence	Independent consultant

45.	Westervelt, S.	stevenwestervelt@gmail.com			
46.	Wezendonk, Rianne	Rianne.wezendonk@minbuza.nl			Ministry of Foreign Affairs

## Appendix 2 – Programme



### DPRN–Clingendael institute Regional Meetings 2007 Regional meeting for The Arab World

*Culture to bridge the gap*

**Date** Friday 16 November 2007

**Venue:** Clingendael institute

#### Programme

- |               |  |
|---------------|--|
| 09.00 – 9.45  | Arrival of the participants and coffee   |
| 09.45 – 10.00 | Welcome address by <b>Maurits Berger</b> , the Clingendael Institute and <b>Eric Korsten</b> , SNV Netherlands Development Organisation and member of the DPRN Task Force  |
| 10.00 – 10.30 | Culture and politics in development issues<br>By Ms <b>Els van der Plas</b> , Director Prince Clause Fund  |
| 10.30 – 11.00 | Discussion   |
| 11.00 – 11.30 | Coffee break   |
| 11.30 – 12.15 | Experiences of interaction between culture and politics in Iran, Turkey and Morocco<br><b>Ms Charlotte Huygens</b> , Curator Arts & Islamic World; Project curator National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden; Member of the Council for Culture (Museum Committee)                            |
| 12.15 – 12.45 | Discussion   |
| 12.45 – 13.30 | Lunch  |
| 13.30 – 14.00 | Beyond building bridges: a new direction for culture and development<br><b>Ms Neila Akrimi</b> , associate researcher at the Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches sur le Partenariat Euro–Méditerranéen (CERPEM) of Aix-en-Provence, and Regional Project Manager at the Agency of International |

Cooperation VNG international in the Hague.

- 14.00 – 14.30 Discussion
- 14.30 – 15.00 Tea break
- 15.00 – 16.15 Workshop: Culture to access development issues  
Ms **Erna Flokstra**, Senior Lecturer Culture & Philosophy (Willem de Kooning Academy Rotterdam – Institute for Advanced Study in Art and Design)
- 16.15 – 17.00 Plenary discussion
- 17.00 – 18.00 Close and drinks



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