

Foreword

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In historical terms the office of Minister for Development Cooperation is a relatively new one. Nevertheless, my predecessors, Mrs Schoo and Mr De Koning, seem to have started a tradition. Now, for the third time in succession, a Netherlands Minister for Development Cooperation has been invited to write the foreword to a collection of studies on the colonial history of India and Indonesia by Indonesian, Indian, British and Dutch scholars. Although as a general rule we should follow a critical approach to traditions, there is evidently much to be said for this one. During the past twenty years development cooperation relationships with Third World countries have evolved and matured. Those with India and Indonesia are of a special kind, for they cover a wide range of activities and are securely based on mutual respect and understanding.

Placing events in a historical perspective should enhance this understanding. The colonial histories of India and Indonesia display both differences and similarities which in part reflect the policies of the respective colonial powers, and in part the indigenous institutional structures. In both countries colonial administrations were preceded by merchants and traders: those of the East India Company in India, and of the Dutch East India Company in Indonesia. A comparative study of the heyday of colonialism in India and Indonesia should therefore prove to be enlightening. As in the former volumes, the articles published here are by scholars from each of the countries which played a part in the events in those regions at the time. This will facilitate a frank and critical assessment of a period constituting an important part of the history of the countries concerned.

A better understanding of this period is not only important in historical terms, for there is also much to be learned from the past. If the principal aim of development cooperation today is to assist Third World countries in their efforts to combat poverty and deprivation and to strengthen their independence, we need to understand the causes of these problems. Historical studies can help to shed light on the institutional context and thus help us to avoid

repeating mistakes. The historical perspective also increases our awareness of relevant details and socio-cultural variations.

The articles published here provide ample material for an approach of this nature. Let us consider two examples. The first concerns population growth, which is the subject of several contributions. From a comparative historical perspective, the concept of population growth as a problem is defined in terms of various factors. These concern not only the ratio of people to available land, but also the quality of the land, its agricultural output and the availability of labour and other resources. Although the agrarian economies of Indonesia and India are particularly flexible and resilient, the process of outside intervention which started in the nineteenth century and continues today, has upset the former balances. This has had far-reaching effects on human relationships on the one hand, and on land and technology on the other. Hence, solutions to the problems of over-population, mass poverty and inadequate food supplies can only be found if we take heed of the historical developments which produced them. At the same time, our awareness of the differences in demographic developments in Indonesia and India should prevent us from making simplistic generalizations on the subject.

The article on indigenous irrigation systems provides a second example. The colonial administrations in India and Indonesia seem to have paid attention only to certain aspects of these systems, and they handled the problems in different ways. The comparative description of historical development strategies in irrigated agriculture brings to mind a dilemma in present-day development cooperation: the problem of the introduction of innovative technology. Though it may yield higher outputs, it also requires a considerable — and sometimes excessive — amount of outside input. Dutch colonial policy sought to minimise interference with the traditional management of indigenous waterworks by incorporating rather than replacing the structure. In retrospect this seems to have been a sensible policy. I am convinced that development programmes can only be effective if the people they are meant to assist take an active part in their implementation, and this they can do only if new information and technology are presented in combination with what is already familiar. Indigenous structures and institutions should not be discarded or, worse, destroyed. As history has taught us, they provide the essential starting point for a policy aimed at balanced and lasting development.