

A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE: INTERVIEW WITH JAN PRONK

Policy Matters

PROFESSOR JAN PRONK

has earned the reputation of being one of the most influential people in development cooperation in the Netherlands through his roles as a politician and prominent United Nations official. He served as the Minister of Development Cooperation, Deputy Secretary General of the United Nations Conference for Trade and Development, and Special Representative for the U.N. Mission to Sudan for Darfur. With honorary degrees from the San Marcos University in Peru and the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague, he currently teaches at the ISS as Professor in Theory and Practice of International Development. Prof. Pronk talks with Nils Gade, former Chief Executive of PSI-Europe.



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NILS GADE: *From PSI's perspective as an organization working in public health, relevant indicators such as HIV prevalence and child mortality are going in the right direction. Yet, development aid is viewed by many people as a failure. Overall, do you think, with the Netherlands in mind, that development aid is better than its reputation?*

JAN PRONK: Oh, definitely. In the last decade, the economic growth of African and Latin American countries has been higher than many people would have expected. However, it is inaccurate to say that such growth is a direct result of development assistance. What is more important than macroeconomic figures are social indicators concerning welfare of people. This welfare depends on economic opportunities, such as those provided by international trade, and on political factors such as domestic policies, good governance and distribution within countries. Development and poverty are no longer national or geographical issues. It is a class problem. For example, in India – with a population of 1.2 billion people – 500 to 600 million people are still stagnating below the poverty line. For me, the most important question is not to which extent the macro figures as a whole are improving, but to which extent those figures are improving for the one-third of the world population which is below the poverty line.

NG: *The donor community is moving toward funding more local organizations. Do you think that international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) will become redundant under this new paradigm of development?*

JP: INGOs can fulfill a variety of roles. Firstly, facilitating local groups and an international environment – a better globalization – in which home-grown options have a better chance. Countries cannot import democracy, economic development or human rights. You cannot import peace either. It has to be achieved at home. Secondly, an INGO must be an agent of communication, ensuring that local views are made known in other countries. Thirdly, INGOs must put political pressure on local powers to bring forward change in the interest of people. And finally, they need to gather and tell stories about the impact of international development on people. Such reports to policymakers, as well as to the international civil society, function as a counterweight, so that people have better insight into the meaning of standard data and official reports.

NG: *NG: Development aid probably has become more politicized. Why do you think it has become more difficult in the Netherlands to mobilize support to use tax payers' money for development?*

JP: There is a lot of discussion about development and development assistance in the world. Until recently, in the Netherlands there always was strong popular support for it. However, rational analysis would demonstrate that development aid is only of secondary importance explaining economic growth and development. Modesty – or honesty – requires that one should be careful claiming successes. However, this means – at the same time – that you may lose popular support for aid. I see development assistance as a device within the new international legal order established after World War II. You need to deal with international problems: peace and conflict, poverty, environment, instability and violations of human rights. And you have to do that together in an international system with common policies, international finance, a world economy and an international civil society. Presently, we see an emerging global middle class living an increasingly comfortable life. Many people don't care much for the poor, for the voiceless, because they are afraid that they would have to give up part of their newly won wealth. They have to be educated that caring for less privileged people would be in their own interest. It is a political struggle and it's not easy.

NG: *NG: Particularly in health, but also in other sectors, interventions funded by development aid are expected to recover their costs and be "sustainable." Do you agree with that notion of sustainability?*

JP: That is a very short-sighted vision of sustainability. Economic and social sustainability are far more important than financial sustainability. Cost recovery within a year or two or three years does not make sense. You have to invest in health, in order to make people live longer and contribute to society over time – over a lifetime.

NG: *NG: In your current position as a professor at ISS, what is the most important lesson you teach your students regarding investing in development?*

JP: My most important message is, "Continue studying; continue learning. Never stop. Continue asking questions, stay critical and do not accept the first answer to the question which you have posed. Listen to the people in the underclass and in the other countries themselves. You are an outsider. You are sometimes a passenger, a passer-by, a visitor. The only people who count are those who are in the midst of the process themselves." ■