A HOPEFUL PESSIMIST

Jan Pronk is a development thinker with vast experience as an academic, economist, diplomat, and politician. Pip Robertson talks to him about his views on conflict, globalisation, and poverty elimination.

Jan Pronk is currently Professor at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague. He has a background as an economist, studying under Nobel Prize winner Jan Tinbergen, and has been a politician, serving three separate terms as a minister in the Netherlands government, holding environment and development portfolios. He has worked in an international multilateral context, notably as the Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN) in Sudan from 2004 until he was thrown out by the Sudanese Government in 2006. The New York Times describes Jan Pronk as "known for his candour" and the former Netherlands Prime Minister Wim Kok has called him "the minister for the national conscience". Jan Pronk visited New Zealand in December 2008 as keynote speaker at the DevNet conference, whose theme was Peripheral Vision.

PIP ROBERTSON: *You emphasise the need for the ownership of development to be given to the people within the region or country receiving the development aid. Why is this so important?*

JAN PRONK: It is their country, their development, their lives. And the development should be owned not by just anyone in the country, but by the people in the country who the aid is for. It is not for the government; it is for the most poor, the most disadvantaged.

Development aid is not a project with a beginning and an end, but a catalyst for something that already exists in a country that will continue, so that the aid can end but the structures and progress remain.

It must improve the lives for the people who most need it – the people who are the most poor, on the periphery, on the edges – otherwise it is not development.

PR: *How can you tell it is helping?*

JP: Go there, ask questions, observe. It is very important to have people there, on the ground. We cannot deliver aid from a distance.

The poor and the excluded need to be the judges of aid's success and worth. If they do not see that it's helping them then it's not development. That is the only criterion that counts.

PR: *You're critical of the idea that a country must meet certain conditions – for example, political stability or good governance – before it can be eligible for development aid. Why?*

JP: Good governance is too static a concept. Better governance is a development outcome. We don't demand that a country has improved child health as a condition, or improved education, before we will give aid. So why should we demand good governance? These things cannot be separated from each other.

1 Jan Pronk (standing at table) urging civilians and rebel forces in Northern Darfur to refrain from attacks and engage in peace talks in 2006. UN Photo – Fred Noy.

The aim should not be 'good governance' but better governance, and who judges whether it is better? Not the neighbouring country, nor the government, but the people themselves.

I am a great believer in democracy. In the west our specific democratic model has developed over centuries, but it may not be the right model for everywhere. If we now try to impose that model on other countries, there might not be the will in those countries. If a system is being imposed, it may create more problems; it may create more conflict. Just as there are different economic market models, there are different democratic ways that political decisions can be made in a country. What is important is that the rights of individual people within a country are being preserved and protected.

PR: ***Just as development is a process of change without a beginning or end, you also say that conflict does not have a beginning and an end. Is aiming to end conflict in a region therefore a false goal?***

JP: We have to be realistic. The aim should be to manage a conflict. We can stop it from escalating, from becoming more violent. But don't fool yourself; we cannot remove conflict.

PR: ***You've been vocal that in Sudan more should have been done by the international community, and sooner. How is international intervention compatible with the idea that people within countries should own the processes of change?***

JP: The international community should see to it that the human rights of people within a country are not being jeopardised. Early political intervention for this is much more possible than we are doing. The problem is we let things go. In Sudan, before the war started in Darfur, there were talks, but in 2002 the Sudanese Government was completely neglecting the views of the people in Darfur itself. If the international community had been timely with its intervention – which means in the year 2001 or 2002 – and sent messengers, sent envoys, and talked to both parties, then it would not have erupted into the violence

1 Children have lunch at a Sudanese orphanage. UN Photo – Arpan Munier.

2 Jan Pronk meets with traditional leaders representing Sudanese internally displaced persons in North Darfur in 2006. UN Photo – Fred Noy.

that took place in 2003. It wasn't until 400,000 people had been killed and 1.3 million people were displaced that the UN Security Council discussed Darfur. That was in July 2004.

There are so many opportunities to put pressure on. And I don't mean military troops as the answer. It can be economic or political pressure. Governments or regional bodies, like the African Union, can exert political pressure.

An example where this worked was after the 2007 elections in Kenya, when there was violence and death. Political and economic pressure was put on and, backed by many different groups, Kofi Annan got the different parties together and agreement was reached between the political parties. It stopped the escalation of conflict.

PR: ***Development aid, if it is effective, will improve the lives of marginalised people. Because this may mean a change in the balance of power or economics or politics in a country, can aid therefore be a source of conflict?***

JP: Conflict is inherent to the process of development, because of scarcity of water, of land, but also because of different interests. That means you have to manage conflict to prevent its escalation into violence.

Some people say that poverty causes violence, or conflict. I don't think this is the case. The fact that people are poor will not cause conflict, but if those people believe the cause of their poverty is because other people are rich and processes are unjust, that can cause conflict.

Responsibility for aid is not just with developed countries; developing countries also have a responsibility to help the poor. India, for example, has an economy that is getting stronger and many people's lives have improved to a great extent. But it still has 600 million people living far below the poverty line.

PR: ***The Millennium Development Goals target the end of poverty and hunger by 2015. We're over halfway to that point now. What in your opinion are the greatest barriers to reducing poverty?***

JP: There is this idea that when the cake is big enough, then it will be distributed. But who decides when the cake is big enough? It is the rich countries. And there is always something else to do before it can be distributed. In healthcare, for example, before basic health is given to the poor in the world, there are highly technical, expensive procedures for the middle-class. And the same idea applies to other spheres.

Globalisation has gone too far. We have facilitated it too far. It has created inequalities and has contributed to economic collapse. In Europe, for example, the agricultural subsidies mean that we produce food – chicken, or tomatoes, for example – and export it to Africa at costs that African producers cannot compete with. And yet we expect them to remove all economic protections.

We need to re-orient globalisation so that it is not only economic globalisation, but also social and environmental globalisation.

We must not think only of development in terms of aid. Giving financial aid and

expertise is only one way to help and it is not the most important way. It must be through trade policies, foreign policies, and environmental policies. It is through these that development cooperation can happen and poor people's lives improve.

Environmental policies are particularly important. Climate change is affecting the poor the most, because they live in the most difficult situations. They are paying for our emissions and yet we still produce greenhouse gases. Other places should not bear the costs. For this to change we must step back.

PR: ***At a government level or individual level, or both?***

JP: We all must. It should be led by governments, but we all must step back.

Governments can do this through budget allocations. Is the emphasis on modernity, or is it about spending more to help the poor? To help the poor it means that the better-off should modify their own wishes.

PR: ***On your blog, you have written a list of guidelines for peacekeepers. One, which I love for its simplicity, is "Care for people. People first." Does this also apply to people working in development?***

JP: That advice for peacekeepers came from my experience with development. I think the same applies. I think development must be about the people. Which people? The people who need it most. Who needs it most? The people on the periphery – the women, the children, people displaced by conflict – these people are important.

Aid has become technocratic. It is about accountabilities, efficiencies, and risk-avoidance. These things are important, but they are of secondary importance. The priority must always be the people.

The human rights of people should be the aim. Development aid should improve the lives of the most excluded. People have the right to live, but also more than this: people have the right to live a life with meaning. Who decides what is meaningful? The people themselves.

PR: ***You call yourself a pessimist, but it is a pessimism that obviously motivates you to act. Are there things, however, which give you a sense of hope?***

JP: There are two things. I'm a pessimist because I'm a realist and the reality is that things are not so good at the moment. But we can change; development can work. That is the first thing.

The second thing is to do with who will be the leaders in the future. I am 68 years old and my generation has been in charge for decades now. In the years after the Second World War there were good developments, good work was done. Things were moving in the right way, with decolonisation and human rights. Somewhere in the 1980s we as leaders stopped, we became stagnant. But it is my impression that the young generation today, the ones who will become leaders, have curiosity. They seem willing to look beyond frontiers – that is, beyond their own purse, beyond their own careers, and beyond their own wants – and this gives me hope.

3 Displaced children fetch water using a submerged hand pump following heavy early rains that flooded villages in Sudan. UN Photo – Tim McKulka.

4 An elderly woman, internally displaced from her home in Abyei by heavy fighting between the Sudan Armed Forces and the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army, gets ready to receive her ration of emergency food aid. UN Photo – Tim McKulka.