About the author

Jan Tinbergen was born in 1903, in The Hague, the Netherlands. His father was a teacher of Dutch and History in a secondary 'Latin school' and his mother had been a primary-school teacher. Two of his brothers were biologists. Because of his interest in mathematics and physics he chose those subjects for his university studies, and got his Ph.D. degree at Leyden University in 1929. He felt he could be more useful to society as an economist and with his supervisor Paul Ehrenfest's help wrote his dissertation on 'Minimum Problems in Physics and Economics'. His first employment was with the Netherlands Central Statistical Office, where he was in charge of business-cycle statistics (1929-1945). From 1936 to 1938 he was in the employ of the League of Nations, Geneva, where his task was to test the various theories of the business cycle set down in Gottfried Haberler's "Prosperity and Depression". He had joined the Econometric Society, whose members were developing mathematical 'models' of society. These 'models' are simplified pictures of the operation of economies. Tinbergen formulated the first testified model of the Dutch economy, designed to give numerical answers to questions of business-cycle policy. If, for instance, the policy is to devaluate the guilder, by how much should it be devalued? Or, if government investments are the instrument chosen, what amount of such investments is advisable?

For the League of Nations, Tinbergen constructed a model of the American economy. Later he developed one for the United Kingdom in the period between 1870 and 1914, which was published by the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences.

In 1933 he had become a professor of statistics and econometrics of the Netherlands School of Economics in Rotterdam (now Erasmus University). He felt his work to be truly useful, because in the 1930s the deep depression of the world economy was rightly considered the most urgent problem.

In 1945, after the Second World War, he was appointed Director of the Central Planning Bureau of the Netherlands, the office that evaluates the economic situation and the likely consequences of various policies, such as tax or wage policy, or trade policies. The Dutch economy, as so many others, had suffered from the war and the most urgent problem had now become the rehabilitation of the economy. For some time during the Nazi occupation, Tinbergen was not allowed to teach, but after a while the prohibition was relieved unconditionally.

In 1951 he had to visit India in his capacity as Secretary of the International Statistical Institute. That first contact with an underdeveloped country brought home to him that other problems were far more urgent than Dutch planning. He was deeply impressed by the poverty he was now seeing from nearby. Wanting to do first things first, he shifted his interest to the development problem. This was facilitated by the retiring of Professor G. Gonggrijp, who taught colonial economics, later renamed Eastern economics. The decolonisation process, which changed former colonies into independent but underdeveloped countries, logically entailed a corresponding change of the subject taught into 'development planning'. in other words, short-term planning had to give way to long-term planning. Tinbergen's part-time professorship was converted into a full-time one (in the official Dutch terminology: from buitengewoon (extra-ordinary) into gewoon (ordinary), and the subject changed accordingly.

In the subsequent years, a Centre for Development Planning was created, in which several teachers taught and research staff worked.Tinbergen was appointed consultant to the World Bank, the United Nations, and the governments of several underdeveloped nations, among them Egypt, Turkey, Indonesia, Surinam, and Venezuela. A fitting orientation for a man whose leitmotiv was the desire to help solve the most urgent problem confronting him.

With the increasing tension between communist and western countries, the example given by physicians clearly appealed to economists. While physicians feel responsible for human health, economists feel responsible for human welfare in a more general way. Wars are a threat to prosperity as well as health, and so naturally, economists united in the American association 'Economists Against the Arms Race (ECAAR)', of which Tinbergen was one of the founding fathers. The Netherlands followed with 'Economen voor Vrede (EVV)', which included the Dutch-speaking ('Flemish') Belgian economists.

Although Tinbergen had not taken up a formal study of economic science, he holds several honorary doctorates and in 1969, together with the Norwegian economist Ragnar Frisch, was the first Laureate in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel.

Tinbergen is a convinced social-democrat. When students in Leyden, he and his girlfriend Tine de Wit joined the Socialist Youth (AJC) and the Labour Party (Sociaal-Democratische Arbeiders-Party - SDAP). Their parents, while not themselves politically active, had no difficulty with that choice. Neither Jan nor Tine wanted a political career, but Jan made various attempts to define a democratic socialist society as an optimum order, that is an order maximising popular welfare. He is strongly convinced that democratic socialism has a bright future. Together with Jan Berkouwer he is currently writing a book on the subject.