

Environment and Development: the contributions of Hans Opschoor

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This interview is to mark the valedictory lecture of Professor Opschoor. During our hour-long discussion, Hans provided an impressive overview of the past decade at ISS, of relevant issues for the environment and development debate since the 1970s and other topical questions. (I refer the reader to the full text of Hans' valedictory for a more detailed exposé of his thoughts on climate change - <http://www.iss.nl/News/Valedictory-Address-Hans-Opschoor>).

You first came to ISS in 1996 when you became Rector of the Institute. What were the reasons for your interest in ISS? What were the most important issues you had to deal with during your rectorship?

I came to ISS in 1996 and served two terms as Rector (from 1996 till the end of 2004), seizing the opportunity to make changes in management and to further my own research agenda on global environment and development. I found ISS to be an extremely stimulating place: it is a truly international institute because of the origin of both students and staff and it is an ideal place to learn and gain perspective. 'Things look different depending on where you stand', as Gunnar Myrdal reminds us, and ISS offers an excellent observation point. As Rector, one of my main objectives was to move ISS away from being an educational institute and to focus on international capacity development and research. I felt we had to specialize in what we do best:

multidisciplinary research matched by an attempt to produce research that matters, i.e. to understand and also to change things. We started to move towards a policy aiming at the development of research potential arising from experience gained in a range of projects in the global South. This research, which would be policy relevant and scientifically sound, would radiate back into quality capacity development and teaching.

It is now once again a time of change for ISS. What is your own perspective on the merger with Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR)?

This merger represents a challenge and also an opportunity for ISS. The challenge is to raise interest in EUR for the type of work we do and in issues related to global development. Potential opportunities arise from potential linkages between ISS and the social sciences and medical faculties of EUR and, more in general, from the possibility of ISS being able to expand its research interests into areas where EUR is already present. ISS can certainly add an international perspective to the rest of EUR. In this context, I am thinking about issues such as poverty and migration in the Netherlands itself. Further complementarities arise from the fact that EUR does not have a development economics component anymore, while this is a strong field for ISS.

You came from being the director of the Institute of Environmental Studies (IVM) of the Free University Amsterdam (VUA) to ISS. Can you tell me how environment and development issues came to be your main interest?



Hans Opschoor during field work, Botswana 1979

I started my career as a welfare economist. In the 1970s my work already focused on environment and development, and especially on poor people's coping mechanisms with respect to environmental stress. In 1971 I started working on what later would be called environmental and ecological economics. This research resulted in several studies on themes such as environmental spaces, focusing on resource origin and resource use to highlight how asymmetries are bound to create problems. Other themes relate to irreversibilities, inequality and scarcity, biodiversity, agriculture, and more recently, of course, to climate change.

In the 1980s I became Director of the Institute of Environmental Studies. The main concerns there at the time were European environmental issues, but development issues were increasingly recognised as being important too. The focus of my attention has been on the costs and benefits of climate change, on adaptation and mitigation. One continuing concern was always how to share the carbon space across individuals and countries and how to distribute responsibilities for staying within these limits. Also, I worked on issues in the field of environment and poverty.

Your contribution to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports in 2001 and 2007 brings us to one of the main issues in the current debate on environment and development: climate change.

The issue of 'shared but differentiated responsibilities' arose from the 1992 Rio Conference and was incorporated in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 1992. The Kyoto Protocol should then have applied the concept, but the mitigation measures for the North and adaptation provisions for the South were far too modest. Now we are in the middle of negotiations for the post-2012 agreements. Certainly China and India should be part of the deal, but the question remains: who should pay, and how should we pay for the costs associated with any agreement? How is the principle of differentiated but shared responsibilities going to work in an agreement that is ambitious in terms of both mitigation (i.e. greenhouse gas

emissions abatement) and adaptation (i.e. adjustment to climate change) measures?

Experiences of local development and environmental objectives have been associated with the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) initiative, which was a Brazilian proposal inspired by northern actors. Unfortunately the implementation of these projects was flawed. While looking at efficiency measures (i.e. at achieving emission reductions in the least expensive way) the instrument basically allows the North to grab the cheapest abatement options that are often available in developing countries. On the receiving end, most initiatives are being undertaken by China, Brazil and India, but very little by African countries. Eventually, it is the countries that are growing anyway that get their investment in new/clean technologies supported by the North. A final problem is that CDM deals only with the state and with private enterprise; local perspectives are neglected and the bottom-up approach has remained theoretical at best.

Another scheme to involve and make developing countries partners and beneficiaries in the policies to fight climate change is emission trading with a cap and distribution mechanism. The problem is that the current experience within the EU is not convincing: there were technical problems since the emission rights were given for free and the whole trading scheme amounts to a commoditization of pollution. Market mechanisms might not work anywhere: if they failed in Europe, that is often considered the top notch in terms of environmental policies, what can we expect from China and India? When societies developed markets in the north, economists qualified markets by studying so-called 'market imperfections': market failures including externalities and a lack of concern for future generations. Traditionally we turned to government policies (e.g. taxation) as ways to correct these problems, while in a neoliberal approach more markets are being established to solve the problems created by already existing markets.

We need to understand the perspective of the poor and start to think and build

policies that are based on collective action. The issue here is to stop thinking as mainstream economists applying our science and our theories in a deductionist fashion by seeing every problem through the prism of markets. The English saying goes that 'if you only have a hammer everything looks like a nail'. If we economists only use neoclassical economics and market theory, we are only going to see market failures that can be corrected by market-based adjustments.

In any case, trading mechanisms will result in pricing carbon that, in turn, will have an impact on income distribution. We are not paying enough attention to the distributional effects that these mechanisms can have, especially at the individual level. One crucial issue here is consumption and emission related to the satisfaction of basic needs. These emissions should be seen as entitlements whereas emissions related to luxurious consumption and wasteful production modes should be the ones to abate. Unfortunately, there is no distinction at the moment, nor is there is a clear debate about the distribution of responsibilities within countries. Looking only at nations obscures the fact that in developing countries elites are contributing to emissions.

The UN initiative Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) is meant to create global environmental benefits, but it displays the same handicaps mentioned above. There are issues related to the consideration of indigenous people and their territories that should be the subject of new environmental regulations. The new constraints should be matched by compensation, but it is unclear how things will play out in practice. The mechanism does not consider people's needs and there are only state to state deals. There can, however, be no trickle down of benefits – from the state to poor individuals – unless there is prior assurance that local people will benefit and that no damage to their livelihoods will be done. An upfront developmental orientation is needed, but missing.

The current DevISSues is focused on migration: how is migration linked to the environmental issues you have been studying?