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# Praxis Interviews Practitioners: Jan Pronk

*Jan Pronk is chair of the International Institute for Environment and Development. He served as Kofi Annan's special envoy to the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg and is a former minister of the environment of the Netherlands. This interview took place on February 21, 2003 after an event at The Fletcher School sponsored by the Fletcher Energy and Environment Forum and the Environmental Professional Interest Committee at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.*

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## **HOW HAS THE ISSUE OF CLIMATE CHANGE AFFECTED THE WAY INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IS BOTH CONCEPTUALIZED AND PRACTICED?**

Climate change has affected development in a couple of ways. First, it is a truly global issue that has ramifications for all countries. The same cannot be said for all typical development problems. Second, climate change has altered the way we deal with different countries in terms of development assistance and in terms of policies. The concept of preferential treatment, which is a developmental concept, has also been applied when dealing with climate negotiations and climate policymaking. For instance, developing countries have been given a more gradual set of environmental goals than developed countries that can better afford to make changes in the way they do business. Third, progress in developing countries is being impaired, grossly, by climate change. This has consequences for food production patterns and for people in coastal areas. It even has health consequences in various countries, because different temperature patterns might have implications for the spread of viruses, for example. It is very important that climate change initiatives not only include provisions about greenhouse gases, but also policies to help countries cope with the effects of climate change and how it impacts individual people. These initiatives must not only be created but also implemented—there is some degree of implementation already but it has to be improved.

## **SHOULD THERE BE A RIO + 20?**

Yes, we need a Rio + 20. Not too soon, but we do need another one, and it should be in 2015. This will be an important year because, for one reason, it is the target

of the millennium development goal to cut world poverty in half. That is the first reason for having a summit at that time. The second is that we have too many summits, and we need to cut back on these. Last year we had the Millennium Summit, the Johannesburg Summit, the World Food Summit. We need to bring all of these overlapping issues together under the aegis of one conference, for instance in a world summit on sustainable development. The third reason is that there is always a recycling of political leadership. In Johannesburg, there were hardly any

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leaders who were also present at Rio. Most leaders are confronted with the day-to-day tasks of their positions, focusing on the immediate issues facing their nations, such as security. They are not focused on the idea that they must take care of their own society in such a way that they are not impairing the choices of other societies and of future generations. It is very important to bring this new political leadership into the process, not to let them get too complacent or rigid in the process of day-to-day policymaking. That is why we need something like another World Summit on Sustainable Development. Not too soon, but we need it nevertheless.

**DO WE NEED TO CREATE A SINGLE, GLOBAL ORGANIZATION TO BRING MORE COHERENCE TO ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES?**

It is not happening. So far it has been like a struggle by Don Quixote. The French and the Germans have asked for it, but the problem is that developing countries say the environment is clearly a concern of the North, not their concern. Developing nations ask the question, "If you are not meeting our concerns, why should we address yours?" So there is a political dead-

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lock. That said, I do believe we need global environmental governance and I could very well envision a world environmental organization. But, perhaps more importantly, I would say that we need a mechanism, a machinery, focused on sustainable development, because we ought to be careful about isolating environmental dimensions from other dimensions.

We also have too many different organizations, and I am very much in favor of reforming the UN system. I would get rid of many of the existing committees, organizations, and institutions. Weed them out, set priorities. The main question is not whether to create a new organization, but to create a political decision-making mechanism that takes on environmental issues in the context of other concerns, and does so with some power. My idea would be an economic and environmental security council—not an organization—where about 25 countries, on behalf of all other nations and on a rotating basis, discuss issues of global environmental and economic importance, making decisions that have a binding value. And they ought not just do so on minor issues, but also on major issues, like they are doing in the Security Council with political decisions. There is already something like this in the IMF, but it is only for monetary policy. This new council would discuss environmental issues and everything that is related to trade and money and would

involve not just individual countries but also major organizations like the IMF and World Bank. It would bring environmental and economic issues, including trade, into one overall discussion.

**HOW DO YOU RESPOND TO PEOPLE WHO DOUBT THAT CLIMATE CHANGE IS THE DIRECT RESULT OF HUMAN ACTIVITIES?**

I address their doubts directly. Of course climate change has taken place throughout the ages. It is very difficult to make the case that one particular climate event, such as a hurricane or typhoon, is taking place as a result of human activities or if it is just taking place as part of climate change that happens naturally. It is not easy to take each individual event and decide that you ought to do something. You must observe what happened and then listen to climate scientists, meteorologists, who can analyze an overall pattern and recognize that there are changes in this pattern that are more important than the individual climate event. If you can show the changes in the overall pattern and associate those changes to human activities, then you can respond to people who doubt the links between these. ■