

Jan Pronk, The Netherlands. [A thematic essay which speaks to Principle 16 in African diplomacy](#)

## The Earth Charter as the Basis for a Comprehensive Approach to Conflicts in Sudan



**Jan Pronk** served for ten years as a member of the Dutch Parliament. Throughout his career, Jan Pronk has played a prominent role in promoting sustainable economic and environmental development. He served three times as Minister for Development Cooperation in the Government in The Netherlands, and as Minister of Environment.

Two times he was Chairman of the Intergovernmental Group for Indonesia. He was also President of the United Nations Conference of Parties of the Convention on Climate Change held in The Hague. Mr. Pronk served as the Secretary-General's Special Envoy for the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg in 2002. He was formerly Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development from 1980 to 1985, and Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations from 1985 to 1986. In 1975, he chaired the Committee of the Whole of the 7th Special Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations. Upon his nomination in 2004 as Special Representative for Sudan, Mr. Jan Pronk laid down all positions to dedicate himself completely to the responsibilities and duties entrusted to him by the United Nations' Secretary-General. He is based in Khartoum.

**T**he sixteenth and final principle of the Earth Charter calls for promoting “a culture of tolerance, nonviolence, and peace.” Nowhere, at first sight, does the realization of this principle seem further away than in Sudan, with its conflicts in several parts of the country, especially in Darfur. And while the Earth Charter encompasses a broad and holistic approach to conflicts and other problems in the world, the strategy of the international community toward Sudan has been all but comprehensive. Too little was done too late. It was only humanitarian – help the victims, pick up the pieces. We did not learn the lessons of the conflicts of the 1990s.

Nevertheless, I see progress in Sudan. 2005 is the year in which Sudanese leaders, who have been fighting each other for years, became future-oriented. They looked forward, which is an essential element of The Earth Charter. The Charter bears a

broad range of elements in it, all of which could be of use in Sudan. The Charter may have an environmental focus, but it also talks about governance, about social issues, about equal sharing in times of scarcity, about not overexploiting resources, and about taking care of future generations.

The Earth Charter could be a perfect guideline for negotiations in Sudan. In political talks, to solve a conflict one always needs a declaration of principles. The principles in the Charter could be used as a framework within which a specific conflict could be addressed. The values enshrined in the Charter could underpin a domestically – or internationally-shaped comprehensive approach. The Charter could provide a base and a guide to build such an approach and to find support for it among all stakeholders.

Such a comprehensive approach towards Sudan is essential and has been lacking until recently. It implies five dimensions: political, economic, social, cultural, and environmental. All should be addressed, and in time, to prevent escalation of the conflict. The approach toward Darfur was not timely. The conflict had burst into major violence and the international community was only giving humanitarian assistance. But to be comprehensive means that one also must deal with the causes of conflict, and not only with the consequences.

The historical root causes of the Darfur conflict are, in the first place, cultural and racial – different groups not seeing the others as equal, but as inferior, and themselves as superior. Secondly, there is a colonial dimension. The problems in the new state of Sudan after decolonization were also rooted in the way colonial powers drew the borders of the country, giving shape to power relations within the country and extending favors to specific groups and elites. A third root cause is related to the environment and resources. In Darfur, farmers and nomads compete over land and water. There are also other actual causes like poor economic governance – the country's ruling class allocating resources to their own people – and poor political governance. These greatly complicate solving the root causes.

An important aspect of the comprehensive approach is the

mechanism chosen by the people in a specific society for decision-making and leadership. Western systems may seem more effective to some, but if they are not accepted, they will not work. In Darfur, the leaders of the tribes and the government are going back to traditional forms of conflict resolution, combined with concepts such as better governance and democracy. These methods help solve problems between nomads and settlers, an important issue behind the conflicts in Darfur and other parts of Sudan. In Darfur, age-old camel tracks run from north to south and back. Traditional law says that camel drivers in conflict with landowning tribes have to pay for the use of, and any damage to, the camel tracks. They know exactly where to go and where not, but because of overpopulation, desertification, climate change, and scarcity, travel has become difficult. Meanwhile, the traditional conflict resolution schemes were suppressed when the central government imposed new procedures in the 1990s. I believe a sustainable end to the war, and reconciliation thereafter, can only be accomplished by sitting together again, in traditional ways. This includes compensation for damage against cattle, people, and houses. If not, there is always the possibility for revenge, which is included in the traditional rules in Darfur. This is not an unlimited right; retaliation has a deadline and is related to whom in the clan the damage has been done. Such elements and causes were not systematically confronted in the past. They weren't even studied comprehensively.

A complicating fact is the international dominance of the security paradigm. This, in practice, always concerns the security of actors, not of victims, of the population. Security is biased. Security is about stability, the absence of violence. But it does not at all address root causes. It is about the security of an internal and expatriate elite. Security may even be dangerous. Security kills because, as a paradigm, it is exclusive; it keeps people out; it creates a form of inequality. When people feel excluded and alienated, they don't accept it and they act against the system that excludes them. Security also considers people as being from a specific category – say as Moslems, Arabs, Palestinians. The alternative would be a new paradigm of human security. I prefer to think in terms of sustainability because it goes into the realm of promises. Whereas, security is exclusive, sustainability is holistic.

One important element of a comprehensive approach is cooperation between international actors. We need a unified system in which all elements of the United Nations and the international community work together. I think it is very important to see Sudan as a domestic problem, instead of an international problem. Of course, there are international dimensions like colonial heritage, arms trade, and economic ties. But the solution lies in a domestic, or African, approach. We have to support African and Sudanese players, not substitute for them. In 2005, we see this starting to happen. We see people starting to talk, in political (pre-) negotiations towards peace. They adopt declarations of principles, many of which are forward-looking and contain language which may not be directly quoting the Earth Charter,

but are rooted in international discussions leading to declarations such as the Earth Charter. In globalized politics, there are now some commonalities, or basic references that are being shared by all people concerned, so that we know what we mean when we use specific language.

The Earth Charter says that a global partnership is needed, but it also calls for involvement of all stakeholders, including civil society. This, too, is a necessary element of a comprehensive approach. A sustainable solution can only be found if it is bottom-up and inclusive, with all social strata taking part.

Sudan is a very authoritarian, undemocratic, and, sometimes, dictatorial society. Before civil society can come in, one must first shape power by international pressure and by domestic pressure. Domestic pressure in Sudan could only be done with arms; the people of the South had no other choice. The power of ideas was not strong enough, so a liberation movement was needed, as in the struggle for decolonization. Civil society at its start is always elitist, but in the case of Sudan, the elite was in Khartoum in the North. In the South, a counter-elite was to be created. The Sudan People's Liberation Army was the vanguard of the exploited, neglected, marginalized, and oppressed. The problem is, in Sudan like in many other African countries, that after the liberation a countervailing power can make the same mistakes. So after the vanguard, one needs deeply-rooted counter-movements based in the middle and lower strata of society of the country. One can never realize sustainability without them carrying the process.

International pressure can follow one of two different paths. One way is regime change from the outside – military intervention – which I am against. The other way is changing the character of a regime using economic, political, and cultural means such as sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and values. It seems forgotten now that this worked in the struggle against Latin American and Iron Curtain dictatorships, and against the regime in South Africa. It is values-based; it is about human rights, freedom, the sharing of responsibilities, and the fruits of progress. These are global values, shared by people of different social classes and of different creeds – all the things that are in the Earth Charter. ●