

Welcome to Turning Conscience Into Action, the Earth Charter podcast. Join Mirian Vilela, Earth Charter International Executive Director, in her fascinating conversations with great thinkers, scholars, and activists from around the world who are working in the fields of sustainability, ethics, education, and social transformation. Our purpose is to generate new insights on how to face current global challenges and inspire Informed Action.

For this podcast episode, we are sharing a conversation with Jan Pronk, former Minister of International Cooperation and Minister of Environment of the Netherlands. He was also a special envoy of the United Nations Secretary General to Sudan. Thank you so much for accepting to join us, Jan Pronk. One important thing to say is that when Jan Pronk was Minister of International Cooperation around the early 90s, it was actually when the new Earth Charter initiative was launched with the cooperation in support of the Dutch government back in 1994. So he has been around and supporting the Earth Charter Global Initiative for many, many years. So Jan, what is your take on the current challenges humanity is facing? I think the challenges we have to see is humanity is expanding the frontiers of global and local challenges. So what is your take on the current challenges we are facing in terms of pandemic, climate change, etc.?

Well I'm struck by the fact that you used the terminology challenges, which is a very positive way to look at it. You know me. I'm quite a pessimistic guy. I see all these phenomena as catastrophes. Now of course a catastrophe is also a challenge, but it is a catastrophe. We have for instance the pandemics and there will be more because of ecological distortion, man invading nature, the living areas of plants and animals.

We have an economic crisis, increasing inequality and poverty amongst all those people who cannot keep up with the others. We have conflicts getting greater, larger and larger, many different conflicts. But to a large extent also due to the fact that nation states are dwindling down because of less democratization, authoritarian politics, sprinkles amongst groups within nations. We have wars, so many international wars and domestic wars.

And many of these wars are not even showing anymore on the news.

No, they are hardly on the screen. But there are not many very stable countries nowadays where people really can expect that there will be progress in freedom and welfare. Certain countries which in the past were examples of possibly progressive and proceeding countries such as the United States, they are falling apart. We have a huge crisis because of the refugees in many countries which are not being helped at all. They are being stopped at war and the numbers are increasing. I can continue. My point is that all these crises, all these catastrophes are related to each other. If you are living in a difficult natural environment, there will be poverty. And if there is poverty, there will be conflicts. When there is conflict, there will be either war or a solution with authoritarian rule. And that will lead to a refugee crisis.

And the conflict will also affect the environment.

So it's continuing. It's continuing. Now, my main point is that and then perhaps I come closer to your terminology of challenges.

We have seen it before. We have seen major crises in the world in the first half of the previous century leading to wars, world wars and also a possibility of nuclear annihilation. And then it was seen as a challenge. Never again. Let's not get further. And we were building on the basis of gradually globally shared values, a shared system of international law and a number of institutions which could help us to discuss all these problems politically in order to find common solutions, rather than to fight and to have another war.

United Nations is an example of this. All these UN organizations with different examples of it on the basis of international law, the Charter of Human Rights, the refugee treaties, the European community was an example. The organization of markets whereby also a number of values were to be respected in terms of trade also, monetary discipline. It was all part of a system.

The system was used to address the catastrophes of the time. In the meantime, and that's in particular since the year 2000, but there were already some examples for them, the system is being dismantled. Who cares about international law, international trade law, international financial law, international environmental, international refugee law, the international treaty of the rights of the child, etc. Who cares? Some countries do. Big companies are not interested. They are too global, too supranational and a number of major powers. They're just going for a nationalistic or geopolitical power.

US number one, and the US was the founding father of the United Nations, you may say, China, Russia. And Europe is feeling threatened by this, is not going yet into the wrong direction, but a number of international laws are also not being complied with by the European community. Take for instance the international law with regards to the rights of refugees. So I see the system gradually being dismantled.

So will a new alternative emerge, a new alternative for the system?

And that is what is necessary, it's not yet in the making. So that is the challenge, but maybe the biggest catastrophe is not all those catastrophes which I mentioned, but the fact that we are depriving ourselves of the systems and values which are necessary to address all these catastrophes.

Wow, that's a good point. We need to re-look at the current, the capacity of the current system and the values we all have as humanity to be able to address the current challenges.

Definitely.

So that's good. So one of the questions was what's most needed to change the course. So humanity is heading towards maybe a catastrophe as you would say, but to change the course to another direction and to take humanity to a new path. So you would say is new institutions values?

Maybe a restoration of existing institutions because it's always difficult to build new institutions. That's number one. Number two, you need a kind of a world popular movement of people who consider themselves as belonging to one Earth community, one global community.

Not a nationalistic movement, but a world movement. Some efforts were made during the last 20 years, the resistance against global capital, for instance, but it all died out. What do I see yet? And if I have to speak about catastrophes or challenges, then I also have to say something about hope. Hope. What I see at the moment is that younger people perhaps are more willing to consider themselves as part of the world community without discrimination. All people having the same rights. You see that at the moment in the Black Lives Matter movement, which is also getting support from many non-black young people. It's one thing. You also see that in the young people who are going for the fight against climate change.

All of a sudden it ticked and other young people were following the example of a great atomba. It's an example. Young people, either with regard to the issue of race or with regard to the issue of climate, you also see that sometimes in individual countries in order to help refugees, young people willing to go and help them, to fight for them. It is not yet a movement, but it is anyway a value system, climate-raised refugees, oriented, which is crossing national frontiers, which is part of maybe a lifestyle of a younger generation.

And of course it is not just young in terms of age. Older people can also feel young, feel affected by the new drive of those young people. No, that is necessary in order to resist the powers.

So you have worked for so many years in the international cooperation, in different fields. You must have some good stories. You must have some good stories and bad ones in your life in the field of international cooperation. Would you share with us some examples of stories you have lived in international cooperation?

Well, stories, there were in those years in which I was able to work together with others, there were some major steps forward because the institutions were used well.

Let's face it, the major victory of the new system which was built in 1946, the United Nations, or decolonisation, the whole southern part of the world had been colonised for centuries. And in 30 years it was over. And that was on the basis of international law, international institutions and values. No, I was young, but I was part of that process. And I think it is extremely important. Now secondly, there was the idea that all these countries ought to be assisted to become also economically self-reliant. That became international development cooperation and for quite a number of years, international development cooperation was an important issue of the system.

Thirdly, it was possible to discuss the values of the system and to start processes to adjust the system in order to benefit other countries, weaker countries, poorer countries, than the countries which had started the system. And I was asked in 1975 to chair the negotiations within the framework of the United Nations on a new international economic order, which was the demand of the developing countries, but the rich countries had to give in and we had negotiated and I was asked to chair those negotiations. Well, we did reach a compromise. We did reach a text with some changes in the values and the rules of law as far as the international economic order so far had been.

That was step forward. However, step backward. It was not implemented for a number of reasons, which I'm not going to discuss here, but it is possible to negotiate and to reach a result. Implementation is a second issue. I had a similar experience 20 years ago.

I was asked to chair the world negotiations on climate and we did make the Kyoto Protocol into a legal text, binding text which would be effective also with compliance procedures and with sanctions.

This was probably a fascinating experience to chair that process.

It was fascinating because we proved that it is possible at a worldwide level to reach an agreement. Compromising, of course, and you can be more ambitious, but you have to find a solution in which all countries can participate. Again, it was a major step forward.

20 years after, for the first time, scientists had said, climate change is man-made, so men have to do something about it. However, it was not implemented because the Kyoto Protocol was binding but only for a specific period and then we would have to restart the negotiations for the next stage and they didn't take part. Instead, countries discussed another treaty in which they would not bind themselves but they would only promise to do their best. Plans had to be submitted to the secretariat but the plans were not binding and the outcome of all the national plans in terms of climate change was far above what was considered to be sustainable for the world as a whole. Step forward, no implementation, step backward. Two examples. That is what we have seen. It's kind of an extra-large procession. You step forward and you step backward. Until the year 2000, I thought it is extremely difficult. You step forward and backward. Some of these institutions were nullified. For instance, I was the Deputy Secretary General of the UNCTAD. UNCTAD United Conference on Trade and Development. We had negotiated. It was possible to negotiate a number of solutions of international economic problems. However, in the mid-1980s, the Americans, Reagan, said, no way. I do not want to continue to negotiate anymore because any international negotiation is violating our national liberties and rights. Step forward, UNCTAD, step backward, stop.

The 1990s were a very interesting period because after that great conference in Rio de Janeiro on environment and development, where we well agreed on a charter, on an agenda for the year, for the 21st century, we had many initiatives of world negotiations on specific issues, on social affairs, on the position of women, for instance, on human rights. Just to mention a couple. There were more. In the United Nations, but last but not least, second in general, which underrated, in my view, came with an agenda for peace and agenda for development.

They were agreeable. However, it was difficult to implement it, but we worked further in the right direction, but not fast enough. The catastrophes were showing themselves already as coming. The last very positive thing in my view, and I was no longer involved in that, was the Millennium Development Declaration with the Millennium Development Goals, which is a brilliant set of goals, ambitious but feasible, worldwide, committing everybody.

It has been implemented partly, not well enough. Now we see the Sustainable Development Goals, which in my view is the major positive outcome of an international negotiation of

the last 10 years. However, they have to be implemented again, and that is difficult. But it is, if you read it, the whole set of Sustainable Development Goals, it is an effective answer to capitalism, because capitalism, which was the major force behind all those processes of the last couple of decades, capitalism means capital is more important than people and nature.

You always need an economy of people, capital and nature, for instance raw materials, in order to do something, to produce something, to create wealth. But if you say capital is the most important, then the direction of your process is being dictated by capital, and it may go to the detriment of people, poverty, people are being excluded, people are being exploited, people are being sent away out of the country, out of the system, and to the detriment also of the environment, of nature, of climate. No, so capital is doing all this, capitalism is doing all this. Sustainability means capital is not the most important thing, because it has to be sustainable for all people, for the earth as a whole, for future generations.

And that means that people's values and nature's values, people's rights, human rights, and nature's rights are more important than the interests of capital. Absolutely. So the SDGs, are in my view a very important outcome of a negotiation.

It also builds on previous agenda. It builds on the 92 agenda, the MDG agenda, so it was kind of building on previous process.

Yeah, part of a process, but it has to be implement. You cannot continue only negotiating, agreeing on a text, forgetting it, going to a new negotiation, agreeing on a new text, forgetting it again. As long as that is happening, people are being deluded. You may also say nature is being betrayed, poor people are being betrayed.

And that is what we perhaps have done. I may have been guilty also in that respect, that there was continuous negotiation. I was believing in the system. And I tried to contribute to implementation and definitely did my part. But implementation is more important than new texts.

I fully agree with that. Implementation is more important than new texts. And there are a lot of current texts that are good enough.

Sure, definitely. That's also the Earth Charter. We're going to discuss that. But there's one of the inspiring texts which was not brought to people from above. But which is part of a process. And to a certain extent, what I mentioned as the climate movement of young people or the anti-racial discrimination movement of others. The Earth Charter is also such a movement. It is a movement from below. A number of countries have subscribed to it and raised it.

But more important is that people believe in the values of the Earth Charter. And that they fight for those values to make them not individual values, but public values. On the basis of a movement, a fight by people themselves. Not just the outcome of a negotiation, which then can be set to sign.

Right. So in your life, in your professional life, you must have had many dilemmas and challenges in your own decision-making process. For you as the decision-maker leader in many of your different positions. Would you share with us one or two specific examples that you have had in your professional life that you felt most challenging in terms of the decisions you had to make in the dilemmas you have had in your hands?

As a matter of fact, I didn't have too many dilemmas which were not possible to be overcome. In terms of negotiations and international economic relations or development cooperation, my main personal defeats, you may say, in the atmosphere of development and conflict war. I have been extremely intensely involved in Rwanda, for instance.

The civil war over there brought one million people dead in three months genocide. We had built a world system in order also to safeguard human rights. We had an anti-genocide convention, but it took place. We didn't see it happening. We didn't foresee it. It happened. So we came too late. And the world community is very often coming too late or not coming at all, looking aside. Well, I did my best, but I was also too late. And that is a traumatic experience. I've seen it. I've seen the genocide. I've spelled it. I was there.

That's one of the traumatic experiences about which I'm being reminded each week still. And a second one is strongly related also to the role of the Dutch that was in Srebrenica in the same period in Bosnia, where on the basis of humanitarian intervention and to a certain extent the responsibility to protect the Dutch battalion of the United Nations, blue helmets had to safeguard and protect people in a village. And we didn't do it very well. And I was responsible as a politician. I was not a military member. I was a politician at the time. And there was genocide. Eight thousand people were killed. So half of the village was just killed by the Serb military. And we failed. Now, of course, they killed, but we failed to protect the people to be killed. And that is something which I also like Rwanda, I'm having a really thought of it still. I'm still talking about it, preaching about it, trying to influence systems, writing about it, reading about it.

It is, again, the failure of a system. It's a failure of a country, but also the failure of a system. Because we didn't do what we promised to do. We didn't do what we promised ourselves. We didn't do what we promised possible victims, what we were doing. No. So those are the defeats. Being defeated in an international negotiation is not a big problem.

If the outcome is not being implemented in full or hardly, it's a problem. But you can, you can still work in order to improve. But these were examples, and there are so many others, of course, of definitive defeats. So if we speak about a systematic crisis, the crisis of the system, the crisis of human rights, genocide, domestic war, violent conflict is only related to all the others, but it is preponderant. Still, maybe we had to learn the job of intervention. That's possible. However, having learned the job, we did not have better successes in the period 10 years later.

For instance, in Syria, for instance, in Central African Republic, we did do many mistakes in the early 1990s, maybe because we had to learn the trade of protection. There was no United Nations activity before the end of the Cold War. So in the beginning, we were making mistakes. Now, you can perhaps say that we could learn from our own mistakes. However, during the last 20 years, we have not done better. Not at all. The situation in,

for instance, in Darfur is an example of bad intervention. The situation in Syria is even worse. There are a number of other conflicts, say for instance, in Rohingya, in Burma. There is no intervention in time of the right character.

And there are still extremely many victims of such an attitude. To that extent, you may say that we have negotiated well international law responsibility to protect new value, but again, no implementation.

It's very interesting. The responsibility to protect the commission that developed that document made a good job in issuing that in a time that the international community needs to think about that kind of responsibility.

Yeah, sure. Yeah.

Okay, so in terms of 92, the International Corporation around the 92 summit, RIO summit, how was it perceived the status of the International Corporation back then?

I think it was a, it got a very positive receipt. After the end of the Cold War in 1989, people felt relieved in all parts of the world. In many countries, people felt that they were no longer somewhere between east and west. And they could try to find their own course. In other countries, it was felt that they didn't have to invest anymore in armaments, so that you could more invest in poverty reduction and also in environmental protection. So there was a new atmosphere, a new perspective, liberties, care for nature. And as a matter of fact, the conference in Rio was the, well, the high point.

After three years, 89, 92, people came together and negotiated in a new spirit and had a new text, which was forward looking on the basis of very interesting values, which were agreed upon. Well, you know the Earth Charter, definitely. However, also the values which had been agreed upon in the preambula of the resolution following the conference in Rio were forward looking. It was kind of a miracle that it was possible to agree. Again, implementation was difficult.

But there were many efforts, also after 92. In that period, that was also a bit pessimistic. I thought that we are failing. We are not tackling all the issues which are to be tackled. However, looking backwards, I used the same language as I mentioned half an hour ago. We were running into the right direction, but not fast enough. But anyway, to run into the right direction is already important because then you get a boost. You are being pushed.

You may say that after 2000, we are not running into the right direction anymore. We are stepping backwards. We are stepping aside. We do not even try jointly as nations, within the United Nations, to address the problems. So you can be too slow, but you work. Nowadays, there is no effort anymore.

Now, we are entering the third phase or the third decade of the new millennium. Almost 30 years since the Earth Summit. We were talking about international cooperation back then. How do you see it now, in terms of the international community, has better ideas of the challenges we have in how to address these challenges in a coordinated way?

Well, governments are not living up to the mandate of the UN international negotiation. How do you take place? They do not lead to concrete results. Insofar as there are some results, there is no implementation whatsoever. We are sliding backwards. This is to a large extent the result of the fight between the big powers. The world is completely different nowadays. The big powers have taken over and they dictate the speed because they only interest in geopolitical influence and international influence. America first, America first. Of course, all countries follow that. China first, Russia first.

And nowadays, you see that also in big parts of the population in Europe. Europe inward looking, Brexit, UK first. It is dismantling our capacity to address common problems. On the basis of a country first approach, you will never be able to find the pandemic. You will never be able to address climate change. You will never be able to restore economic and financial stability, which is being threatened by big corporations and financial institutions and banks. You will not be able to solve the world's refugee crisis or the crisis with regard to the distortion of the ecology and biodiversity. You have to do it differently together, not on a nation-first approach.

Okay, so let's look at now the Earth Charter from your point of view. What do you think is the relevance of Earth Charter to current times and how do you think it can be used?

But before that, I think it's good and important for us to remember that you were minister of international cooperation back in the early 90s. And especially when the Dutch government gave a significant push and support to launch the new Earth Charter initiative back in 1994. And in May 95, first major Earth Charter workshop took place in the peace palace. And you were part of that. Would you share with us what happened there, what you remember?

Yeah, I'd like to do that, but I must be modest, because as a matter of fact, indeed, the Dutch government did finance the whole operation. And I could do that myself as a minister for international cooperation, because it all came from the budget of development cooperation. It was in 1995. I had been present in 1992 at the Rio conference as a member of the government.

I saw the Earth Charter movement, workshop towards a movement as a sequel, follow up to that conference. I was at the same time, I must confess a bit hesitant, because I was quite impressed with the principles which had been agreed upon in Rio de Janeiro itself. The list of principles and values is still outstanding. But there was not much of a follow up after Rio, which is so often the case. You come together in an international United Nations conference, you agree on something, and then there is no implementation. So I saw the Earth Charter workshop at the beginning of a movement to go for sustainable development in the broadest sense of the world, led by a number of statesmen. As a matter of fact, my former prime minister, Ruud Lubbers, I had been a member of his government as well, was the main active person in the Netherlands, push for it. And he had brought together a number of other international statesmen.

Amongst them, which was quite something, Gorbachev. And Gorbachev was willing to come to the Netherlands to participate in a workshop to start drafting such a target. And

if you have a person like Gorbachev adding his weights and also his wisdom to a meeting where people together draft a text, that is exceptional. So the workshop took place. I did myself, I was participant, but I couldn't really participate, I will explain, because I made an opening statement, together with Gorbachev and together with Lubbers, maybe these statements are still somewhere available, but I couldn't find it so fast. I had to leave, it was the meeting in the Peace Palace, quite something in itself, the relation between development, environment and peace is there. But we had a Council of Ministers meeting at the same day, which I had to attend, because it was in the middle of the war in Bosnia. And we had a Dutch blue helmet, United Nations battalion in Srebrenica. They were attacked by the Serbs under Mladic. A month later, it broke down completely and did lead to that very well-known tragedy of the genocide in Srebrenica. I was much involved in policymaking at the time on development and conflict. I was very much involved also in issues on Bosnia and Srebrenica, so I had to leave the meeting of the workshop.

But you were there for the opening, yeah?

In the Council of Ministers meeting, but we got a report, because the meeting didn't last longer than one day. I got the report and I added my ongoing support, and Lubbers had stepped down as Prime Minister. Wim Kok had succeeded him, but I kept regular contact with Lubbers and also with some other people brought together by him. And as a matter of fact, also with you, because you were involved right from the beginning, I knew you already, I think, around or even before 1992. We had discussions on sustainable development. I think I added my political wisdom to you, but you added your substantive thoughts with regard to sustainability in quite a number of discussions with me. So that was the beginning, but I was just at the sidelines, very much interested.

You made the opening speech and you were also in conversation with Mohamed Sanon.

Yeah before the workshop took place a couple of weeks earlier. Mohamed Sanon came to the Netherlands in order to discuss with me and also with Lubbers, I suppose, but I had a private meeting with him. The outline of the Earth Charter, as thought it could be by him, and the agenda for the workshop and a number of other details. As a matter of fact, I knew Sanon also very well from another number of conflict situations in the world. The 90s were after 1992, when everything was bright after the end of the world, the Cold War, a decade of conflict, all the civil conflicts, civil wars. I think I told you that I have been involved in many of the efforts all around the world in order to try to bring peace amongst them also in Somalia, and I met him, amongst them also in Sudan. I met him. Of course, I was involved in Rwanda when I don't think I met Sanon in Rwanda, but he was also a bit involved in discussions on Bosnia. So we met each other quite a number of times. There is a relation.

So it's very interesting that both of you, Jan Pronk and Mohamed Sanon, were so much involved in the many conflicts, in trying to address many of the conflicts in Africa, but also in the environmental agenda and sustainability agenda.

Yeah, because there are many reasons for conflicts, many, but one reason is very often being forgotten. You may say that it's unsustainability, a lack of sustainability, bad environments, natural environment, a worsening natural environment that may be climate

change induced, that may be drought, floods, hunger because of deteriorating soil conditions, or a worsening of the biodiversity. It is adding to conflicts. There are other reasons for conflict as well, of course, dictatorship, violation of human rights, or strife amongst religious or ethnic minorities within a new nation state. But as a matter of fact, all these sources of conflict are impinged on each other. They influence each other.

And I saw a relation between the possibility to shape a brighter future after Rio, in terms of sustainability, environments, poverty, decrease, that was in Rio, and peace, peace operations, conflict de-escalation in the 90s. So it was a decade of two major developments. The struggle for sustainability, it's a struggle, and the struggle for peace, which is also a fight. And they're linked to each other. And if you ask me, what is the importance of the Earth Charter today? Well, the crisis and conflict causes have not been diminished on the contrary. In these 30 years, as a matter of fact, despite all our efforts, they have increased. There is a crisis of the system nowadays, a world system. You can also say an earth and its inhabitants system. And the crisis of that system is a bunch of crisis more, which influence each other. Climate, biodiversity, racism, conflicts between religions, and also the natural environment. And increased dictatorship, which means also authoritarian rule and a decreasing value given to democracy, of people's democracy, not official democracy, not. It's all related to each other. The one crisis leads to the other and then a reaction that it will enhance the crisis as a whole. Now, you need, I think we just discussed that, new institutions or existing institutions reformed on the base of international law. And that can only be done on the base of values of principles. They ought to be broad. And they ought to be not imposed by leaders or governments. They ought to be internalized by people. Now, the Earth Charter movement is a movement of drafting and sustaining a broad set of principles, values, and internalizing them in an increasing manner by many more people all around the world. Now, it is not a charter which includes instruments and specific goals. The instruments and specific goals are being discussed, for instance, in the framework of the United Nations, in world conferences, linking instruments with goals, but you can only do so on the base of values.

If you don't have shared values, not Western, not Chinese, not indigenous only, not American, no shared values, which can be shared by indigenous groups and Chinese and Westerners, including American and Southerners, then you have a basis on which you could try to agree on goals and instruments in order to get peace, get sustainability, or to mention to save the world and to save the earth.

So the principles, the charter with principle, that's the first step, but not only just the first step, it is perhaps the most important step, because if you do not share and do not agree, then any effort to reach goals or instruments is bound to fail because you get then a new fight on the goals, a new fight on the instruments, because not everybody is in agreement with them. You can only agree on goals and instruments if you agree on the values. It is like a constitution in a country. You need a constitution, otherwise you cannot agree. You also have to agree on the process of implementation and the process of decision making. You can only do so on the base of shared values. That's the importance, I think, of the Earth Charter today, which, because the crisis and the conflicts are bigger than 30 years ago, is an importance broader, greater than 30 years ago.

Yeah, absolutely. In international cooperation, in other words, really to be strengthened, shared values for the common good are also important.

Yeah, and the set of principles, of course, ought to be intertwined. It ought to be logical, and what we systematic. It should be interdependent. It should not be a loose set of principles. No, it's a system in itself. That's the beauty of the Earth Charter.

Of course, I have looked many times to the Earth Charter throughout these decades and asked myself, things have changed in the world. Do we have to reform the principles of the Earth Charter? Do we have to adjust them? And I always get the question, no, it's all there. It's all there. They have a long term significance. That is all. Well, thanks to the wise people who were sitting together at that time. So we owe them a lot.

Yeah, visionaries, with a long term vision to things. Well, that was so clear. And I'm so thankful for you to share this with us. Yes, just one last question in terms of your views on the current agenda of the UN sustainable development goals in relation to climate change and the whole challenge of peace security. Do you see hope and do you see that at least in terms of the agenda, the way it's articulated, are we on the right track?

Well, the articulation of the agenda is on the right track, but the implementation is not. I think I discussed that with you also in the previous part of the interview. I'm a lot of pessimistic, in particular, since the beginning of this particular new millennium, this new, the last two decades. Most of the decisions taken by the big powers were in their own self interest. It did lead to many negative consequences economically and also in terms of sustainability and more war and conflicts. The United Nations was not able to contain that. The countries even did prevent a real possibility to discuss it within the framework of the system. Well, there were some exceptions. The most important exception was the agreement on the SDGs. Following the agreement, I was very positive on them in the year 2000, the agreement on the MDGs in SDGs are broader, a step further. More than only poverty reduction, because you need sustainability to reduce poverty. You need more equality to reduce poverty.

And you need to reduce poverty in order to get sustainability. So it's a broader view. But they are the goals. Now, some goals could have been, of course, drafted stronger, stronger language than they have done. But it was the result of a compromise and it is a, well, it's a world consensus. Implementation is low in many countries. It's coming now clear and near to us because it's only 10 years, in the year 2030. So we have used already five years of that specific period. And one of the examples is the one which you mentioned in that climate. There was a conference in Paris. The conference in Paris did result in an agreement, but the agreement was rather hollow because in the past, the agreements were on a binding treaty. You had to fulfill your commitments. Otherwise, you were penalized. Nowadays, Paris is a promise to do your best as a country. Countries are not doing their best and the outcome in the year 2030 will be far below the, not only the expectations, but also below what is necessary in order to be, well, safe as a world, as a whole in the next couple of decades. So it's again, implementation. So I'm positive about the role of the United Nations in terms of agenda setting, in terms of value building, discussing.

Why do you think there's so much or always gap between the development of policies and agenda and the actual implementation, always over the years and history? UN is getting better and better in developing policies and agenda, but always with this challenge and difficulty to implement the agendas. Why this gap is always there?

I do not have a real full answer to this because these are questions which I'm asking myself regularly. I've always seen a main reason in terms of the commercial interest of big companies which are stronger than countries and have a lot of lobbying and other influence on political leaders. So directing the political process into the interest of, well, money, capital, profits rather than people and the earth, that is important. Then defining a national interest in commercial terms, but then in the commercial interest of the middle class and the higher up people, not the lower class, which is not being seen, which is being exploited or excluded or sent away. So there is a combination between commercial interest, financial interest, and group interests of people who within a society think that they are still at the right side of the gap within their own society and want to stay over there and then take distance from other people, which then will result, of course, in other people who do not expect much anymore from the political system to either turn their back to the system or to start following leaders who are populist, who are deluding them, who say that they work in their interest, but don't do that because they're only working in their own personal interest.

What I did say was that the economic development, which has been based in particular now on transnational finance, has also led to a political development of division and of division within countries and between countries. And that has weakened the compliance with international law and with your commitments to international community and international organizations.

It was a very comprehensive answer for someone who didn't have the answer before. I think it was very good. It's also something that is often in my mind and often trying to see why there is so much difference or gap between policy development and agenda setting at the UN and even at the national level and that for implementation. And I guess more communication, information, and cooperation is much necessary if we were to change the course of where we are going.

Leaders have to be trusted and many people don't trust the leaders anymore and leaders give many reasons not to trust them anymore, which is also leading to major conflict within society and in a sheer inability now to have a capable national system because you need leaders to build the system and to keep the system in place. But if people themselves don't trust the leaders anymore and don't trust the promises anymore and talk about their distrust and use the social media to spread also and that message. It is also extremely difficult even for leaders of goodwill to do the necessary thing. So the ghost seems to be sometimes out of the bottom.

Well, thank you so much, Jan Pronk. We are coming to an end of our podcast and I really want to express my appreciation for you for joining us today. Thank you. You're welcome.

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