

# Legacy of Hans Rosling

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The subtitle of Hans Rosling's memoirs reads as follows: How I got to understand the world (Hur jag lärde mig förstå världen). The subtitle could just as well have read: How I taught the world to understand itself. For this is the legacy of Hans Rosling: He provided us all with new and fundamental insight about the world and its development. He did so compellingly, passionately, and with an optimism that both encouraged and inspired.

Undertiteln till Hans Roslings memoarer lyder "Hur jag lärde mig förstå världen". De hade lika gärna kunnat heta "Hur jag lärde världen att förstå sig själv". För det är det som är arvet efter Hans Rosling: Han försåg oss alla med en ny och grundläggande syn på världen och dess utveckling. Han gjorde det med övertygelse, passion och med en optimism som både uppmuntrade och inspirerade.

Hans Rosling changed the way we think about the world and its development. He had this almost uncanny ability to inspire – not by glossing over inconvenient truths and sad facts – but by bringing them to the fore. I think that his optimism derived from his unwavering belief in the supremacy of truth and facts – in his belief that facts are inherently persuasive and will force decision makers to act, and to act wisely. Perhaps not today, perhaps not tomorrow, but eventually.

## Groundbreaking lectures

By carefully unveiling the mechanisms of human and societal development – and by looking forward with optimism and an inquisitive mind – Hans was immensely popular among students. In 2012 I invited him to the University of Oslo to give the first lecture in a series on "The

Global Citizen". His lecture was entitled "A fact based world view". The queue of students wanting to attend extended several hundred meters across campus. All of a sudden our largest auditorium became too small. Hans gave lectures that were groundbreaking in their ability to disseminate new knowledge and to question prevailing concepts. Hans was serial myth killer, no less.

Hans earned his PhD in 1986 and in 1990 was made associate professor of internal medicine at Uppsala University. He then taught courses about healthcare in developing countries until 1996, when he was made senior lecturer of international health at Karolinska Institutet. Hans Rosling became professor of international health at KI three years later.

Hans also inspired the foundation of the Swedish branch of Méde-



At World Bank, June 8 2015.

*Photo: Neil Fantom*

cins Sans Frontières, and was voted into the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences in 2012.

When the US Magazine Foreign Policy listed the 100 thinkers whose ideas had shaped the world in 2009 – Rosling was number 96, and in 2012 he was included in Time Magazine’s list of the world’s 100 most influential people.

### **He gave hope for the future**

In recent years Hans was a much sought-after speaker. He lectured at the World Economic Forum but also for new students at KI. And the students came first, just as he came first for the students.

But it is not his merits that he will be remembered for. First and foremost he gave hope for the future. Hans spoke about an interconnected world, a world where our destinies are inter-

twined. He described a global society that faces challenges that we never have seen before – in terms of demography, resource distribution, energy and climate. However, with facts and passion, he convinced us that there is progress in the world, after all.

Hans inspired us to reflect upon health in the broadest possible sense – how health relates to poverty, climate change, human rights, religious dialogue and governance. His message was that we are global citizens and that not everybody shoulders the responsibility that comes with it.

Hans’ sphere of influence extended globally. Together with his son and daughter-in-law he founded the Gapminder Foundation in order to promote global development through the greater use and understanding of social, economic and environmental statistics. When Hans spoke, the

world listened. Statistics became alive and its message became compelling. Complex relationships between population growth, economy, and health suddenly became easy to understand when he spoke. When we left the auditorium we felt that we had a better understanding of the world. In fact, *we* – and I was certainly among this *we* – could easily feel ashamed when we realized that our perceptions about the world were not well founded on statistics and evidence.

This is exactly what an excellent lecturer should do: Identify embarrassing voids in our knowledge and world view and help fill in the facts we need.

### **A real humanist and altruist**

Sweden's and the world's most famous professor of international health, Hans Rosling, lived a life under the shadow of his own serious disease. This did not stop him from working relentlessly toward his goal of improving health and the living conditions of humankind – a goal that resonates perfectly with the overall vision of KI.

Hans moved on the global scene with statistics and large numbers, but he did so with deep respect for the individual. He was a real humanist and altruist. I think he would give his full support to this quote by Martin Luther King: *“Of all forms of inequality, injustice in health is the most shocking and inhuman”*.

Karolinska Institutet is now in the process of drawing up a new strategy plan. In our new strategy we will look far ahead, all the way to 2030. 2030 is also the time horizon of UN's sustainability development goals. This is

no coincidence, of course. By looking ahead to 2030 we will remind ourselves that KI's vision – to contribute significantly to the improvement of human health – should be seen in the context of the world at large and with due attention to the wellbeing of future generations.

In short: KI must be more visible on the scene of global health and more attuned to the sustainability development goals. Our mission must be to work for better health, sustainable development, and a fair and tolerant society – in Stockholm, in Sweden, in the Nordic region, and in the world at large. By setting up these ambitions – and by realizing them – we are truly honoring the legacy of Hans Rosling.

### **On a personal note**

I would like to conclude on a personal note. Hans Rosling had a tremendous impact on me personally. His thoughts inspired me to enter the realm of global health and his work directed my attention to the stark and unacceptable health inequities in present day society. The Lancet-UiO commission on Global Governance for Health, which I led, was much influenced by Rosling's “fact-based world view”. In our commission report we identified the political determinants of health in the belief that they would serve as guiding principles for decision makers of today and tomorrow and thus provide for a better and more equitable healthcare. In fact, the commission was motivated and driven by the very same conviction that Rosling so famously and optimistically espoused: the supremacy of facts.