Many people can’t relinquish control. Fortunately, I have never suffered from that problem. As a result, the management of his department has been in the hands of his successors for the past ten years.

‘Many people can’t relinquish control. Fortunately, I have never suffered from that problem’

In his office, Peter Nijkamp works on articles for dozens of economics journals or talks to students - for example, on the VU Multicultural Event: he is organizing with their assistance. But he doesn’t spend all day at his desk or conference table. He travels a lot. Shortly before this interview, he was in New Zealand for a conference on migration, a topic he has been interested in for a number of years. When Geert Wilders claimed that immigrants only cost the Netherlands money, Peter Nijkamp decided to investigate the truth of this assertion. ‘In fact, migrants contribute a lot to the Dutch economy. Migration leads to more innovation, one of the key economic problems, he was sometimes faced by the limitations of his own discipline. “Then I would talk to a sociologist, a psychologist or a lawyer.” Such cross-fertilization with researchers from other disciplines led Peter Nijkamp for example to introduce the principle of meta-analysis - quantitative analysis of the results of previous investigations of a given topic, widely used in the medical world - in the field of economics.

‘By listening to them, I was able to devise new concepts and help them to change their whole approach’

Peter Nijkamp is an exception. The first people I talked to were not the interest groups, but the growers themselves. I told them, ‘I’ve been asked to draw up a plan, but this is not my line of business. You will have to tell me what needs to be done.’ By listening to them, I was able to devise new concepts and help them to change their whole approach.’

‘Jan Tinbergen was a shining example to me’

Where Tinbergen taught. “He was a shining example to me. He was motivated by two things: a wish to help his fellow human beings and an absolute commitment not to be guided by his emotions but to discover how the world worked by hard scientific analysis.”

This attitude suited Peter Nijkamp down to the ground. He had always wanted to understand how unfortunate economic conditions came about. “In many cases, they are not due to ill will. No one wanted the wave of unemployment that followed the closure of the coal mines in southern Limburg or the textile industry in Twente. No one wants to see men developing countries to starve to death. But these things are driven by inevitable economic laws. A scientist is not a crystal-gazer or a preacher: he has to filter information, formulate concepts and come up with explanations. That is my motivation.”

Initially, Peter Nijkamp followed in Tinbergen’s footsteps by starting his career as a quantitative economist specializing in models, statistics and econometrics. When he switched to spatial economics, he had a whole arsenal of techniques at his disposal that he could apply to his relatively new discipline.

Cross-fertilization

In his quest for answers to economic questions and solutions to economic problems, he was sometimes faced by the limitations of his own discipline. “Then I would talk to a sociologist, a psychologist or a lawyer.” Such cross-fertilization with researchers from other disciplines led Peter Nijkamp, for example, to introduce the principle of meta-analysis - quantitative analysis of the results of previous investigations of a given topic, widely used in the medical world - in the field of economics.

Nijkamp is often called on to advise such bodies as the World Bank, the European Commission, OECD, the Council of Europe and the Dutch government. In 2010, for example, the Cabinet asked him to draw up a plan to ensure the future vitality of the huge but fragmented Dutch horticultural sector. “There are tens of thousands of people working in this field,” said Peter Nijkamp, “and they’re all competing against one another. Dutch flowers are flown to the whole world. But globalization is forcing us to devise a joint strategy. We need to share knowledge and cross-fertilize with researchers from other disciplines. A scientist is not a crystal-gazer or a preacher: he has to filter information, formulate concepts and come up with explanations. That is my motivation.”

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No matter who Peter Nijkamp advises, he has remained firmly attached to VU University Amsterdam since 1973 - even during his period as Chairman of NWO from 2002 to 2009. “This is a good place to be a researcher, with an open academic environment. For example, the Executive Board supports my migration research. That takes time, and is a politically sensitive issue. My aim is to investigate the underlying mechanisms. I don’t make political pronouncements - that would make me a preacher, and we have more than enough of those in the Netherlands as it is. ‘You have to remain impartial.’

MOBILE MAN

Did you too think that advances in IT led to less physical transport and were therefore good for the environment? It seems a reasonable proposition. Former US President Bill Clinton was among its advocates: the idea has political consequences. But it is not true. It is more than working from home and sending less mail by post. University professor and special economist Peter Nijkamp became interested in the topic. ‘What is the real relationship between IT and mobility?’ ‘Your range of action increases: you get to know more people and can work with them more easily. But after all those E-mails and Facebook contacts, you want to meet face to face. You may save time by travelling to and from work less, but you make up for it by unscheduled mobility. That’s how people are made. Meeting people is a source of inspiration. IT is no substitute.’

Thanks to Nijkamp’s research in this field, policy-makers now have a more balanced view of the green credentials of IT developments. For example, while more and more goods are ordered online, they still have to be delivered physically to your door...