

Obituary Pieter Hendrik Streefland (1946-2008)

Pieter Streefland, professor of Applied Development Sociology and core member of the Medical Anthropology and Sociology Unit of the University of Amsterdam, died on the 3rd of January 2008 after a long illness. He was only 61. He was a gifted teacher and writer and an excellent organizer who initiated several teaching and research programmes in the field of health and development. The focus of his work was always on the intertwinement of poverty, politics and ill health, particularly in Southern Asia and Africa.

He studied sociology at the Free University of Amsterdam, specializing in the sociology of non-Western societies. In the early 1970s he did research among sweepers and scavengers in Karachi, Pakistan, focusing on social conflicts within this outcast community. The study resulted in his PhD dissertation and later on in a book *The Sweepers of Slaughterhouse* (1979). Several articles on the social organization of urban sanitation followed. His description of the work of sweepers and cleaners is one of the first examples of sanitation ethnography. He discussed both the monetary aspect of the work, such as options for relative high income for private cleaners, and the stigmatization that accompanied the work.

After returning from Karachi, he joined the South and Southeast Asia sub-department of the University of Amsterdam to teach the sociology of South Asia. He went to Bangladesh to study the role of non-government organizations in the development process, which resulted in various articles about the plight of the rural poor. He continued to be involved in applied research in Bangladesh and in 1987, jointly with the Centre for Social Studies of the University of Dhaka, published *Different Ways to Support the Rural Poor*. Professor Mushtaque Chowdury of BRAC Bangladesh has written his personal memories of working with Pieter Streefland in a separate tribute, following this obituary.

In 1978 he joined the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) in Amsterdam where he headed the newly erected section of Primary Health Care, which consisted of public health doctors and social scientists. His focus was on problems of health, health care and development, particularly in South Asia, and later also in Africa. He conducted related research in India, Bangladesh and Nepal and was involved in advisory work with regard to health development programmes. Among studies he conducted were those on the distribution of medicines at the village level in Thailand, on the socio-cultural background of the AIDS epidemic in Southern Africa, and on the revitalization of Primary Health Care in Uganda. He led a multi-centred study on Social Science and Immunization. His last research was a study of chronicity, poverty and care in a Zambian town.

In 1990 he became professor of Applied Development Sociology at the University of Amsterdam. In his inaugural lecture *Seeking a Balance*, he sketched the liminal position that health social scientists held between their sociological and anthropological colleagues on one side and epidemiologists and medical scientists on another. His lecture was a strong plea for interdisciplinary respect and collaboration. It was also an advice to social scientists to present the data of their research in clear and accessible language in order to attract the attention of policy-makers and to convince them of the relevance of a social and cultural perspective on health and health care. His own writing was exemplary in that respect.

He published extensively on issues of health and development in journals such as *Social Science & Medicine*, *Health Policy & Planning*, *Health Policy, Development & Change*, *Human Organization*, *Public Administration & Development*, the *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* and *Medische Antropologie*. He co-authored *Enhancing Appropriate Medicine Use in the Karakorum Mountains* (1996; with Z.A. Rasmussen, M. Rahim & A. Hardon) and the *Manual of Applied Health Research* (1994, 2001, with 13 other authors). He edited *Problems and Potential in International Health* (1998) and co-edited

Implementing Primary Health Care (1990) and *African Primary Health Care in Times of Economic Turbulence* (1995). His last publication ‘Public health care under pressure in sub-Saharan Africa’ (2005) has been reprinted in this issue of *Medische Antropologie* as a tribute to his entire work. A complete list of his publications can be found on the website of the Amsterdam School of Social science Research: www.assr.nl .

He held several positions outside the university such as chairman of the Dutch Society of South Asia scholars and member of the advisory committee of one of the main Dutch non-government development organizations.

He was one of health social scientists who organized a six weeks introduction course in applied medical anthropology that was held in Thailand, The Philippines and Bangladesh. He also contributed to the design of the Amsterdam Master’s in Medical Anthropology (AMMA) in 1997, and the Dutch Master in Medical Anthropology and Sociology (MAS) in 2004. Until he became ill he headed the AMMA exam committee, designed and chaired its modules on social and historical meanings of infectious disease and on health and health care in Asia, and functioned as MAS director.

His contributions to the scientific quality and social relevance of the Unit’s research and educational programs have been invaluable. We will miss him for his loyalty, his insight and sharp analyses, his inspiring supervision of students and his unbending principles.

Sjaak van der Geest