

# ASSOCIATION FOR SOCIAL ECONOMICS INTERVIEW SERIES

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To propose an interview for this new ASE series, please contact Quentin Wodon ([qwodon@worldbank.org](mailto:qwodon@worldbank.org)), ASE newsletter editor.

### ***Interview with Wilfred Dolfsma: Force-feeding insights is not the way to grow an academic field. The key is to aim for understanding of real world phenomena***

(Interview compiled by Quentin Wodon)

Trained as both an economist and philosopher, Wilfred Dolfsma is Professor of strategy & innovation at the University of Groningen School of Economics and Business, and is one of two editors-in-chief for the *Review of Social Economy*. His research focuses on aspects of cooperation in processes of innovation. He is the author of *Institutional Economics and the Formation of Preferences* (2004), *Institutions, Communication and Values* (2009), *Government Failure* (2013). The former monograph won him EAEPE's Gunnar Myrdal Prize in 2006. He has also received several prizes from ASE, including the Potter Prize as well as the Divine award for service to the association. His articles have been featured among others in the *Journal of Economics Issues*, *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, *Journal of Evolutionary Economics*, *Journal of Economic and Social Geography*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *The Information Society*, *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, *Regional Studies*, and *Research Policy*.



#### **How did you get interested in social economics and who were your mentors?**

The roots of my interest date back to my work at Erasmus University where I got a Master's in development economics and another degree in philosophy before moving on for the PhD. I had a number of mentors who could be seen as social economists without themselves knowing it, in the same way that at the time I did not yet see myself as a social economist.

John Groenewegen encouraged me to explore institutional economics and to come to the ASSA meetings. Arjo Klamer and Deirdre McCloskey opened my eyes to the immaterial and rhetorical. The three EAEPE summer schools I attended were important to me – Geoff Hodgson had an influence on me. John Davis brought me firmly inside of ASE, and taught me to be welcoming while also encouraging myself and others to do more. It was a pleasure to publish the *Companion to Social Economics* with him, a second edition of which is due out soon (May 2015). The Waters scholarship that I received from ASE also helped me to gain a better understanding of social economics and

adjacent fields. I used the scholarship to get input for work on my PhD thesis and was fortunate to be able to visit several influential scholars, including Metin Coşgel, David George, Mark Granovetter, Lanse Minkler, and Juliet Schor.

I have also learned a lot from others. Truth is, rather than doing research and teaching by myself, I prefer to work in a (small) group of people who are like-minded and dare to speak up and take a stand. Some of these colleagues are firmly within social economics, such as Jane Clary, Stefan Kesting, Irene van Staveren, and Pat Welch. Others are not firmly inside social economics, but are sympathetic. Force-feeding them with insights to persuade them to join ASE is not the way to grow an academic field. The key is to aim for understanding of real world phenomena, instead of ideological or conceptual purity for its own sake. In that sense, I believe that when you offer insights from social economics that are useful, people will be persuaded to join the 'conversation'.

**Among your various publications, what is your favorite paper, and why?**

There are several papers and books that I like. Although I was very fed-up with it at the time, I am honored that the reworked version of my PhD thesis won the Myrdal prize. The social-value nexus is something I would like to see picked up more – it does inform my own thinking a lot. I also like the paper on dynamic welfare theory that I published in 2005 in *Research Policy*, as well as the paper on how social capital emerges, develops and possibly disappears, published in the *Journal of Business Ethics* (2009). My recent book on *Government Failure* (2013) has grown out of a number of projects with colleagues and friends and was inspired by some of my own experiences at governing (a department, a research institute, and several foundations). What I would also like to mention is a recent book on *Institutions, Communication and Values* (2009), developing a line of thought started with my PhD thesis.

**Have you encountered any obstacles professionally (or personally) in working on social economics?**

A friend of mine keeps telling me to turn bugs into features or opportunities, and that is actually what I try to do on many occasions. I tend to be pragmatic. If you have a sense of how the world, and the academic world in particular, works, it makes no sense to be fighting all those windmills all the time. It is best to pick your fights and avoid what obstacles (fights) can easily be avoided. Try to turn what is found objectionable by others into something praiseworthy. But also: understand why the obstacles are there. Everybody meets with problems in professional and personal life, I guess, and I have had my share. What is important, I believe, is to have a community of like-minded, yet critical as well as supportive fellow scholars who you can draw on for advice and information. This helps you deal with obstacles or at the very least lessen what blow might come. ASE has been that for me, and I hope to continue doing this for people in ASE. ASE can do more of this, though.

**What would you like to achieve in the next few years?**

There are several things that I would like to achieve in the next couple of years for the

association, the Review and myself. Some of that aligns. I hope that the association will gradually be changing the way it works so that its potential can more fully be realized. It has lots of strengths, and not just in terms of relevant ideas to draw upon and develop further. Making use and building on the potential might involve making some choices. The Review continues to do better, and so it should if it is to make a difference. The Review is a key asset for the association, and so it is important for the association to continue to be involved and contribute.

Personally, my research is turning more micro, but not necessarily micro-economic. I have become more and more interested in the sociology of relations in organizations and between individuals from different organizations. I try to adopt and develop a number of different insights, including prominently from social network analysis. A number of different papers on this are starting to come out as we speak, and I expect for some of these to have quite an impact. I am also working with Rick Aalbers on a book called *Innovation Networks*, due out next May (2015) that we hope will not just inspire academics, but also others in society and business.

**How do you see the relationship between social economics and policy/the real world?**

Social economics potentially has a lot to offer to policy and the real world. We offer insights and ways of understanding the world that are in demand. ASE could potentially play a more visible role in gathering scholars into its community, including those with real influence on policy and the outside world, without overwhelming ASE-folk. ASE is trying to reach out to accomplish that from its US base, which is both a good thing but can by some be seen as a drawback. For ASE to have set up an organizational structure, including regional directors, to try to make use of the potential and avoid the drawbacks or turn them into features could be a potentially good move.

**Does social economics today really matter to the world beyond academia? If so, why?**

Social Economics only matters if social economists can indicate that we have something valuable to offer. And we need to do so not just

by developing our ideas and presenting the findings that we have to each other, but also to others and beyond academia. Personally, I try to be in touch with other fields, attend conferences and meet with scholars. I also try to offer ideas to various circles in society. The real world is a complex system, and so being informed is important. Communicating with different audiences teaches you, for instance, in how to most persuasively make your argument. Too many colleagues and submitting authors fail to consider their audience's point of view, implicitly doing research and writing mainly for themselves. One is not likely to make an impact this way.

**Social economists tend to be concerned with real life issues. How does a professor like you make a difference?**

To sharpen our thinking and our analysis, we must be allowed to interact. The ivory tower is needed to be able to offer better insights to the real world. But scholars must *also* engage with the real world. In ASE, we should engage more actively than we have been as a group. The onus is on us, not on society or policy makers. This does mean that we have to be able and willing to explain what it is that we have to offer as insights in ways that non-experts understand as well. I myself regularly publish op-eds in newspapers, for instance, or contributions in magazines for a more general audience. For me this means that I intend to push, in a constructive manner, the thinking that goes on in academia and in society. I have also set up an expertise center at my department that organizations can approach to have problems they have addressed.

I would like to emphasize again that it is not enough to know (or claim) that the insights and understandings you have to offer sound sympathetic and are fair. You must show that they matter. What I believe could be the biggest problem for social economics and social economists today is that they stop at the first and don't proceed to the second. I see a similar tendency in other groups of scholars, and I believe it won't help us, nor society.

For example, social economics would benefit from more empirical research. Empirical research can get your hands dirty, and can be confusing, since you will always have to make

tough decisions about how to measure a certain concept, and how to proceed with your analysis. But empirical research disciplines the mind. Some concepts can be developed more through empirical research, so as to offer more practical insights that matter in real life.

**What do you think are some of the most promising areas of social economics today?**

Promising areas of research for social economics include how social relations are seen to affect economic outcomes, and where ethics has sudden and unexpected connection with the economy. An example of the former is the study of the effects the exact configuration of social networks in a context of, for instance, a firm or the way in which a firm works. Social network analysis could be a cornerstone for social economics. An example of the latter is the current discussion of the way in which insights from ethics should be used to re-structure our financial system. The special issue on Oaths and Codes in Economics and Business, June of 2013, co-guest edited with Boudewijn de Bruin, can be mentioned here.

**What do you think are today the weakest areas of work in social economics, and what could be done about it?**

I would not like, or be able to, point to a generally weak area of work in social economics. I would just like to suggest that any area of social economics that is not informed by empirical research has a tendency to be or become weak and irrelevant over time.

**What are the obstacles to making ethics a normal part of economic education?**

Many students, policy makers and individuals in society at large are open to insights from scholars who combine ethical and economic insights. But while this may seem to be a good thing for social economics, the danger is that others who may have a limited understanding of some of the links between ethics and economics could fill the gap. That could then discredit social economics. Social economics could take advantage of the opportunities that offer themselves nowadays, but there is also a risk if the profession does not step up its game.