

February 07, 2017 Oral History Interview with Ben Sanders

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Summary:

Co-founder of the Programme for Promoting Nuclear Non-Proliferation (PPNN) and advisor to the Conference President Dhanapala.

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- English Transcription

Ben Sanders

The Netherlands / PPNN

Oral history interview conducted by Michal Onderco by Skype on 7 February 2017

Michal Onderco:

Let me start with a general question. Why, when and how did you decide to found the PPNN?

Ben Sanders:

Well, I have to give you a little bit of my background.

Michal Onderco:

Okay.

Ben Sanders:

I was an official in the foreign ministry in the Netherlands where I arrived just at the time there had been an exhibition organized by the United States called the Atoms for Peace Event, at which the United States tried to promote the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. The United States of course had the absolute monopoly, or so it thought, of those things. It -- and it was helped -- it was the idea I think of Eisenhower that, by spreading the peaceful useful -- the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, you could coattail or even alter the -- altogether prevent the military use. In that spirit the foreign ministry in the Netherlands created an office called the Bureau voor Atomzaken, the Bureau for Nuclear Affairs.

Michal Onderco:

Yeah.

Ben Sanders:

And new officials were asked to join. Nobody was very keen because it was all this physics stuff which well-respecting diplomats would stay clear of. I was very interested. And they were good enough to send me to a few professors and courses so that I could brush up a bit on nuclear affairs, which I did with great pleasure. I worked there for a couple of years. It was then - well, it was more or less a matter of studying what was in there for the Netherlands, which was precious little. And in, I think, 1956 or 7 the United Nations founded a thing called an organization called the International Atomic Energy Agency in which had its first meeting in Vienna. And I was sent there as Secretary of the Netherlands delegation. I loved it. Not only Vienna but the work. And in 1958 the organization asked various states to supply officials for the new administration, for the new secretary. And I was sent out on loan by the ministry in 19 -- end of 1958 beginning '59 and stayed for a couple of years. My particular field was to have been the development of the so-called safeguards, that is the verification system that was to be created to keep the uses of nuclear energy peaceful, but very little happened at that time still. And when, in 1961, I worked in the secretariat, as I said - but, as I say, there was very little to do - I did work out a system of inspection for -- because at that time it was current both the peaceful -- the control of peaceful uses and of physics of the physical safety of the material that was to be used. And I worked out what they called the Inspector's Document for that exercise. But it was boring, there was very little to do. And I was more expecting that there would be -- we would have to set up a sort of field service for the security. And in order to do that I wanted to get some of the, what do you call it? The experience of United Nations field services of various kinds, for which I then volunteered and the IAEA, the International Atomic Energy Agency, loaned me to the U.N. In other words, I was on loan twice. [laughter]

Once for the ministry and once for them, double loan. I worked there for a couple of years. It was then called -- it later became the United Nations Technical Assistance Organization. And I learned an awful lot about fieldwork. I came back to the IAEA in 1965 when they were really beginning to think of the development of the verification for the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. Now, some of

us were already thinking that that would be a wonderful procedure system, a thing to be used in the case of nuclear disarmament. But we were laughed out of court because it was so farfetched nobody believed in that yet.

And in the 60s - late 60s beginning 70s, in other words we -- a small group of agency officials, U.N. officials, worked out a set of basic verification measures which would be used to try and control the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. And in 1971 the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty entered into effect and the IAEA was asked to supply the verification system for that. And then it became really interesting, because that was a concrete application of this verification system. When I had worked there for a while, and particularly involved in what was then called the subsidiary arrangements, the specific rules that had to be applied in various installations to facilitate the verification system. I was then asked by the United Nations Secretariat, which was working on the establishment of a disarmament unit, I was asked to come there, to New York. And since -- well, the career possibilities for a Dutchman in the secretariat in Vienna were minor. Well, I had not done badly but in New York it was thought that I would be able to contribute more.

Michal Onderco:

Yeah.

Ben Sanders:

And well we worked particularly on the application, again, of the Non Proliferation Treaty in, I think, 1975. That was the first of the five yearly Review Conference they used to call it. In fact, it was a renewal and I was a deputy secretary. In 1980 I was secretary of the same thing and in '85 secretary general. And it was very interesting. It was extremely imaginative. Except that there was one thing lacking. The whole system of verification was based on the voluntary acceptance of the states by the system was to be applied. And that was just not good enough. There had to be a possibility to enforce it. And the trouble in Iraq, which was found to have actually worked on nuclear weapons, although on a very primitive level, showed that it really was necessary for the IAEA to have more enforcement possibilities. Have that was work -- that was worked out particularly in Vienna and extremely well it worked. It's still working.

But at that time, in 1986, I was 60 and the U.N. was as usual running out of money. And they said, "Well, you have to go on -- this is your pension age and you have to go." Which was a bit of a trick because the deputy secretary general who was my direct chief, was a Swede, Swedish ambassador. And it turned out that he had somebody in mind whose career would be serving him while in the IAEA. And so they had to get rid of me as quickly as possible in order to get him there. And I wasn't about to do nothing when I was 60.

Michal Onderco:

Yeah.

Ben Sanders:

I had -- so I -- and I found that the trouble with these conferences of the Non Proliferation Treaty was mainly that while the work there, while the attendance was mainly diplomatic, was diplomats from various posts; and particularly from the posts where these conferences were held like Geneva, and Vienna, and New York. That was all done the diplomats and they didn't know a damn. The smallest thing about the nuclear side.

Michal Onderco:

Okay.

Ben Sanders:

I had worked with both and I thought it would be useful to have them together now and again in order to train them a bit in the substance. And that is how PPNN was really created. I decided that from the very many people I had learned -- got to know and with whom I had good relations we could form a sort of steering committee with which to set up sort of courses or at least exchange

possibilities on the diplomatic political and technical side of the verification systems.

Michal Onderco:

How did you meet John Simpson?

Ben Sanders:

I had been to a conference that he had organized in the -- and he was a reader as they call it, sort of adjunct professor, in international relations. And he was interesting he had always been interested in physics. He thought it was a good subject for him and for his career possibilities.

Now, as I had met so many people I didn't think twice about it.

But when I went around sort of begging for money, I went to various international non-governmental organizations. I was at the Ford Foundation where there was somebody very interested. They had an advisor who was an ex-foreign minister of Norway. And he advised. And they told me to have lunch with him. And he was very keen to see the idea worked out. But they said, "All right, but we can't give you any money because you need to be associated with an institution that can manage that money. Do you know anybody?" And I said well, I know this fellow Simpson who is associated with the University of Southampton maybe he will do it. They said, "Well, be careful. When you do these things remember that the person with whom you associate also wants to further his career. And you have to look out very carefully what you do. If you think he's the right man, fine." Anyway we got together, Simpson and I, and he was good at getting money out of people. [laughter] So we went -- he and I - went to various organizations like the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and the MacArthur. MacArthur I think it was, in Chicago; very excellent foundation, which had genius grants for when there are studies that they find interesting they promote them. And so we sort of scrounged the money together and got going. I was the executive director and he was my deputy.

My specialty was the substance and not the money so much. But we operated -- we got more and more excellent people in what we called the Core Group.

Michal Onderco:

Yes. But that was my question: how did you select these people?

Ben Sanders:

Well, frankly in the beginning, it was purely the people I knew.

Michal Onderco:

Okay.

Ben Sanders:

And who knew me. And then we decided that we needed to involve certain countries. You see we were -- of course, the organization was totally non-governmental.

Michal Onderco:

Yes.

Michal Onderco:

But the people who served on the Core Group were all governmental.

Michal Onderco:

Yes.

Ben Sanders:

They were ambassadors and ex-ambassadors and specialists in the nuclear field and so on. Well, that's how we operated. One of the things I -- which I spent a lot of money on was the Newsbrief.

Michal Onderco:

Yes.

Ben Sanders:

A -- yeah, a periodic thing based entirely on public information. But I selected things very much also on the basis of my personal information, my personal contacts. It was a great success that paper, that publication.

Michal Onderco:

And you circulated the Newsbrief amongst the members of the Core Group or also beyond?

Ben Sanders:

Also beyond, to people who asked for it.

Michal Onderco:

Why -- how did you choose the countries at the beginning, to be represented? Because some countries were represented and others were not. For example, France was not in or China.

Ben Sanders:

France was not in because France, at that time at the beginning, was violently against the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Michal Onderco:

Okay.

Ben Sanders:

And didn't want any relation of its international involvement of its nuclear weaponry.

Michal Onderco:

Was it sort of like you tried to test the waters and you found out it was useless?

Ben Sanders:

Yeah.

Michal Onderco:

Okay.

Ben Sanders:

Yeah. Yeah. Exactly. Well, it was also -- there were countries that were simply not interested. And there were others who were dying to send things, to send people.

Michal Onderco:

For example?

Ben Sanders:

Well the United States, of course, was number one.

Michal Onderco:

Yeah.

Ben Sanders:

Then we had at that time Euratom was coming up and we wanted somebody from the European Nuclear Energy Agency in Brussels. But Germany wanted very badly to be a party. And so we asked Germany -- well and they were, of course, very active in the field and very knowledgeable.

Michal Onderco:

So how did they find -- how did they find out about these things? How did they find out about the PPNN?

Ben Sanders:

Well, that's a good question. Word of mouth, I suppose.

Michal Onderco:

Okay.

Ben Sanders:

It circulated very fast. Particularly at the Non Proliferation Treaty Review Conferences because -- where I think we were very open in advertising our involvement. I incidentally was -- went on, even though I was not in the U.N. Secretariat anymore. I was advisor to the Dutch delegation from then on in. And in that position I was also able to make people aware of the existence of PPNN. And then they asked for the Newsbrief. And that way, words spread, I suppose.

Michal Onderco:

So was the 1995 conference, in your mind, already from day one of starting the PPNN?

Ben Sanders:

Yes. Very much because, of course, at that occasion the big decision had to be made, really whether the treaty would continue or not. Indefinitely, that is, according to the treaty.

Michal Onderco:

And were you, already at the beginning so when PPNN was started in '86, were you already at that time sure that you wanted to go for indefinite extension?

Ben Sanders:

Yeah. If only because the Non Proliferation Treaty, NPT, was the only thing in the field that was set up to prevent proliferation. And that was our big goal.

Michal Onderco:

How did the end of the cold war affect how PPNN worked?

Ben Sanders:

Well, less than you would think. Because from the very beginning - it was very interesting, the United States and the Soviet Union worked together on non-proliferation. This was well known in Vienna where the delegations of the Americans and the Soviets had no contact, or very little contact, during the Cold War except for the people who dealt with the non-proliferation side.

Michal Onderco:

Okay.

Ben Sanders:

And it was known and [laughs] and this was a sort of statement. You could see how non-proliferation was going by the way the two delegations would have lunch in the cafeteria of the IAEA. They had very close contact both in Vienna, and in Geneva. All the time, yeah.

Michal Onderco:

And what's the -- I mean after the end of the Cold War you had the expansion of the Core Group, of course.

Ben Sanders:

Yes.

Michal Onderco:

How did you -- how did you choose these new countries?

Ben Sanders:

Well, the choice of the Core Group was not connected with the end of the Cold War at all.

Michal Onderco:
Okay, so what was it connected to?

Ben Sanders:
To whether countries were active and interested in the Non Proliferation Treaty. That was the basis of the choice.

Michal Onderco:
Was there a lot of variation in terms of how the people who were on the Core Group saw the main challenges of non-proliferation?

Ben Sanders:
No, they stayed. It was usually the same group the same people. Mind you we had a lot of people who were not associated with the country.

Michal Onderco:
Okay.

Ben Sanders:
I don't know if you -- if you've heard of Goldblatt, Josef Goldblatt. Now he, for instance, didn't represent anything except the knowledge of the treaties, of the agreements.

Michal Onderco:
But you also had people like Harald Muller who was on paper an independent researcher.

Ben Sanders:
Yes, he was. He was very much so.

Michal Onderco:
Was there a lot of disagreement within the group, within the Core Group? Or was this more of a group of people with the same opinions?

Ben Sanders:
Well, there might have been. The disagreements that I remember were mostly with or among the nuclear weapons states.

Michal Onderco:
Okay.

Ben Sanders:
Mind you we did not select anybody from countries that were known to be against the NPT.

Michal Onderco:
Okay.

Ben Sanders:
We had no Indian. We had no Pakistani.

Michal Onderco:
Yeah.

Ben Sanders:
We had no Israelis who were totally distant, although I personally had contacts because I had been on U.N. missions there, to the Middle East. Also after I left the U.N. as an independent expert. But the disagreements were mostly, funnily enough, from France. France was very difficult. It was...
What shall I say? They did at first they didn't like the NPT at all. And then the -- they became very active in it but still very difficult.

Michal Onderco:

Before the 1995 conference you started organizing these seminars in different places.

Ben Sanders:

Yeah.

Michal Onderco:

I have three questions about this. The first one is why did you start organizing them? And the second is: was this easy or difficult? And third what did your funders think about this?

Ben Sanders:

In the first place, the reason for those meetings was to make people who were expected to be on the delegations at the review conference aware of the problems. Again, because they had so little insight into the technical side and also bring them up to speed on the problems that were prominent. What was your second question?

Michal Onderco:

The second question was whether that was easy or difficult.

Ben Sanders:

Oh, it was very difficult.

Michal Onderco:

Why?

Ben Sanders:

We had to give lectures on the various aspects of verification, why certain installations more suitable than others? The French, for instance, wanted to prevent non-nuclear weapons states from using virtually any nuclear applications. And we had -- we invited experts from various countries, not only technical but also political, to acquaint our participants with the various problems. That wasn't always easy. Yeah, I remember one day when there was a very interesting lecture by, of all people, the head of the international relations of the IAEA.

The representative of, let me say, one country, got up and said, "What the hell is this? I'm a diplomat. I don't want all this nonsense of boiling water and types of reactors. That's not my business, that's for mechanics, to hell with you people." And he left.

Now, that was a bit exaggerated. It never happened to that extent anymore. But certainly the diplomatic people, who were in the majority, found the technical side frightfully uninteresting, and difficult, too difficult to master. That was one of the main difficulties. Another one was, of course, the verification. Countries don't like being checked.

Michal Onderco:

Yeah.

Ben Sanders:

[laughs] Here again an anecdote. And at that time, in the 70s, a firm was looking into the possibility of fabricating nuclear fuel elements. And the man who was in charge of that whom I knew, a very clever engineer said, "Look, if you people," he could say that to me because we knew each other well. "If you people come to inspect me, and those are people that you select and not me, I close the tent; to hell with you. I'd rather burn the place down than having foreign inspectors in my shop." Now, that was a bit exaggerated but many people thought like that a bit. And, therefore, this whole inspection business was very sensitive.

Michal Onderco:

And did that -- did that also translate into the seminars that PPNN was running in places like

Venezuela or in Sri Lanka?

Ben Sanders:

No. No, it didn't. It was very interesting and well, very informative meetings. Incidentally, the venue was chosen on the basis of the fact that we had members from that nationality on the Core Group. Of course, a Sri Lankan later became the president of the extension conference.

Michal Onderco:

Jayantha Dhanapala

Ben Sanders:

Dhanapala and the other thing what was it?

Michal Onderco:

Venezuela. Ambassador Taylhardat

Ben Sanders:

Taylhardat heard that. Yes, he was frantically trying to become the head of the shop. First of the Core Group and then of the NPT review conference. He failed. He was very sad. He made a lot of fuss about it. Yeah.

Michal Onderco:

And how did these regional conferences go? How was the mood in these meetings?

Ben Sanders:

Oh, excellent. Excellent, very friendly, very close. We also made it a point of having nice dinners and having a nice excursion now and again and people were very interested.

Michal Onderco:

And they were set up to make -- to make it easier for people to network, to get to know each other?

Ben Sanders:

Yes. There was a lot of networking as a result.

Michal Onderco:

Many of the people who worked in the PPNN, either as members of the Core Group or who attended one of the events became very senior in their country's delegations to the 1995 NPT RevCon. How did you manage to find such crucial people?

Ben Sanders:

Purely through personal contact, which was really my main activity. I knew them all and I talked a lot with them.

Michal Onderco:

But, I mean when you, for example, when you selected Dhanapala in '86 to join the Core Group, you couldn't have known that Dhanapala is going to become the Conference president.

Ben Sanders:

No. No, but I knew that he was a clever and interested and pleasant man. And well, frankly, I think we sort of promoted him that way. Yeah, we helped him make his own necessary contacts.

Michal Onderco:

Okay.

Ben Sanders:

And also very often those people would meet members of the Core Group would ask us, ask me, "Get me in touch with so and so if you don't mind. I don't know him and he doesn't know me. But I

know you -- I know that you know both of us. Could you help?" That was a great -- very useful aspect not something you could put on paper -- or do officially but very much the work of the kind of organization that we ran.

Michal Onderco:

And you also mentioned Israel. Israel was also one of the countries that you approached?

Ben Sanders:

Yeah, well Israel was very much against the NPT. But Israel was open to talks about, what was that called? Regional Non Proliferation Arrangements, you know, a non-nuclear area.

Michal Onderco:

Yes.

Ben Sanders:

They still are, as far as I hear; but at least until the present American administration is not about to talk about those things. And the previous one was more interested but they didn't -- they didn't have the right people to talk about them.

Michal Onderco:

In these conferences and these events that you organized for senior officials, were you trying to promote the idea of indefinite extension?

Ben Sanders:

Yeah. Yes.

Michal Onderco:

Very openly ?

Ben Sanders:

Openly, yes.

Michal Onderco:

And did people not mind?

Ben Sanders:

No.

Michal Onderco:

Even if they came from country like Mexico that was opposed to indefinite extension.

Ben Sanders:

No, they didn't mind. You discussed it openly. Mexico was one of the big promoters of the whole -- the whole idea of non-proliferation, of course. Garcia Robles was the great man there. And he had been -- well, he was a good friend of mine. A friend - he was much older. But we had good contacts and they listened. Oh, yes.

Michal Onderco:

In the run-up to the actual conference your activities intensified a little bit. Can you tell me a little more about sort of what was going on with PPNN in that period?

Ben Sanders:

Well, PPNN did not -- in -- did not appear in its -- in its organizational metamorphosis. People knew that one was interested in it. In 1995, we were more or less personal. I was the advisor to the president of the conference, personal advisor. And as such I had a, you know, I had an official function. What's his name? It's --

Michal Onderco:
Dhanapala?

Ben Sanders:
No, John Simpson was there as an advisory member of the U.K. delegation and so on. We were not there as PPNN. We were there just as members of various delegations.

Michal Onderco:
But did you try to advance some of the ideas from PPNN, for example, through informal channels?

Ben Sanders:
Well, yes. You -- one helped to draw up draft papers and draft final declaration, that sort of thing.

Michal Onderco:
Yeah.

Ben Sanders:
But we were asked to do that. It wasn't that you had to push your way in at all.

Michal Onderco:
The breakthrough at the conference at the 1995 came through the South African proposals. And South Africans were not part of the Core Group. But did you have any --

Ben Sanders:
Yes, they were.

Michal Onderco:
Okay.

Ben Sanders:
No, they were. We had a South African member of the Core Group.

Michal Onderco:
Was it Minty?

Ben Sanders:
Sorry?

Michal Onderco:
That was Abdul Minty, right?

Ben Sanders:
Well, he came to our meetings. But then he wasn't -- he was not the president -- I forget his name now. But he was not the permanent member. The permanent member was a younger --

Michal Onderco:
Peter Goosen

Ben Sanders:
Yeah, Peter Goosen, yeah. Right.

Michal Onderco:
Did you, for example, get the wind of the two documents that South Africa presented to the conference in the PPNN meetings?

Ben Sanders:
No, it was not done in meetings. Those things were discussed with individuals. At the conference

PPNN did not appear as such as an organization. Because we all had our functions, our functions at the meetings.

Michal Onderco:

Did you in any way either stay at least in touch with the members of the Core Group, for example, at the conference?

Ben Sanders:

Yeah. Well, of course when I -- yeah, it [laughs] was a mixture of personal contact, official contact, conference contact - difficult to describe, totally informal.

Michal Onderco:

And how did PPNN help you in being the advisor to Dhanapala at the conference?

Ben Sanders:

That was supposed to be totally normal because everybody in the PPNN Core Group had a function of some kind. And I was the advisor to the president.

Michal Onderco:

Did you see any of the ideas that were -- that were discussed, for example, in the PPNN settings to reappear in the conference?

Ben Sanders:

That I don't remember. I should think so but I don't recall that.

Michal Onderco:

So what was the life of PPNN after 1995, after the conference?

Ben Sanders:

Virtually none [laughs]. We sort of went on, in 2000 there was a review conference, which I didn't even go to. Did I? I don't remember. But iwell, we sort of fell apart in 2001. We had no more money.

Michal Onderco:

Why was there no more money? I mean, why were sponsors not interested anymore?

Ben Sanders:

Yeah, that I describe as the NASA, or Moon landing atmosphere. When NASA, the American Space Agency lived on handouts from the Congress. Now and again they got some money, never enough. But they were well funded in the 60s, in the 60s, up to the point where they landed on the Moon. And when the NASA people came to the Congress for more money they said, "Why should you have more money? You succeeded. [laughter] So what are you going to do now?" That was exactly the approach many of our funders used towards us in 1995. "You've now succeeded. What more do you want? Non-Proliferation has arrived." And that was the big mistake because non-proliferation never arrives. People always try to get out from under and try to re-establish their nuclear programs up to the point where the controls are kept from -- and they feel that they can get away with it. Not all countries, of course, but a thing like the Non Proliferation Treaty has to be reinforced all the time. There are some ideas floating about now, particularly General Assembly there have been some interesting ideas, or so I hear.

Michal Onderco:

Was there also less interest in the activities of PPNN among the diplomats after the 1995?

Ben Sanders:

Yeah, less interest. And as I said the big -- the big thing was a lack of money. And there was particularly in organizations like the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and I think also MacArthur. Those

were basically American organizations. And particularly the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, I have this from the official who worked and helped us, who was the liaison between the fund and ourselves, she was told it's now time to look after American interests. And you have done enough of assisting international bodies, international non-governmental bodies, NGOs. Now we have to concentrate on internal American problems. Which was of course, rather shortsighted because non-proliferation is an international, and just as much an American problem as it is a German, Dutch, or French problem. It's in the interest of all peaceful states.

Michal Onderco:

So when you say that there was in general sort of lack of interest in non-proliferation after 1995?

Ben Sanders:

That's right, yeah. That's why I called it the NASA Syndrome. You've reached your direct goal, and now why should we put our money into something that is really succeeded, and need not be followed up?

Michal Onderco:

Was there any sort of recognition for PPNN for its activities in the run-up to the conference?

Ben Sanders:

No, not really. It was taken for granted, yeah.

Michal Onderco:

And did at least the diplomats acknowledge the fact that PPNN may be helped them to understand better the technical issues?

Ben Sanders:

Yes, some do, some have. Yeah, but it was very personal and very sporadic. A little bit disappointing.

Michal Onderco:

Well, when in doing this project we spoke to many diplomats. And some of them do mention PPNN as an important venue for discussing non-proliferation. People still remember PPNN.

Ben Sanders:

Yeah. Well, I noticed that when I went to the meeting, last year somewhere in the framework of the General Assembly. And then all of a sudden I heard an applause and I didn't know who they were applauding. Turned out they were applauding me. I [laughs] just -- I just walked in [laughs], yeah.

Michal Onderco:

Is there something about the PPNN that I should ask or I should have asked and I didn't?

Ben Sanders:

No. No, I don't think so. I think that PPNN is a fine example of how informal contacts work. Track two. These contacts are incredibly effective. They are hard to establish and they depend very much on personal contact, on personal knowledge. But they form a very important aspect of international relations. And I think PPNN is an example of that.

Michal Onderco:

Thank you very much for your time.