

STEPHAN KLASEN (1966-2020): IN MEMORIAM

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Photo: Stephan Klasen
& Latest Thinking
Published in 2018
Photographer: Sebastian
Neumann [https://
doi.org/10.21036/
LTPUB10645](https://doi.org/10.21036/LTPUB10645)

You see the sun go down, very slowly, and yet one is still surprised when it's suddenly dark. Franz Kafka

On October 27, 2020, Stephan Klasen passed away in Göttingen after battling the incurable disease Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) for 5 years. How he dealt with his illness—with full transparency, strength and kindness—deserves our utmost respect. Stephan leaves behind his wife Christine and his children, Lukas, Nikolas, Sophia and Jeremias—we are grieving with them and extend our deepest sympathy to them. We wish them all the strength for the time to come.

Stephan (born on 18.6.1966 in Trier) received his doctorate in 1994 from Harvard University under the supervision of Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen and subsequently held scientific positions in Johannesburg, Cambridge and Munich. Since 2003, Stephan was Professor of Development Economics at the University of Göttingen. In a short period of time, he managed to build a strong development economics research group at the Faculty of Economic Sciences and established strong links with other related disciplines, especially statistics and agricultural sciences. In the process, he succeeded in involving many colleagues and making the University of Göttingen what it stands for today in development research: an outstanding center in Europe.

In addition, and among many other positions, he was president of the European Development Research Network (EUDN), chairperson of the Development Economics Committee of the German Economic Association, and he was an editor of the *Review of Income and Wealth* (2005 to 2012) and played a significant role in the Council of the IARIW (2014 to 2020). Stephan had the gift of being

able to communicate complex issues comprehensibly to the public and to policy makers. He did so most notably as member of the United Nations Committee for Development Policy, as member of the scientific advisory board of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, and as coordinating lead author and lead author are two different things in the IPCC. Stephan was coordinating lead author of the 5th Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

Stephan distinguished himself through his path-breaking work on gender economics and poverty and inequality. In his early career, Stephan studied gender inequality in intra-household resource allocation—historically and globally. In particular, he continued Amartya Sen’s work on “missing women,” refining the analysis and adding enormous amount of detail to Sen’s previous findings. He did this with such mastery that Sen frequently referred to Stephan as the world’s leading expert on gender bias in mortality. Moreover, Stephan has empirically shown in many studies that gender inequalities, in addition to being unfair, are harmful to society and reduce economic growth. This topic stayed close to Stephan’s heart throughout his career, even when his physical strength started to diminish due to ALS. The last large project that he led, funded by Canada’s International Development Research Centre, investigated the link between economic empowerment of women and economic growth, inspiring a new generation of doctoral students and postdocs to devote their talent to issues of gender inequality. The findings of this work have been included in one of Stephan’s last review articles on levels and trends of gender inequality: “From ‘Me Too’ to Boko Haram” published in 2020 in *World Development*.¹ His work has also strongly influenced international development policy. The United Nations have recognized the causes and implications of gender-specific inequalities and take them into account, among other things, by calculating the “Gender Related Development Index,” which Stephan has played a key role in developing further.

Stephan made many other important contributions, in particular to the measurement of poverty and inequality that led to several refinements of UNDP’s Human Development Index (for instance taking into account inequality²) and had an impact on the World Bank’s poverty measurement.³ Moreover, he substantially contributed to the conceptualization and measurement of pro-poor growth and the debate on which policies could bring growth to all.⁴ He also added very original work to the literature on poverty and vulnerability: when Stephan edited a book in 2018 on *Measuring Poverty*,⁵ the leading scientists in the field including two Nobel laureates—Agnus Deaton and Amartya Sen—contributed their work to the volume, documenting the utmost respect of the economics profession for Stephan’s work on measuring and analyzing poverty.

Stephan’s research has led to close to 200 scientific articles and several books. However, the examples above show that Stephan was not only an internationally outstanding development economist, who shaped research in his field, but also

¹<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2019.104862>.

²<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0305750X0800106X> and <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0305750X11002336?via%3Dihub>.

³<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10888-016-9324-8>.

⁴<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/15022/289950PAPER0ABCDE020030Europe.pdf?sequence=1>.

⁵<https://www.e-elgar.com/shop/gbp/measuring-poverty-9781786436948.html>.

someone who always ensured that research results led to concrete recommendations for policy and action. He considered this as his social responsibility. He was never concerned with himself, with publications in the most prestigious economics journals or media attention, but always with what mattered to make a difference not only in science, but in the world. The mission statement of the University of Göttingen and Stephan's research could not have been a better match—"in publica commoda," for the good of all.

In addition to being a scientist and an advisor to policy, Stephan was an incredible mentor who always stood up and opened doors for young scientists. In particular, he was a true feminist and globalist paying particular attention to the scientific promotion of women and students from less privileged countries. He was a primary doctoral advisor to 80 students, supported numerous postdocs with their careers and inspired generations of development economics students. We called this "Göttinger Schule" when we celebrated Stephan's 50th birthday in 2016. Many of his students are now themselves scientists around the world or work for international organizations—all feeling committed to Stephan's legacy to do research and raise their voices for a better world.

Incredibly far-sighted and with a brilliant mind, he had the gift of inspiring his environment with constructive criticism on almost all topics and questions. His infinite energy, his enthusiasm and his curiosity impressed everybody who met him. At the same time, he was very collegial, extremely modest and unpretentious with a wonderful sense of humor. Nothing can document this better than his retirement from active duty in 2019, when colleagues and students traveled to Göttingen from all over the world to thank him for what he had given them and to wish him strength for what lay ahead.⁶

Despite the increasing and ever more intolerable health problems, Stephan has been as involved and committed as he could have been right up to the end, particularly for his students. The lights in his office were on until the university shut down for the Coronavirus in March 2020. His commitment to work may have surprised some of us at first, but we all understood that in his life he cared most for his family and his work. Stephan started his farewell lecture in 2019 with a quote by Stephan Hawking who died from ALS in 2018:

One, remember to look up at the stars and not down at your feet.

Two, never give up work. Work gives you meaning and purpose and life is empty without it. Three, if you are lucky enough to find love, remember it is there and don't throw it away.

We had the pleasure and honor of working with Stephan and being a part of his life. It is incredible what he has achieved in the limited time that was given to him and how many people he has taught and touched. Stephan went a very long way—only incredibly fast. We will miss him very much—as a scientist and a friend. He will continue to live in our minds and hearts. Stephan will remain a role model for us, how to use economic sciences to improve the living conditions of all.

⁶The recording of the farewell lecture can be found here: <https://youtu.be/jIS0NqV6-0k>.