

Profile

Jean-Paul Moatti: charismatic French leader in global health



"This is my first real job in management", says Jean-Paul Moatti, who was appointed jointly as Chairman and Executive Director of France's National Research Institute for Development (IRD) in March, 2015. A leading figure behind the *Lancet* France: nation and world Series, Moatti's role at IRD puts him in a unique position to steer France's output in global health research over the next few years. "International research is my love, and IRD is the best place I could be", he says. "Our job is to help and collaborate with the scientific communities in the countries where we have a presence, to strengthen research capacity, and ultimately health systems globally." IRD, jointly funded by France's research and foreign affairs ministries, is involved in biomedical and human development research in 28 countries, many of them Francophone nations, but also with reach in southeast Asia and in Latin America. "We have around 2500 people working within IRD, of whom around 40% will be working on the ground at any one time and about a quarter focus on health, collaborating in research programmes, such as in the potential of a malaria vaccine for pregnant women in Benin, or supporting Ebola research work in Guinea", he says.

Moatti did not plan a career in health. Born in Tunisia and excelling in mathematics at school and later taking a Masters and a PhD in economics in Paris, his early career was spent as a research analyst at France's Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) where his expertise in econometrics was put to use in helping shape strategy in France's electricity and nuclear industries. His growing reputation in econometrics was recognised by Philippe Lazare, then Executive Director of INSERM, France's national biomedical research agency, resulting in Moatti's transition to health economics and public health. "It was interesting as my background in using the tool of cost-benefit analysis which I used at AEC was first viewed with suspicion in the health and medical field, even though such an approach could serve to maximise economic opportunities within the health sector", Moatti says. His 13 years at INSERM involved many areas of health policy that resonate today, notably in cost-benefit analysis of screening programmes for prenatal testing and diagnosis, and in the field of thalassaemia and sickle-cell disease.

In 1994, he established his own social sciences laboratory at Aix-Marseille University (AMU), gaining a chair in economics there the next year. A challenging project in the early days of his lab involved a collaboration with oncologists at Marseille's Institut Paoli-Calmettes. "Some physicians called us the wolves coming to work in a field of lambs, although I rather felt the reverse", Moatti recalls, "but it was extremely gratifying to show how a health-economics approach could bring about meaningful and positive advance in the clinical setting". Another notable role came in 2011 when he became

Director of the Public Health Research Institute (ISP) for the French National Alliance for Life and Health Sciences, where for 3 years he coordinated publicly funded clinical and public health research across 150 centres.

In global health, it is in HIV/AIDS where Moatti's impact has been most profound. Around the turn of the millennium, he helped convince the Nobel Prize-winning economists Kenneth Arrow and Joseph Stiglitz that antiretroviral drugs could be justified on both scientific and economic grounds for HIV treatment and prevention. In the broader global health arena, he has contributed to the work of WHO's Maximising Positive Synergies Collaborative Group, tasked to tease out the complex relation between investment in multilateral global health initiatives compared with health-systems funding in low-income and middle-income countries, detailed in a 2009 *Lancet* paper. The group's series of recommendations for scaling up and maximising health resources globally has been fundamental to the language and aspirations of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

Martin McKee, Professor of European Public Health at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, has benefited from Moatti's influence in the global health arena. McKee says that he was "extremely fortunate to have Jean-Paul as a member when I chaired the public health board of the Open Society Foundation in New York over the past 5 years. He combines technical expertise with a detailed understanding of policy and politics, helped by the fact that he clearly knows everyone who is anyone in global health, and indeed in global politics. Consequently, his interventions, in a remarkably wide range of issues, are always extremely insightful, often spotting issues that others miss. In part this reflected how he spans the Anglophone and Francophone worlds, enabling him to challenge the conventional, often Anglocentric, wisdom. He is someone who makes a real difference."

Advising scientific committees has characterised Moatti's later career, notably his work with the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, the French Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, and the French Agency for AIDS and Hepatitis Research (ANRS). He is often frustrated by politicians' ability to ignore evidence-based research to suit political ends. "At heart I am really a researcher, not an administrator or politician. I am passionate about wanting to influence global health policy, but I am not about being an international bureaucrat", he says. However, Moatti points to the recent COP21 climate change negotiations in Paris as a good example of how science and politics can be effective: "As scientists, social or otherwise, we really can make a difference, but only if we are truly collaborative."

Richard Lane



© IRD-Emmanuel Barant

Published Online
May 2, 2016
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(16\)30270-7](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(16)30270-7)
See Online/Series
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(16\)00580-8](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(16)00580-8) and
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(16\)00379-2](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(16)00379-2)