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## Advocacy research and the World Bank: propositions for discussion

*Jonathan Fox*

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### Making a difference: how do we know?

Researchers committed to the public interest work hard to avoid being 'merely academic'. Commitment is necessary but not sufficient for making a difference, however. Any discussion of how researchers can make a difference requires a broader assessment of whether the campaigns they work on are having an impact. From a research point of view, it turns out that assessing whether and how public interest campaigns *are* indeed having an impact is one of the hardest challenges. After all, most of the time, progress in dealing with powerful elite institutions inherently takes place through partial and uneven changes. Even more problematic, advocacy impact often needs to be assessed in terms of the terrible things that actually *did not* happen or were avoided—damage control—and this leads one onto the slippery terrain of the 'counter-factual'. For example, is the World Bank doing more nasty things now than it did almost two decades ago, when what came to be known as the Multilateral Development Bank (MDB) campaign first took off? If so, what would that tell us about the efficacy of the many civil society efforts to challenge the Bank's actions? Is the World Bank doing more decent things nowadays, having adopted a very enlightened-sounding series of official policies, public discourses, and NGO

partners? Could *both* propositions be true at the same time, because the Bank is a contradictory institution that does lots of different things at once, some much worse than others?

When considering different approaches to and criteria for assessing advocacy impact it helps to keep one key proposition in mind: where you stand depends on where you sit. Policy changes that may seem quite small in San Francisco or London—for better or for worse—often loom much larger when seen from below, at the receiving end.

### Participant observation: help folks to follow the money

This essay is organised in terms of several propositions for discussion that link advocacy and research dilemmas. An early strategy for using research to empower campaigns to influence the World Bank came out of one of the intellectual traditions of the US social movements of the 1960s, namely that of researching power structures. The focus was on revealing to the public how powerful institutions were governed, how they made their decisions, and whose interests they served. This tradition drew on the power of transparency to question the legitimacy of ‘business as usual’. One of the key tools was the ‘citizen’s guide’, an accessible manual disclosing the inner workings of dominant institutions, such as government agencies, universities, and private corporations. These handbooks serve to guide action by revealing where the pressure points in the system are, as well as by highlighting cross-sectoral alliance possibilities. The phrase ‘*follow the money*’ sums it up.

The power structure analysis was complemented by the ‘case study’ approach, which evolved into the most politically effective action-research strategy. Especially vivid cases of development disasters were documented in media-savvy ways, to show the world that if the Bank is capable of funding . . . (fill in the blank) then it must be an institution with deeply systemic flaws.

### What’s new since Seattle?

The Seattle events of 1999 opened a new cycle in the campaigns against top-down globalisation, but the international campaigns to challenge the World Bank began in the mid-1980s. In spite of being muted since the attacks of 11 September 2001 on US targets, what *is* new since 1999 is that the campaign generated a broader, more mobilised social base in the USA than ever before, reaching far beyond its usual core of full-time professional advocacy staff. Did the 16 April 2000 (A16) protest marches in Washington DC have an impact on the World Bank? After so many years of terrible press, Bank decision makers had grown a fairly thick skin. How would we be able to tell?

One clear-cut example of impact that does come to mind concerns a Bank project that spectacularly failed to comply with its own, enlightened-sounding policies—the China Western Poverty Reduction project. Critics showed that the project would contribute to the long-standing Chinese policy of encouraging migration in order to dilute the nomadic ethnic Tibetan and Mongol populations, as senior Bank managers later privately admitted. In spite of the Bank’s vast and very sophisticated public relations operations, this project managed to trip over one of the world’s most influential and well-known indigenous rights movements, leading this movement to unite with the campaign on the Bank. Controversy raged at the highest levels, and between the US and Chinese governments behind the scenes. Affected Tibetans also filed a claim with the Bank’s six-year-old, relatively autonomous ombudsperson office, the Inspection Panel, charging violations of the Bank’s own policies.

The case turned into a make-or-break test for the Inspection Panel—the Bank’s in-house watchdog commission, responsible for investigating the Bank’s possible violations of its own social and environmental policies. Borrowing governments—which

the Bank needs, since it has an imperative to lend—reacted defensively, claiming that this violated national sovereignty. The more general A16 protests helped this specific campaign because the mass media were already receptive and the Tibetan solidarity movement was already energised and had targeted the Bank. By June and July they were able to put vocal protesters downstairs at exactly the same time as the World Bank's board of executive directors was upstairs, deciding whether or not to move ahead and fund the project. Campaigners calculated that the board could actually hear the chants from the streets below. As far as I know, this was the first ever *mass* protest that directly targeted a board's loan decision-making process, and the protestors won—China was obliged to withdraw the project proposal. Following this embarrassment, Bank policy makers redesigned their internal procedures to make it more difficult for staff to ignore ostensibly mandatory 'safeguard' social and environmental policies.

So what's new here? Ten or fifteen years ago, protesters generally criticised projects that were *already* underway, and so had already been causing environmental and social damage for years. The best that could be hoped for, then, was some kind of mitigation or damage control. Reparations were (and still are) in order, but campaigners lacked the clout to extract them. Nowadays, specific projects at least can be stopped or changed before they start. While that doesn't necessarily change the overall direction the Bank is moving in, or improve compliance with reform policies more systematically, these project-specific victories matter a lot to those who would have been directly affected on the ground. The movement's capacity to do this is the combined result of past battles won and lost, the Bank's own reforms in response to public pressure exercised via threats to its congressional funding, and the broadening and deepening of transnational civil society networks that act as early-warning systems.

## Wars of movement versus wars of position

When looking back on almost two decades of campaigning to change the World Bank, it is useful to reflect on political theorist Antonio Gramsci's classic distinction between wars of movement and wars of position. His military analogy refers to battles over institutions and ideas, because if one is interested in systemic change, then storming the barricades only gets one just so far. Wars of position evoke slow, slogging, trench warfare. The concept refers to the difficult and gradual process of challenging hegemonic ideas and institutions, especially during the long periods when the balance of forces keeps more radical change off the agenda. Wars of movement, in contrast, refer to fluid, rapidly changing dynamics involving the element of surprise and the mobilisation of concentrated pressure—as in Seattle, Prague, Genoa, or Barcelona.

For an important example, recall the World Bank's 50th anniversary in 1994, when the media resonance of the 'Fifty Years is Enough' protest campaign made it difficult for the Bank to celebrate too much. The 1993/94 period was unusual primarily because two political opportunities converged. In India, the mass movement of tribal peoples and farmers against the Narmada dam was highly mobilised and had just been legitimated by an independent study, commissioned by the Bank itself, which concluded that the movement was right and the Bank was wrong. At the same time, in the USA, because the Democrats controlled both the Congress and the presidency, a few progressive congressional leaders were emboldened to respond to the international Narmada campaign and used their control over foreign aid to force the Bank to make critical policy concessions—opening up public access to information and creating the Inspection Panel. What this suggests is that transnational civil society coalitions are key, but so is the degree of domestic leverage over the US government's

own policy processes. This case also underscores the challenge of assessing impact. The Narmada campaign obliged the Bank to pull out, and then won several years of relative stability thanks to a national court decision, but the political winds shifted within India and the water level was raised—threatening thousands. It turns out that international advocacy campaigns cannot escape the challenge of domestic power politics.

Thinking about Bank campaigns more generally over the last 15 years, we see brief waves of intense mass mobilisation and unusual vindication in the dominant media (thanks to accessible images like burning rainforests, dam-flooded villages, and leaky oil pipelines). These moments were punctuated by long interludes when lower profile, more specialised watchdog groups kept up the more technical, less splashy work of monitoring and exposing the Bank. These efforts won occasional battles in relation to specific projects and provided key information and other resources that empowered allies both on the ground and in national capitals around the world.

### Situating official discourse: look at what they do, not just what they say

There is no doubt that important elements of World Bank discourse now sound remarkably enlightened. They have learned to talk the talk. This poses a puzzle for those scholars who see ‘developmentalist discourse’ in and of itself as inherently and always all-powerful. What does it mean when the World Bank changes its discourse to call for substantial policy changes and financial investments in sustainable development, gender equality, and poor people’s empowerment? The 2000/2001 *World Development Report*, the Bank’s flagship annual synthesis of ‘state-of-the-art’ research on a given theme, focuses on poverty alleviation. One of its main themes is that economic growth is necessary but not sufficient, that

public institutions themselves must become ‘pro-poor’, that poor people must become empowered, and that ethnic and gender discrimination are key obstacles that must be overcome. As far as official lines go, this is new. The draft of this document was made public on the Internet and subjected to a systematic international consultation effort coordinated by the British NGO coalition, the Bretton Woods Project. Before the author could incorporate the comments that were made, a backlash from conservative economists and the US Treasury Department provoked him to resign in protest, leading most critics to assume that the final report would be gutted before it saw the light of day. Curiously, though, the final report is not all that different from the public draft. Some observers contend that the author’s resignation effectively ‘inoculated’ the report, protecting its main message because the first version was still available for comparison—perhaps a case of the power of transparency.

How do we assess this shift in the official discourse? Is it just for show? One hypothesis is that the new *World Development Report* lines reflect the combination of shifting internal debates and the failure of the Bank’s conventional wisdom in practice, under the pressure of years of civil society criticism. The *Report* projects the views of the World Bank’s usually subordinated minority of non-economist social scientists. At the same time, in almost all other arenas that matter, the Bank’s macroeconomists clearly remain hegemonic. It is still too soon to tell whether the *World Development Report*’s legitimation of more heterodox views will make much difference, but it poses an analytical puzzle for analysts. Is more enlightened discourse going to be just as influential as the classic developmentalist ideology we have all critiqued so thoroughly? Certainly not—but why not? When, where, and how will it matter, if at all? Probably when its advocates within the Bank manage to partner with similar reform-minded counterparts in borrowing governments and civil society—but only then. A

search for the answers requires us to embed our analysis of official discourses in an understanding of the contending ideas and interests *within* the institutions that generate and propagate them.

To understand the relative weight of Bank discourse, we need to situate it in terms of Bank *policies*. Bank policies are supposed to guide the design and implementation of projects, so they are, in effect, an important potential bridge between discourse and institutional practice. There are two main kinds—safeguard policies and ‘good practices’ policies. The safeguard policies are in the ‘first do no harm’ category, including environmental assessment, indigenous peoples, resettlement—and they are supposed to be mandatory. The ‘good practices’ policies are merely recommended, and advocate, for example, gender equality, collaboration with NGOs, and informed participation by poor people. In short, some of the enlightened discourse is translated into policies that are optional, while other elements are translated into ostensibly mandatory policies that turn out to be systematically violated. As a result of the Bank’s problem with reform policy compliance, it is now in a long-term process of trying to water them down—to make compliance easier.

### What side are the Bank’s anthropologists on?

The anthropologists who work for the Bank are not so different from those who work for any large, powerful bureaucracy that is not accountable to those it is supposed to serve. Here the observation of a Latin American activist anthropologist colleague is very relevant. As he put it, ‘I think all anthropologists have problems when they reach power. The point is: they think they know more about the needs of the natives than the natives themselves.’

From my own experience of studying them, most anthropologists who pursue a Bank career follow one of three kinds of paths. First, as you might expect, some get

fully co-opted—assimilating the institution’s norms and applying their skills to blunting just a bit of sharp edge of what the Bank funds (for example, figuring out how to convince people to move out of the way before the bulldozers actually show up). Second, there are those who take principled stands some of the time, but are inconsistent. This means that they have difficulty sustaining coalitions with directly affected groups. In part because of their limited influence inside the institution, they end up doing a kind of everyday triage, picking their battles carefully to avoid finding themselves on the outside looking in.

A third group, very small to be sure, manages to stick to its principles most of the time while still functioning within the institution. Some focus on carving out small niches where they can promote participatory, innovative development projects that are so tiny, by Bank standards, that they don’t threaten the rest of what the Bank does. Still, those cracks in the system matter a lot for the grassroots organisations that find new room for manoeuvre. Other insider reformists sometimes manage to block nasty projects before they gather unstoppable momentum. When that doesn’t work, they play critical roles in empowering public interest groups in their campaigns. As Bank critics marshal their evidence to reveal why certain projects are ‘development disasters’, you often hear the phrase ‘even Bank documents show . . . how horrible they are’. Well, somebody had to write those documents, and somebody had to put them into the right hands. Recall Professor Ted Downing’s consultant study for the Bank on the disastrous social effects of the Bío Bío dam in Chile on the Mapuche people, which led to an official complaint by the American Anthropological Association.

Clearly this is just a schematic set of distinctions, very much in the eye of the beholder, and sometimes the same individual shifts from one category to another. More importantly, this proposition does not imply that *any* of these categories is very large or very influential, for three main reasons. First,

there are very few anthropologists who are actual Bank staff. Second, they are involved in a very small fraction of the total number of projects, since most of the money goes to structural adjustment and other kinds of macro-institutional changes. And third, even where they are involved, they are more often ignored than heeded.

### The need for more civil society monitoring from below

Those who do grassroots field research in developing countries probably come up against the World Bank often without knowing it—you deal with the local clinic or school, or with the municipal government. Most of the Bank's money no longer goes on the classic highways through the rainforest or the hydroelectric dams that flood villages. First, such projects provoked such effective environmental/human rights coalitions that it is just much harder to get away with them now than it used to be—especially in countries that have active, mobilised civil societies. Elsewhere, the Bank's social and environmental policies risk being side-stepped, as occurred in Chad, whose president received a US\$25 million 'signing bonus' from an oil consortium once the Bank loan for a pipeline was approved, of which US\$4.5 million was spent on arms (Farah and Ottaway 2000). But, second, infrastructure projects account for only a minority of Bank funding—most of the loans go to macro-structural adjustment (oscillating between just less than a half and two thirds of the total over the last few years), and a significant fraction goes to social and environmental projects. These projects may or may not be good for society or the environment, but one can be sure that whatever *is* wrong with them is far less obvious, and will require much more field research and institutional analysis than the emblematic 'road through the rainforest'.

For example, the role of the World Bank in Mexico's social policy process was completely secret until recently, but, since the

Bank's 1994 information disclosure reforms, it turns out that many of the government's anti-poverty programmes were supported by World Bank loans targeted to the poorest and most rural states (see, for example, Fox 2000). What is the government's main strategy in each of these sectors? Decentralisation. Where did the World Bank fit in? The availability of World Bank loans gave added ideological and economic leverage to those sectors within the national government that were promoting a rapid decentralisation of social policies to the governments of the poorest states. This was a process of blind decentralisation, however, because even in the World Bank's technical logic, there was no empirical evidence that those state governments had the capacity to manage health and education services more efficiently than the federal government. After many years and literally billions of dollars in loans—which the Mexican people will have to pay back with interest—it still remains unclear just how effective those social investments have been. Why is it not clear? Because, in spite of the World Bank's own policies, none of the large anti-poverty loans included any measures to encourage the independent monitoring and evaluation of governmental performance—particularly the state and municipal governments now responsible for many anti-poverty investments. At least some of these projects may have contributed to the violent unrest in Chiapas—culminating in the 1997 Acteal massacre—since the Funds were administered by local government structures which were more part of the problem than of the solution (Fox 2000:623). *Proving* this hypothesis, of course, is easier said than done, but that's where anthropologists come in—researchers who understand how nation-states actually operate within communities, up close and personal.

Most of the problems with anti-poverty loans are less spectacular than in Chiapas, involving everyday forms of resistance and collective action to win the right to participatory, accountable governance. To mention

examples of some of the projects that we monitor in Mexico, the Bank lends money to the government for ostensibly participatory indigenous agricultural development, rural health clinics, and local village-run anti-poverty projects. When seen from the point of view of the independent peasants and indigenous organisations that want to monitor and influence the policy process, there is a lot to learn from the methodology developed to defend communities against the classic infrastructure mega-projects that were the main focus of the first wave of the MDB campaign in the 1980s.

For example, many have learned how to follow the money through the system, to figure out where possible pressure points are, and to begin to disentangle the respective roles of the World Bank and the national government—which in the Mexican case remains quite autonomous of the Bank. At the same time, they need to adjust this approach because in the case of anti-poverty and environmental projects their main goal is not to *stop* such projects but to make sure that they actually meet their goals. Here the Bank's paper policies become potential weapons for grassroots organisations. These organisations are trying to use the Bank's commitment to public information access and informed participation by indigenous peoples in policies that affect them as levers to open up space in their 500 years of struggle with the state.

One of the most promising advocacy strategies now being adopted by civil society involves the *vertical integration* of monitoring, advocacy, and campaigning. Vertical integration refers to the systematic coordination between diverse levels of civil society—from local to provincial, national, and international arenas—to monitor and offset the parallel partnerships between the World Bank and national, provincial, and local governments. This approach is being pursued systematically in both Brazil, which has the broadest and deepest civil society advocacy coalition, Rede Brasil,

and in Mexico, where the Oaxaca-based NGO watchdog *Transparencia* works closely with diverse indigenous organisations to monitor and influence social and environmental projects in rural areas. Like many other grassroots-oriented advocacy campaigns in the South, they are trying to democratise the triangular relationship between their own government, the MDBs, and civil society.

### A proposal from Mexico: a code of ethics for Bank anthropologists

This essay concludes by sharing some reflections by Manuel Fernández Villegas, director of *Transparencia*:

*The role of anthropologists in World Bank activities: A wake-up call*

*World Bank operations often incorporate the participation of anthropologists (as well as other social experts) in the analyses that form part of the evaluations and technical studies involved in preparing their development investment programmes.*

*In addition to the small number of anthropologists who work as permanent employees of the Bank, it often hires such specialists as consultants . . . Sometimes these temporary contracts are carried out with the intermediation of academic institutions or research centres. These researchers, during their fieldwork, present themselves as academics and do not always clearly explain—to the organisations and communities that are the focus of their diagnoses—the role they are playing, nor the final destiny of their reports.*

*It is easy to imagine that those who are interviewed might well choose to present their proposals and opinions differently if they knew that the reports went directly to the offices of the*



*World Bank and the government officials with whom they share these technical studies. It is not the same to converse with a 'nice guy' academic researcher, as it is with a consultant in the service of the Bank who is collecting information as part of the investment logic it shares with the government institutions who actually carry out the projects . . .*

*From our point of view, this is quite delicate, and it would be worthwhile to propose something like a code of ethics for those social development professionals who work as consultants, involving their relationships with the communities and social organisations who are the target of their research.*

*For example, it is very rare for the communities and organisations mentioned in the reports and diagnoses to receive a copy of them, so that they are not even aware of what is said about them, much less have the opportunity to state their opinion or revise the way in which the results that are obtained during their (always brief) field visits [are presented].*

*Clearly, in practice, the counter-argument that the consultants offer is that the final reports are the property of those who commissioned them . . . (the Bank) and they cannot be shared without its authorisation.*

*Yes, this is the logic of contractual relations for those who sell their consulting services, but (from our point of view) this means giving priority to their source of temporary employment, over and above the interests and rights of the communities and social organisations who are trying to defend their autonomy and their right to decide and to participate in the government programmes that are carried out in their area of influence—*

*[already] a complicated and difficult challenge . . .*

*Anthropologists . . . could well be very useful to communities and grassroots organisations if they would help us to understand the World Bank and its development projects. From the grassroots perspective, it is not always easy to understand the logic of multilateral financing for specific public policies.*

*It seems that for many ordinary citizens, the World Bank and the projects it promotes are foreign and remote, almost magical, the target of prejudices—true modern myths. [The officials] seem distant and somehow superior—their direct physical presence is an act of 'coming down' to be in contact with us, [who are the ones] interested in whether or not they support us.*

*These institutions' power and technical expertise creates the appearance of being supposedly 'objective'. They project the image of being capable of resolving problems and changing the painful reality of poverty if they were to decide to do so—if we could only convince them. Their visiting missions of experts create a climate in which we are expected to try to win them over by courting them with polite proposals.*

*In practice, however, discussions with Bank missions often turn ostensible beneficiaries into petitioners rather than real participants or partners. Lack of information among grassroots actors about the World Bank and the policy process more generally often creates a fertile ground for manipulative and clientelistic practices, especially during election time. Anti-poverty funding is often seen as a discretionary donation by the powerful, who expect loyalty and gratitude in exchange, rather than as an exercise of economic, social, and political rights.*

[In summary, then] . . . grassroots organisations also need the technical services of anthropologists and social analysts, to be able to provide us with the diagnoses and field research that would allow us to better understand the customary laws of the multilateral institutions and [their government partners]. . . . We need some of them on our side.

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## The multi-image development NGO: an agent of the new imperialism?

*Fletcher Tembo*

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## Introduction

This Viewpoint explores how development NGOs that seek to empower rural communities may, in the context of the reform of the state that is taking place in many developing countries, get caught up in pursuing the agenda of the state and market rather than that of the poor. On the face of it, the reformed state and development NGOs both advocate the agenda of empowering the poor and avoiding the negative effects of market liberalisation on people’s social values. However, as Mohan and Stokke (2000) observe, the discourses of participation and empowerment have different ideological roots. On one hand is the ‘revised neo-liberal position’, whose top-down promotion of participation and empowerment barely challenges the significance of power in shaping social relations. The underlying objective is