"This whole desire to build a research empire here, to duplicate a Harvard or a Yale, to try to do better than they do, and publish, has been very counterproductive. There is a lot more of an argument to have indigenous research because it would be more suited to the cultural and other peculiarities of each nation".

MAHBUB UL HAQ, WORLD BANK ORAL HISTORY.

Tackling the Knowledge Bank

Civil society organisations have long monitored and criticised Bank-funded projects and policy prescriptions, but have done less to tackle its functions as a research organisation and opinion former. Yet, as academic Nicholas Stern wrote in The World Bank as an Intellectual Actor, "the weight of the number of development economists, the research budget and the leverage from its lending means that the Bank's potential influence is profound, and it cannot be seen as just one of a number of fairly equal actors in the world of development economics".1

Under Wolfensohn the World Bank wants to increase its role as "provider of leadership in the field of development knowledge".2 The Bretton Woods Project believes civil society organisations should therefore more systematically scrutinise the Bank's existing and planned research output and expose the influences and biases which dominate it. This report, commissioned to examine the Bank's most prominent annual publication, the World Development Report, is a small contribution to this task.

What is the World Development Report?

Since 1978 the World Bank has produced an annual World Development Report (WDR) to present staff's views on selected development topics. The Bank writes the Report in an accessible style, seeking to ensure a large readership. It is a costly exercise: the production budget for the 1997 Report was $3 million, around 150,000 copies are published. Many thousands are distributed for free to journalists, Southern universities and other targeted audiences.

The WDRs are written and marketed giving the impression that they convey broadly held views and objective research. Many civil society organisations feel, however, that they are selective and biased and that the Bank sees them as a tool for self-promotion and self-justification. As a result the Reports are unbalanced and lack independent analysis, especially of the Bank's own actions. Brendan Martin, an author and consultant working with trade unions, characterised the WDR as "a highly leveraged intervention in the policy market, which overlooks and crowds out other publications in the field". Former World Bank Vice-President Willi Wapenhans, writing for the Bretton Woods Commission in 1992 commented that the Bank's isolation from the wider intellectual community "creates the perception that the Bank's operational research is exclusive, self-serving, and of insufficient objectivity." He states further that the Bank's research agenda is largely directed by the need to substantiate politically inspired shifts in policy direction."3
The Bank’s WDR team decided to engage civil society organisations in consultation from the early stages of its production. UK civil society representatives attended two consultation meetings and circulated information to groups in other countries. Whilst some organisations obtained limited rewordings of certain sections, for example on involving workers in public sector reforms, many felt that the Bank team was not prepared to address more fundamental arguments, for example on the relative strength of transnational companies and governments or the universality of market models. Not only non-government organisations, but also some academics and officials were disappointed that the final WDR omitted some of their key criticisms and concerns. They assessed that this may be explained by factors including:

- the predominance of economists on the WDR team and in the Bank in general, who are not capable of tackling complex political economy issues;
- as the WDR has the status of a Bank staff report, Bank staff have veto power and can prevent mention of the Bank’s own responsibility for problems under review;
- the World Bank was established to promote the globalisation of trade and the integration of economies. Whatever problems it identifies, the solutions it proposes are likely to emphasise further liberalisation and internationalisation of economies, rather than alternatives.

Better Process Options

If WDRs in future are to become more objective and encompass a wider range of opinions, new production processes will have to be introduced, for example:

- anonymous peer reviews of a near final draft to assess the methodology and whether the evidence supports the conclusions (this year academics criticised aspects the econometric and political economy analysis at seminars held only after the report was published);
- asking an organisation or individual to write an alternative view section which can be published at the end of the Report;
- contracting out the production of the Report to an independent thinktank or research organisation.

If these proposals which match the Bank’s perspectives on the benefits of competition and partnership-building are not adopted, many NGOs will continue to feel that Bank publications are dominated by self-promotion and a desire to channel debates, and are not prepared to open up to express the opinions of critical, independent voices.

A World Bank: NGO Ceasefire?

At the 1997 World Bank annual meetings Bank President Wolfensohn pleaded that "name calling between civil society and multilateral institutions must stop. We should encourage criticism but we should also recognise that we share a common goal". Whilst the common goal is described vaguely as "development" agreement may be possible, but the mainstream Bank view of the political and economic routes to development still appear very different to those of most civil society organisations.

The World Bank’s 1998 World Development Report will tackle the subject of Knowledge and Development, providing an opportunity to discuss the Bank’s role as a producer and disseminator of research, including how it deals with alternative views.

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