

Becoming a knowledge bank? The World Bank's emerging approach to knowledge, partnership and development in the time of globalisation

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INTRODUCTION

The World Bank President, James Wolfensohn, has committed his organisation to becoming a knowledge bank in the most visible example of development cooperation agency concern with the effects of new knowledge debates on their existing ways of working. Given its size and influence, the Bank's progress towards being a knowledge bank and the implications this has for partnership and development are of prime importance to understanding the current trends in development cooperation.

This paper is the third in a series of working papers for the "Learning to make policy" project, a three year study of knowledge - policy relationships in development cooperation agencies. The paper is written at the end of the first phase of the project in which initial data collection has taken place. It is intended to clarify our thoughts about knowledge and policy in the World Bank; to help shape our strategy for the main data collection phase; and to foster our dialogue with World Bank staff.

The paper draws on interviews with more than 30 past and present Bank staff members as well as a large range of texts, acquired in hard copy and from the Bank's web sites. We also draw upon face-to-face and electronic discussions as part of consultations on particular Bank projects and on comments about the Bank's work by staff of other agencies and NGOs interviewed as part of the broader research project. It is important to note that the World Bank's activities regarding knowledge, and their presentation on the Bank's website, have developed rapidly in the past year, and that much of the detail being discussed here will rapidly become redundant. Nonetheless, this paper does raise important issues that will continue to be of relevance to the Bank's ambitious knowledge activities.

KNOWLEDGE

Alongside globalisation, one of the key theoretical debates that has shaped development policy discourses since the late 1990s has been that of knowledge. This debate situates knowledge at the centre of economic success and highlights the importance of new ways of working and of collaborating in achieving success in terms

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of a revised set of development goals. Indeed, in some formulations, knowledge is described as the key to development.

One of the major themes of the Wolfensohn Presidency at the World Bank has been the transformation of the institution into a “knowledge bank”. By 2000, this vision is supposed to have been, to a large extent, turned into reality. Nonetheless, it is important when analysing the Bank’s knowledge strategy to remember that this has been envisaged as a medium-term project, as part of a broader vision of revitalising the work of the Bank and its development impact.

What are the origins of the World Bank’s concerns with knowledge?

Concerns with knowledge sharing² emerge in their present form out of a trend in the corporate sector, and particularly management consultancy, that really took off in the second half of the 1990s. The impetus to think about knowledge was also powerfully shaped by the presence of Joseph Stiglitz as Chief Economist at this time, as he had been one of the leading economic theorists of information and knowledge prior to joining the Bank (e.g. Grossman and Stiglitz 1980; Stiglitz and Weiss 1981). This mixture of corporate pragmatism and high theory has come to give the Bank’s knowledge strategy a unique, if somewhat contradictory, form and feel.³

However, it is important to remember a longer history to concerns about knowledge use within the Bank and amongst the constituencies with which it interacts. Amongst the research institutes of Latin America, for instance, there has been a tradition of synthesis and dissemination work. In the Bank, the Bell Report (World Bank 1978) on the education sector is but one example of a concern with the agency’s capacity to generate, acquire and use knowledge. However, it is evident that the rapid changes in the nature of information and communications technologies in the 1990s have reordered the knowledge debate in quite fundamental ways.

What is the Bank’s account regarding the nature of knowledge?

Given the size of the World Bank, it is not surprising that there is a great range of different versions of the organisation’s knowledge account. Nonetheless, as knowledge is a central component of Wolfensohn’s vision, it is striking that there appear to be some major tensions at the heart of the Bank’s knowledge policy and practice.

There is a strand of thinking about knowledge within the Bank that can be identified in part with the writings of Stiglitz, and in the writings of the central knowledge team in

² The discourse is often couched in terms of knowledge management. However, the Bank has shifted its own usage to knowledge sharing and that will be reflected in our account.

³ King (2000) examines these origins in more detail.

support of the *World Development Report 1998/9* (World Bank 1998a).⁴ In this view, a strong distinction is made between embodied and codified knowledge, with the former being seen as of more importance in the highly uncertain and context-laden world of development cooperation. Individual and organisational processes of learning and adaptation are seen as central to knowledge use. Networking approaches that can put learners in touch with individuals already possessing knowledge are emphasised. Moreover, it is argued that knowledge exists within contexts and must be applied within contexts. As such, universal best theory and practice is rejected in favour of learning from comparative experiences and adaptation to local circumstances. It is out of this vision of knowledge that the shift in Bank usage towards knowledge sharing rather than knowledge management appears to emerge.

Another strand of thinking about knowledge appears to derive more directly from the experiences of some corporate knowledge management programmes, particularly in the management consultancy field. This stresses codification of knowledge into databases through synthesis and retains a belief in universally applicable best practice. It also tends to conflate information and knowledge, eschewing the theoretical concerns of the other approach. Its concern is often more with the management of existing knowledge than with either generation or acquisition.

In practice, the Bank has a large number of sites in which knowledge strategies have emerged and these reflect a range of positions on a continuum between the two polar accounts, although the core knowledge team around Steve Denning may be seen as being close to the former pole and the synthesis work of the Education Advisory Service as representing a position close to the latter pole.

It appears that the variety of positions on knowledge may reflect a wider tendency within the Bank to develop ideas and practices around specific projects rather than at an organisation-wide level. For instance, it appears from one of James Wolfensohn's speeches (1999b) that his vision of the knowledge bank is largely in terms of knowledge projects, such as the African Virtual University, WorldLinks, etc.

The divergence in thinking does seem to have radical implications for the Bank's use of knowledge and for the way that knowledge is linked to issues of partnership and of development itself. We shall tease out some of these implications in the pages that follow. However, at present we shall briefly note some of the absences that can be discerned regardless of where one stands on the divergent Bank account of knowledge. Across the Bank's thinking there appears to be an underlying assumption that knowledge is neutral. Moreover, the Bank's account of knowledge appears to be rather weak in its consideration of the skills required for working in a knowledge bank;⁵ of the

⁴ A number of think pieces supporting and building on the 1998/9 WDR were available in until mid 2000 via <http://www.worldbank.org/km> or, at a later point, <http://www.worldbank.org/ks> In the major site revamping in the US summer of 2000, a new sub-site, <http://www.worldbank.org/knowledgebank> was established, and the previous material is not available through this URL. However, on the positive side, this URL does provide clear pathways to a range of knowledge-related activities in which the Bank is currently engaged.

⁵ This is in contrast to awareness amongst some staff in DFID and Sida of this issue.

role of training in a knowledge strategy; and of the relationship between knowledge and evaluation.

What is the relationship in World Bank thinking between knowledge and development?

The *World Development Report 1998-9* (World Bank 1998a) provided a strong account of the perceived relationship between knowledge and development. It argued that poverty could be seen in terms of an absence of knowledge as well as of capital. Strikingly, it also suggested that the East Asian Miracle could be thought of in terms of a knowledge for development strategy. This Bank perception of a close connection between knowledge and development has been furthered in later documents that have stressed the importance of supporting national knowledge strategies, another theme of the WDR. For instance, this is a component of the Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF) approach that has emerged alongside the new knowledge strategy. The Bank is also concerned to develop its own knowledge capacity in order to support development. This has led to the notion that “knowledge lending” might become more important than financial disbursements. Given the Bank’s growing concern with partnership and Southern ownership of development (see below), it is unsurprising that a sense is emerging of the need to promote partnership through better access of Southern stakeholders to developmentally useful knowledge. This can be seen as an element in the Global Development Network (GDN) project, discussed below.

It is evident that one of the factors behind this new concern with knowledge for development is an awareness of the need to respond to the falling levels of official development assistance (ODA). This is typically linked to a perception that the current way of doing aid is not sufficiently effective in any case. Such an account clearly fits in well with the Stiglitz critique of development cooperation (Stiglitz 1998) and the policy response of the CDF, largely developed by Wolfensohn himself (Wolfensohn 1998 and 1999a). This concern also appears to be somewhat related to the tendency within a number of agencies to be concerned with maximising their visible development impact. However, in the case of the World Bank and knowledge for development, it is important to consider whether the use of knowledge as a lever to maximise impact should be seen primarily in terms of agency knowledge being used to promote specific policies in the South, or in terms of agency support to Southern knowledge generation for better policy development.

Is the Bank a telling bank or a listening bank?

The way in which the Bank brings together knowledge and development has major implications for other elements of its strategy, such as partnership - ownership. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Bank’s strong identification with the Neo-liberal orthodoxy meant that it was perceived to be very much in the business of telling others rather than listening to others. In stressing its new identity as a knowledge bank, has the

organisation been able to move away from that view of being a knowledge provider to one in which it is also a knowledge seeker and sharer?

Some of the staff that we interviewed were confident that the Bank had, in their words, become “less arrogant”. However, for a significant number there was a strong concern that the organisation was still primarily engaged in dissemination of its existing knowledge rather than in seeking to develop new knowledge for itself or to learn from the knowledge of others. From a number of documents and interviews, there was a strong sense of the need to think about multi-directional flows of knowledge and about supporting national knowledge generation capacities. However, there was also a contradictory emphasis, in both interviews and documents, on Northern knowledge to the absence of that from the South. Three key themes seem to be crucial here.

First, does the Bank seek to control knowledge or act as an honest broker? There clearly is a wish from inside the Bank to use the agency’s great resources to promote knowledge sharing across the development community. This can be seen in practice in the lively discussions that have been promoted by the development forum part of the Bank’s external website. Brokerage concerns, raised very clearly in the WDR, can also be found in the Global Development Network and Global Development Gateway (GDG) projects, discussed below.

However, the overall feel of the external and internal websites suggests a concern with presenting Bank knowledge as authoritative rather than exploring a range of experiences. There is talk of the need to reflect plurality of opinions, whilst maintaining usability, but this in practice seems to be a debate for special projects such as the GDN and GDG rather than for core Bank activities. Moreover, there is a view from other agencies that the Bank is still too much about control and furthering its own agenda. As any other agency, it is apparent that the Bank will continue to find it difficult when it comes to knowledge sharing that might highlight major weaknesses in its own flagship projects.

Second, does the Bank over-emphasise knowledge dissemination in comparison to knowledge generation? One of the recurrent themes in interviews with sectoral staff at the Bank was the perceived irony of the World Bank publicly embracing knowledge at a time when its own analytical capacity and knowledge generation was so weak. There was a strong feeling that resources for knowledge dissemination were being greatly increased but time and money for knowledge generation were clearly inadequate. Whilst the Bank continued to create large amounts of information, experienced staff were concerned about its translation into knowledge. Moreover, it was noted that the Bank had also played a major role in weakening Southern capacity for knowledge generation through 20 years of under-funding of higher education.

Third, what sources of knowledge does the Bank treat as valuable? There appears to be quite a tension in this regard. The GDG and GDN can both be seen as attempts to promote a stronger commitment to Southern knowledge and the Africa Region has also developed a project to promote indigenous knowledge. Whilst the *World Development Report 1998-9* and numerous outputs of the core knowledge sharing team (Ellerman

1998; World Bank [nd] a – g⁶) stress the need for multiple knowledge flows and the importance of local knowledge and contexts, there remain concerns that knowledge sourcing in practice is typically far narrower than this. Whilst the new knowledge account does give Southern knowledge an importance impossible under the Neo-liberal ascendancy of the 1980s and 1990s, a number of staff commented on the almost totally Northern nature of knowledge use. Significantly, others seemed unaware of there being any issue in this regard whilst interviews with them made it clear that their knowledge sources were exclusively Northern. A brief examination in March 2000 of the websites of the thematic groups for education and conversations with coordinators made it apparent that links to external knowledge was very uneven, but that where it was present, it had an overwhelming emphasis on Northern knowledge.

Does the Bank's knowledge strategy mean that it is a learning organisation?

The interest of agencies in knowledge sharing is interwoven with an interest in becoming learning organisations, although the intellectual origins of these two trends are somewhat different. In Sida, it appears that the learning organisation is a more explicit concern of the agency but in the Bank it appears that knowledge is more explicit. Nonetheless, it is useful to consider how far the Bank's pursuit of a knowledge strategy has made it conform to ideas regarding a learning organisation.

It appears that there is room for improvement in the Bank in making links between knowledge and learning more explicit. To a large extent, this is related to the failure of the Bank to live up to the more radical notion of knowledge sharing as active learning. Concerns with the seepage of embodied knowledge are directly linked to a worry that the Bank is not as good at learning from its own experience as it should be. Whilst it was felt by some interviewees that organisational restructuring had helped cross-sectoral collaboration, there was some sense that the thematic groups remained too tied to departmental identities to ensure cross-sectoral learning. Concerns were raised by operational staff about the value and timeliness of evaluations, although evaluation staff argued that their division was improving on both counts. Moreover, the Bank still was seen to struggle in learning from its mistakes, not least because there is little incentive either to report or analyse these. As noted above, there are also concerns about the extent to which the Bank is successful in learning from others, whether other agencies, Northern researchers or Southern partners of whatever kind.

Are World Bank culture, structures and processes supportive of its knowledge activities?

Changes have been introduced into the Bank's way of working in order to reinforce knowledge sharing. The thematic groups are one structural example of this. Crucially,

⁶ As noted in a previous footnote, there has been a major restructuring of the World Bank's knowledge sub-site. We shall list the documents referenced here with the correct URLs at the time of download.

knowledge activities have been introduced into the staff appraisal mechanism. However, a number of staff members spoke of the barrier of an existing anti-sharing culture which, they perceived, had not yet been overcome. In their classic text on learning organisations, Argyris and Schön (1978) identified some of the ways in which organisational structures can act against learning by maintaining divisional jealousies and preventing meaningful analysis of performance. There was a sense from a number of interviews that the Bank was not entirely free from such weaknesses.

A number of staff pointed to the inadequate level of resources set aside for a range of knowledge activities and argued that embodied knowledge was being fragmented by a constant overstretching of individuals that required them to be involved in too many disparate activities. Decentralisation⁷ was criticised for diffusing the knowledge base and for limiting the possibilities of critical mass in knowledge generation emerging. In education, this was seen as a core element in the weakening of the sectoral group's ability to generate significant new knowledge.

Is the World Bank good at knowledge sharing?

What can we say about the overall performance of the Bank thus far in becoming a knowledge bank? Clearly, the Bank has done more than any other agency to develop both a theoretical account of knowledge sharing and new practices in this area. It has successfully drawn on both academic theory and corporate practice. There is potential in projects such as the GDN to contribute in significant ways to Southern knowledge generation. This links to much of the more theoretical account developed by the Bank, which points to the potential for a new, knowledge-based approach to development that is fundamentally more participatory and less donor-driven than previous models. Within some of the theories and practices of the knowledge bank there is the kernel of a new way of doing development.

Nonetheless, it is apparent that this has not yet constructed itself into a new orthodoxy. On one level, the new vision will take longer to change older practices and thinking. On another, there are still apparently strong trends within the agency to continue with such older ways of doing and thinking and the success of the knowledge bank, in a form resembling that sketched in the *World Development Report 1998-9*, cannot simply be assumed as inevitable.

There are a number of areas that emerged from our research to date in which the Bank's knowledge strategy is far from complete. It was felt that capture of embodied knowledge remained poor, notwithstanding innovations such as the tacit knowledge download. Phillip (1999) suggests that there is inadequate articulation between knowledge, evaluation and research in the Bank.

⁷ In the case of the World Bank, decentralisation typically means allocation to a regional department within the World Bank complex in Washington rather than to the field. This is different from the case in some other agencies, such as GTZ and SDC, where significant numbers of senior staff have been placed in field offices and given considerable autonomy.

From our interviews there was often a sense that good ideas had not been fully translated into good practices. The thematic groups are probably too many and are widely seen as under-resourced. Although some have good links to other Northern actors, there is no sense of them having operationalised the Bank's stated commitment to multi-directional knowledge flows. Crucially, there appears to be little in the way of central oversight of the performance of the thematic groups. This is remarkable given the apparent importance of the thematic groups in the Bank's talk about knowledge sharing.

There were significant levels of both scepticism and confusion regarding the Bank's knowledge strategy across our interviews. In part, the diversity of activities and the limited coherence between them were responsible for both of these problems. There was also a strong sense that the Bank was still primarily about disbursement in practice and that the Board and the organisational culture would continue to emphasise disbursement no matter how many knowledge initiatives there were.

The knowledge bank and knowledge sharing are supposed to be at the core of the World Bank's new way of working. However, it is striking that this is almost invisible for anyone looking at the Bank's homepage. The knowledge sharing sub-site has not always been visible from the Bank's homepage as this has gone through various versions during 2000. Without knowing the URL for this sub-site, it would be very difficult to navigate to it. Once there, it is also noticeable that hardly any material has been added during 2000, and that much of the Bank's excellent internal thinking on knowledge sharing has yet to migrate from the intranet. The GDG project is prominently linked (arguably too much so – see below) but the GDN is absent, and difficult to find since its URL is not a sub-site of <http://www.worldbank.org>

There has clearly been some first rate thinking about knowledge in the Bank and some promising new initiatives. However, it is also possible to find sympathy for the NGO perspective that public relations and control are too powerful in the Bank's current way of working. Clearly much more needs to be done both to improve internal knowledge sharing and learning and to allow the Bank to be seen as a valuable partner in broader knowledge initiatives. We shall touch on this point again when we consider some of the Bank's current projects later in this paper.

PARTNERSHIP

Partnership is central to the notion of knowledge sharing. However, it has a broader importance in development cooperation discourse. Spreading from the language of NGOs in the 1990s, partnership is now a central theme of all development cooperation agencies, whether bilateral or multilateral. Therefore, it is no surprise that the notion of partnership, and related concepts such as ownership and participation should have formed a central theme of key World Bank documents, such as Presidential speeches (Wolfensohn 1997, 1998 and 1999a). In this section, we shall try to provide a sense of some of the strengths and weaknesses of the Bank's account of partnership, noting - as with knowledge - that there is considerable variety in expressions of partnership within the Bank.

What are the strengths of the Bank's partnership vision?

Along with a number of other agencies, the Bank has made important statements about the need for a new approach to development in which partnership is central. This, for instance, can be seen as a central principle of the CDF (see below for more detail). This notion of partnership seeks to move beyond state to state relations and the Bank has emphasised the importance of ownership of development that stretches beyond the state.

In its "partnership for development" initiative, the Bank has made clear the need for partnership to move away from donor domination (World Bank 1998b). Equally, there is an awareness of the need to develop clear and agreed criteria for evaluating the performance of partnerships and mechanisms for the various parties to end partnerships where this is desirable. The Bank's partnership vision also contains a concern with the need for Southern institutional capacity to be developed further in order for partnership to succeed.

What are the weaknesses of the Bank's account of partnership?

Nonetheless, there are questions and concerns remaining about the theory and practice of the Bank's partnership approach. Whereas Sida's partnership vision is very concerned with establishing an ethical position regarding partnership, there is a strong sense that the Bank is primarily interested in partnership for pragmatic reasons:

it must be remembered that the goal is not partnership *per se*. Partnership is *a means to an end*. The real goal is the shared objective. Partnership is a tool to reach this goal more effectively, and more efficiently, for the benefit of all involved. (World Bank 1998b: 5)

Part of the Swedish rationale for partnership is to do with a concern about asymmetries of power in development and an awareness that Sweden has been guilty of using its power to force policy ideas on "partners" in the past. It is not clear that there is a similar awareness in the World Bank, or that the Bank is well-positioned to overcome the legacy of mistrust that was engendered by structural adjustment and the conditionalities of the 1980s. Although, Wolfensohn's arguments about the need for a CDF (Wolfensohn 1998 and 1999a) can be seen as implicitly critical of past practices, there is still an apparent tendency within the Bank to downplay notions of power and ideology in policymaking and overstress neutrality and consensus.

The on-line discussion that the Bank promoted on the CDF in June and July 2000 was a source of very open debate about the Bank's use of concepts such as partnership and ownership (http://www.worldbank.org/devforum/forum_cdf2.html). Out of that discussion came a strong sense from outsiders that the Bank was not being radical enough about partnership.

Criticism emerged that participation was about legitimation rather than agenda-setting. The Bank appears to have a tension between stating that its primary goal is poverty reduction and a tendency to line up a longer list of policy givens. A minimalist position on development goals seems to allow more room for country agenda setting. However, a more maximalist position, such as DFID's strong adherence to the International Development Targets (IDTs) or the old approach to conditionalities of the Bank, makes it far harder to own policy at the national level. There is a sense from documents and interviews that the Bank finds itself pulled both ways on this issue.

For development to be genuinely and broadly owned in the South, discussants of the CDF argued that a pro-poor approach to partnership needed to be taken. There is a danger in stakeholderism that elite groups can continue to satisfy their own interests. Instead, an active strategy of bringing the poor into the policy process seems necessary for true partnership. However, this requires considerable effort in terms of empowerment and capacity building, and is also highly complex and sensitive. Again, the Bank was seen as assuming too much as unproblematic when in reality genuine partnership and involvement of the poor may be difficult or impossible to achieve in some circumstances.

The last sentence could imply the need for selectivity in choosing where to try for partnerships and, indeed, this argument can be found in documents of the Bank and other agencies. There is obvious sense in a position that says that partnership is so important that we can only work in our fullest way in places where the proper processes can take place. There is only a limited ODA budget in any case and rationing is inevitable. However, there is an issue here about the danger of developing an approach to development cooperation in which agencies work with countries that satisfy criteria of merit rather than criteria of need. There is a sense that a second-class form of development cooperation will still be available for the Somalias but this does not deal with the claim that they are more in need of support than the Ugandas.

This issue clearly links to that of conditionality. Has the Bank successfully addressed the issue of conditionality? The issue of selectivity is one way in which the conditionality issue is being played out in the Bank at present. The *Assessing Aid* report (World Bank 1998c) can be seen as a strong supporter of the thesis that support should only go to those who agree with our policies and who carry them out. However, Guillaumont and Chauvet (1999) dissent from this, calling for a needs based element to funding. There is a strong sense from Northern NGOs and the South that conditionalities are still central to approaches such as the Heavily Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) initiative and the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs). These are taken as indicators that the Bank is neither as good at listening or as serious about partnership and ownership as it professes.

What is the relationship between partnership and knowledge in the Bank's thinking?

It would be naïve to expect perfect articulation between different strands of an agency's policies, but it is worth noting that the Bank's twin focus on partnership and knowledge has not led to the development of many clear points of articulation between the two.

Yet, it can be argued that a closer combination of the new emphases would have considerable advantages for both.

KNOWLEDGE AND PARTNERSHIP: SOME INSIGHTS FROM WORLD BANK PROJECTS

We have already noted that much of the detail of how the World Bank operates with regard to knowledge and partnership exists in particular projects and initiatives. Given the size and potential influence of some of these initiatives, there also seems merit in briefly looking at some of them for their knowledge and partnership content at this point. We shall consider three examples here: the Comprehensive Development Framework, the Global Development Gateway and the Global Development Network.

The Comprehensive Development Framework

The CDF is an initiative that is intimately connected with the Wolfensohn Presidency. The idea was trailed in Wolfensohn's speeches and the initial outline document appeared as a paper attributed to Wolfensohn rather than the Bank (Wolfensohn 1999a). The CDF can be seen partly as a response to the Stiglitz critique of adjustment and Neo-liberal development, although it sits squarely with broader cross-agency trends.

What is the nature of the CDF? There appears to be some degree of tension here. On the one hand, the CDF exists as a matrix of key cross-sectoral areas on which agencies and Southern partners must come to agreement in order to construct an integrated national development strategy. The extent to which this can be Southern-owned can be seen as limited both by what is and isn't part of the matrix and by the apparent relationship between the CDF and the IDTs.

However, this is but one reading of the CDF. In another reading, the heart of the CDF is not so much content as principles, there being four of these:

- A long-term and holistic view of development
- Country ownership of national development strategy
- Partnership with all donors and stakeholders
- An outcomes focus (World Bank 2000a).

Partnership is clearly a core element of the CDF, although it does matter quite seriously whether partnership is embedded in a set of givens in terms of content or process. In seeming to point both ways, the Bank's position may be contrasted with the IDT-oriented strategy of DFID and the values-oriented approach of Sida.

There are a range of other concerns that have been raised about the CDF, many of which relate to our earlier discussions of knowledge and partnership. As we have

already argued, the Bank's understanding of partnership appears to be weak when it comes to power and conflict. Much of the on-line discussion of the CDF idea was critical of its naivety in assuming away such problems (http://www.worldbank.org/devforum/forum_cdf2.html). For many commentators, there is nothing in the CDF that suggests it will move power away from either agencies or states and towards communities and the marginalised.

The mid term progress report (World Bank 2000a) honestly acknowledges the perception from partner countries that the CDF process is still too donor-driven and that the CDF principles seem to be undermined by the speed with which the PRSP process is taking place.⁸ However, it does not go very far in suggesting what can and will be done in these regards. Moreover, it sees having four country directors present in CDF countries as indicative of its seriousness about partnership and dialogue, rather than viewing the location of nine of them in Washington as a sign of the Bank's failure to put theory into practice. Indeed, it is hard to see why any country directors should still be in Washington given the Bank's dual commitments to partnership and decentralisation.

Knowledge, though, is not so highly stressed in the CDF documents. Whilst the Bank envisages a major knowledge capacity support element to national CDFs, this is stressed far more in GDG documents than it is in those of the CDF. As we have argued earlier, this is part of a broader failure to articulate knowledge and partnership adequately. Yet to fail so to do is to undermine both concepts.

The other area in which the CDF has been subject to questioning regards its powerful claim to represent a fundamental shift in how development is being done. Both Wolfensohn's and Stiglitz's speeches of 1998 and 1999 were replete with criticisms of past practice in development and claims that a new approach could deal with the main weaknesses. The CDF's first principle is that it is long-term and holistic. However, both of these claims have been subject to critique. First, the long-term nature of any CDF commitment, it is argued, has to be tempered by the continuation of short-term disbursement pressures (not just in the Bank) which can undermine process in the rush to outcomes. Second, the notion of holism has been widely rejected. For many critics, as expressed in the CDF on-line discussion, holism represents a fundamentally different way of thinking from the Enlightenment paradigm in which notions of development and progress are firmly situated. Whereas holism celebrates complexity, it is suggested that the CDF is about rationalising and ordering the whole of development into a manageable set of boxes. Moreover, the claim of moving away from a narrow economic vision of development notwithstanding, the sense of development contained in the CDF is still strongly economic and ignores or downplays areas such as spirituality and culture. Equally, the suggestion that the CDF will fit into existing Bank procedures (World Bank 1999) points to very real limitations to the claim that the CDF represents a radically new way of working.

⁸ Indeed, there appears to be some concern from the South that the CDF's emphasis on longer term relationship-building could be compromised by the need to develop PRSPs swiftly in order for lending to take place. Thus, this could be another example of the tendency for disbursement needs to over-ride commitments to partnership and process.

The Global Development Gateway

The Gateway is less developed than the CDF. Nonetheless, there are some important comments that can be made regarding the GDG's development to date, not least as it is currently the subject of much discussion, particularly from knowledge-oriented NGOs, including non-profit internet service providers.

At the heart of the GDG vision is the need to make ICTs servants of development, and of poverty reduction in particular. There is also an explicit link made to the CDF, national gateways being piloted in some of the CDF pilot countries with a view to expanding this quite rapidly to all CDF countries. The origins of the GDG are somewhat more shrouded than those of the CDF but there is a strong impression that this too is a Wolfensohnian project, with early comments on it talking of an alliance between him and Bill Gates, although the Microsoft branding is not apparent in what has developed thus far.

There are very serious external concerns about the GDG. Many existing development knowledge providers, both North and South, feel that it is over-ambitious, duplicative of existing initiatives and likely to lead to excessive World Bank influence over what is accepted as useful development knowledge.

In early formulations, the project was explicitly a World Bank owned one in which others could join a consortium but where the senior management would be Wolfensohn's appointees (World Bank 2000b). Later formulations talk of an independent foundation being set up (World Bank 2000c). However, this is highly contentious for a number of reasons. First, the view from NGO critics is that the Bank has been going ahead with decisions about content and editorial policy (reflected on a World Bank branded pilot site) before dealing with the prior issue of governance. Second, there is considerable NGO unhappiness at what they perceive as the mismanagement and distortion of the rather unsystematic consultation process to date. Third, they are unhappy at later documents (World Bank 2000c and d) that stress partnerships that they feel have no basis in reality. Thus, by July 2000 as an electronic consultation began on the Bellanet site⁹, a number of prominent organisations were setting a series of conditions that needed to be agreed to by the Bank before they would be prepared to endorse the GDG in any way.

The GDG has potential to be a major site for knowledge sharing, although questions as to how conflict and control over content will be resolved will be crucial here, as will the extent of Southern knowledge presence and the Gateway's addressing of the limited possibility for Southern access to the internet, due to factors of cost and technology. However, to date the project has been extremely problematic in terms of partnership. The damage done will be hard to overcome. Moreover, the lack of transparency and appropriate process in a project so closely linked to the President could seriously undermine the Bank's efforts to improve its public image, and call into question its sincerity regarding partnership.

⁹ The discussion is archived on the Bellanet site at <http://www.bellanet.org/gdgprinciples>

The Global Development Network

The Global Development Network is the Bank's attempt to encourage better policy-related knowledge generation and better policy dialogue within the South. As such, it is an important example of a World Bank interest in facilitating non-Bank knowledge. At present, its governance structures are being developed, but it appears that the GDN will be predominantly Southern-led and oriented, with strong concerns about multiple opinions and contexts. Importantly too, the Bank has successfully brought other donors on board and has begun the process of moving the GDN to independent status.

What do the three projects tell us about the World Bank, knowledge and partnership?

All three projects mentioned above have important development aims. From the knowledge-oriented projects there is strong stated commitment to multi-directional knowledge flows and to diversity of opinion. However, questions can be raised about how decisions will be made about what is acceptable content. These can be raised in terms of the economics' bias of the GDN or the challenge of developing a large number of topic guides and content pages at both global and national level in the GDG. Whereas the GDN does seem to be moving quite successfully to independence from the Bank, there remain major concerns about ownership of the GDG. Issues of ownership and control also link the knowledge projects to the debate about the CDF. It is far from clear whether the CDF is primarily about a new process of partnership for development or about a set of outcomes over which Southern "partners" have questionable control. Moreover, a recurrent criticism of both the Gateway and the CDF is that they are unrealistically ambitious in their scope and speed and, hence, likely impact.

DEVELOPMENT

The emerging accounts about partnership and knowledge frame and shape the Bank's notion of development and cooperation in important ways. We have suggested in the introduction that the sheer volume of new writing and initiatives from the agencies is indicative of a shift in the development paradigm. However, there is a need to explore this further.

Are the policy and project initiatives of the World Bank indicative of the emergence of a new approach to development cooperation?

There are good reasons to think so. The focus on knowledge, and to a lesser extent on partnership, can be seen as directly linked to arguments that we have entered into a new phase of economic organisation globally where knowledge and its networking is at the core of competitiveness and development. At the level of development cooperation discourse, notions of partnership, knowledge and coordination have emerged in the last five years or so to provide a new range of concepts and understandings. At the level

of practice, the CDF, GDN and GDG can be seen alongside the trend towards SWAPs as pointing to a new way of working. New actors such as the EU and the DAC have gained greater influence on the development cooperation process with potentially powerful implications. There has been a huge amount of policy development across a range of agencies.

At a more theoretical level, there are significant signs too of a new understanding of development emerging. The Bank's knowledge account at its most theoretical is closely linked to new social theory approaches that seek to go beyond the Enlightenment search for universal rationality and its development manifestations of linear progress towards economic goals. Thinking of this kind stresses processes over outcomes. Holism is highlighted that goes beyond just adding in some social content to seeing the relationships between parts and the whole in a very different light that stresses trans-sectoral thinking and action. The spiritual and the moral are affirmed and the need for sustainability to be at the core not the periphery of thinking. Complexity, non-linearity and context become important concepts that point to the weaknesses of conventional development thinking and stress the need to eschew simple causalities and universally applicable theories. Such notions are not the stuff of agency discourse. Nonetheless, there are a range of points at which agency texts do converge with such ideas.

Notwithstanding this argument for a new way of thinking and working within and beyond agencies, it is also possible to argue as plausibly that much has not changed and that "business as usual" exists alongside new approaches. There is a strong NGO critique of the Bank in particular that sees it as having simply disguised its continued Neo-liberalism behind a new façade (Martin 2000, Wood 2000). In this view, Stiglitz's stress of context and his critique of adjustment (Stiglitz 1998) amount to an argument about the means of development according to the orthodox views of the Bank, not the goals.

There are tensions too regarding the relative importance of outcomes and processes. The Bank, necessarily, is committed to both but we have argued that it is unclear as to what extent the agency has moved to a focus on the single goal of poverty reduction alongside a strong concern for country ownership of development or has remained focused on a longer list of non-negotiable outcomes.

Our brief view of the Bank also suggests that it, like other organisations, is struggling to make its thinking sufficiently coherent. There is still a very strong sense of projects and some of these seem to be too closely linked to the President to allow for critical analysis from within the Bank.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper, we have highlighted a range of major efforts by the Bank to improve the practice of development. In the area of knowledge for development, the Bank is a clear leader in terms of both applied theory and practice. Moreover, the CDF has the potential to have the biggest impact on country ownership and agency

coordination of any current activity of any agency. However, our paper has also highlighted a range of tensions in what the Bank says and does.

Radically different visions of knowledge for development exist and there is a large gap between theory and practice, not least because of inadequate resources and lack of cultural change within the organisation. Crucially, strategies for supporting Southern knowledge generation and use and for maximising the diversity of development knowledge are contradicted by practices in other parts of the Bank. Partnership too is a powerful theme of the Wolfensohn Presidency but its openness to diverse opinions about development priorities remains in question. Whilst some tensions are inevitable in such a large organisation, a number of those we highlight could have very significant impacts on the performance of the World Bank, of its Southern partners, and of development cooperation as a whole.

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