

Must the World Bank have Official Views?

David Ellerman, World Bank*

February 2000

Introduction

The Bank spends much time and effort determining its Official Views on this question or that, but there is little or no discussion of the prior question of whether or not the Bank should have Official Views in the first place. I will argue that this practice:

- impedes the open contesting of adverse opinions that is so crucial to the advancement of knowledge,
- impedes the Bank as a learning organization since the overturning of an older view is all the more difficult if it has been branded and enshrined as an Official View, and
- impedes the country being intellectually in the driver's seat (i.e., learning to apply critical reason and think for itself) since the country will inevitably be encouraged in a multitude of ways to accept an opinion because it is an Official View.

"Official Views" are defined here pragmatically from the client's perspective. When a view is presented to the client as the Bank's View, and the client is informed, explicitly or implicitly, that the project should conform to the View if the project is to be approved in Washington, then such a view is for all practical purposes an "Official View" even though one might unearth carefully worded Bank documents in Washington with footnotes expressing caveats and reservations.

The World Bank as the "Church of Development"

Our purest knowledge institutions such as universities do not have Official Views on the questions of the day. There is no official Harvard or MIT view on the controversies that rage in the natural, life, and social sciences. That was not always so. The knowledge institutions of the Middle Ages had Official Views on questions about the physical, biological, and social nature of the world. Open and critical discussion of these dogmas was hardly encouraged, there was no open "clash of adverse opinions" and no free market in ideas—and knowledge accordingly stagnated. Today the norm in universities (not always realized) and in the fields of science is a tolerance of reasoned and evidenced views without the institutions themselves taking official stands. When organizations do take stands, the results are typically dismal, e.g., the Soviet theory of genetics or the University of Utah theory of cold fusion. Science accepts nothing on authority; all claims are subjected to the test of independent replication (as the supporters of cold fusion came to appreciate to their chagrin).

When the advantages of the hard-won intellectual tolerance are so clear in the universities and scientific institutes, it is by no means clear that the Knowledge Bank should employ a somewhat older "church-

* The findings, interpretations, and views expressed in this paper are entirely those of the author and should not be taken in any manner as the official views of the World Bank, its affiliated organizations, or the members of its Board of Directors or the countries they represent.

model" of a knowledge institution by having *ex cathedra* Official World Bank Views on the exceedingly difficult and subtle questions of economic development.

But it will be said that the Bank Views are not dogma; they are based on evidence and well-reasoned arguments. Very well, then state the evidence and the well-reasoned arguments to the client country so that the client can make a more informed judgment. What is added of *scientific value* by calling it the "Official World Bank View"? Isn't that an attempt to short-circuit the client's judgment in favor of accepting the View based on authority? Does it improve the evidence to make the view Official? Does that sharpen the reasoning? Far from it. Often the citation of the evidence to the client is slighted since, after all, it is the Bank View. Often the reasoning is perfunctory since, after all, it is the Bank View. The client should take it on authority or faith that the Bank would not have that View if there was not sufficient evidence or well-reasoned arguments. Why waste time and energy gilding the lily?

The Bank does the intellectual research and quality control to determine the Bank's View, and thus the client is saved the trouble of learning to sift evidence, reasoning through possible alternative policies, and thinking for itself. All that has already been done by the experts at the Bank, so why duplicate efforts when the needs of development are so pressing? The project managers support listening and learning—so long as the clients are listening to and learning the Right Policies. Any genuinely self-directed learning process with the client country in the driver's seat might take a wrong turn and veer off in the wrong direction which the project manager could not support. It would conflict with the Bank's View. The gardener wants only her own seeds to grow; all else are weeds.

In the client countries, the best learners are the ones who show their special ability not by stubbornly asking critical questions or seeking alternative views but by quickly picking up and parroting the Main Messages. They reap the rewards of this Learning by thus becoming the gatekeepers for the flow of Bank resources into the country. As the clients receive operent conditioning to appreciate the Bank Views, they become cognitively dependent on this source of intellectual nourishment. After this negative reinforcement against the "thinking for oneself" or "being in the driver's seat," the clients experience cognitive dissonance and distress when they hear mixed messages from the Bank. Of course, parents may argue and doctors may "war" but not in front of the children or patients! To reduce such distress in the cognitively dependent clients, the Bank should publicly express only the One Best Way. The complexities of the development process are so large that the Bank should not add to the clients' distress by allowing its experts to disagree in public. That would only put the clients in the unaccustomed position of having to think for themselves and make up their own minds.

But it will be said that the Bank is not some academic debating society; the Bank has to "put its money where its mouth is" by funding projects based on certain assumptions. Once the Bank has committed significant resources to certain assumptions, then it is time to fall in line, play for the Home Team, and support the funded assumptions. This sort of argument is one of the marvels of bureaucratic reason. It is obvious why individual project managers and their superiors would like a funded project assumption to be treated as "gospel" but those are not reasons why the whole institution should take such a stand. Theories are corroborated by evidence, not by the commitment of funds. Many businesses have come to grief because managers would not revisit strategies after initial costs were sunk. In view of the record

of international development aid, there is little support for the similar practice of seeing project assumptions as hardening into gospel once funds are committed.

But it will be said that every customer cannot run his or her own testing laboratory. Some things have to be bought on the basis of certification by experts and reputation. The Bank globally scans for best practices which are backed up by fundamental research drawing on the best that the social sciences (usually Economics) have to offer. When the Bank puts its brand-name and reputation on the line by adopting an Official View, then the clients are saved the trouble of duplicating these costly efforts. The product has been highly vetted by the best in the field, otherwise the Bank would not put its brand-name on it. Of course, it is then incumbent on the Bank to get it right the first time, since learning would involve public admission of error and would thus be all the more painful. No company works to devalue its own brand-name so any adverse evidence that might entail a change in the View is not particularly encouraged. Researchers need to be sound and responsible team players.

The Knowledge Bank with less tutelage and more listening

The Bank could take a page out of the experience of universities and scientific institutes and not attach its brand-name to particular views. But that would shift the onus of thinking and decision-making to the clients who could no longer just choose according to brand-name. The clients would have to do some of their own research and take responsibility for and ownership of their choices. But lacking the expertise and scientific resources of the Bank, the clients might end up making sub-optimal decisions. Shouldn't we make sure that our clients get the Right Views? Even though the Bank's Views may be imperfect, they are based on the best evidence and research to date—so shouldn't they be taught to the clients? Shouldn't the Knowledge Bank be a teacher or disseminator of Development Knowledge?

There are very different types of "teaching." If the teaching takes the form of core course catechisms, then learning is probably inversely proportional to such "teaching." George Bernard Shaw quipped: "if you teach a man anything he will never learn it." Ortega y Gasset suggested: "He who wants to teach a truth should place us in the position to discover it ourselves." Genuine learning (with ownership of the learnings) presupposes that the learner is in the driver's seat actively re-appropriating the knowledge.

Yet the default pedagogy that unfortunately is the theory-in-use in much of the Knowledge Bank (regardless of the espoused theory) is that the Bank has the knowledge and then transmits or disseminates it to the clients. Even if the Bank has the right knowledge—and that is no small "if"—it is the wrong pedagogy to try to "transmit" it to the clients. The Bank needs to play more the role of the Socratic guide and midwife to strengthen the powers of critical thought and independent inquiry in the clients and to promote the clients' own self-directed learning program—so the clients will discover appropriate knowledge themselves. Then the knowledge is locally owned as well as automatically adapted to local conditions. The Bank's penchant to transmit Official Views in catechisms does not help this learning process; in fact it hurts the process of autonomous learning on the part of the clients by promoting, implicitly if not explicitly, tutelage and belief based on authority.

For the Knowledge Bank to promote active learning rather than passive tutelage, the message to the clients would be something like this.

To the best of our accumulated experience (which we deem to call "knowledge"), here is what works best in countries like yours. Why don't you study these principles together with their corroboration to date (best practice success stories), take a look at these case studies, contact these people who designed those reforms, set up horizontal learning programs with those best practice cases, and try some experiments to see what works in your own country? After carrying out this learning process on your own, you might call us back if you feel we could help by partially but not wholly funding the reform program you have decided upon.

To impose a model based on the Bank's View (or even "best opinion") without this local learning process would be to "short-circuit" and bypass the active learning capability of the local policy-makers, to substitute "authority" in its place, and thus to perpetuate the passivity of tutelage.

The key to development is not having Good Policies that agree with the Bank's View; it is the country's commitment to a genuine learning process to find its own reform programs. Indeed, if the country just parrots the Good Policies in order to receive positive reinforcement from the Bank, then there is no real commitment to self-directed learning to arrive at a locally-owned reform program. Parroting does not count even though it is always implicitly encouraged by Bank's promotion of its Official View. In such a sycophantic case, the Bank should not commit resources in spite of the outward display of undying adherence to Good Policies.

But suppose the country does get in the driver's seat, undertakes a genuine learning process, and then arrives at results at odds with the Bank's View. Then instead of retreating in horror at the country's apostasy, the Bank should suggest a commitment to mutual learning. Both the country and the Bank should commit to certain experiments and pilot projects, and they should agree ahead of time on the sort of indicators and results that would lead the country or the Bank or both to modify and nuance their views. That process of listening and learning would be much facilitated if the Bank had not previously invested its prestige in an Official View, if it instead maintained some Socratic "ignorance" about such complex and subtle matters, and if it abandoned tutelage in favor of the country taking over the driver's seat in the process of development learning.