International NGOs and the World Bank: Brave New Global Governance?

In 1998, Jonathan Fox and David Brown argued in their influential book, *The Struggle for Accountability*, that transnational advocacy networks had proven themselves capable of changing the way the World Bank approached development assistance[1]. They found that a loose, interactive group of civil society actors ('Southern' and 'Northern/International' NGOs) and small numbers of Bank and donor officials, had provided the evidence, ideas and encouragement for donors such as the United States to pressure the World Bank to move away from environmentally and socially hazardous projects. As a result, the Bank adopted project safeguards, established the Inspection Panel to determine accountability when those safeguards weren't met, and withdrew its support from environmentally-disastrous projects such as the Arun III hydroelectric dam in Nepal.

Fox and Brown, and a multitude of other authors in that period, highlighted the power of global networks (often, but not always, focused on advocacy) to shape discourse and, through that, exert policy influence over states and multilateral organisations. Such networks might emerge within sectors, around specific issues or cases, or within geographic confines. Such was the power of the network, as metaphor if nothing else, that the World Bank itself got in on the act by establishing the Global Development Network in 1999 as part of its re-branding as 'the knowledge bank', having already been a major player in the establishment of the network-like Global Environment Facility.

Most analysts of the global, or transnational, network phenomenon as it related to the World Bank came from development studies or international relations, and they made assumptions about networks that were not mirrored in domestic public policy theorising. For example, there was a tendency to see networks as being relatively open, in the sense that any legitimate public actor or organisation with an interest in a sector/issue/area could get a seat at a network 'table'. The relationship between networks and markets and private sector actors was often left unclear, although philanthropic actors (in later analyses) were regarded as having a role to play. There was often too little appreciation of the existence of both 'closed' or 'elite' networks and also 'managed networks' – those created and controlled by governments or multilateral organisations and displaying a mix of hierarchical, market and network governance. Given the nature of foreign policy making, which is generally closed, elite-driven, and – where networked interaction does exist – highly managed, it is surprising that greater problematising of these assumptions did not occur.

In the absence of global public policy thinking (Di Stone's work being a notable exception) that acknowledged the nuance domestic public policy theory brought to issues such as networks, partnerships and alliances, it was all too easy for development policy analysts to lean toward boosterism in their assessment of what new approaches toward global governance might bring. Networks were regarded as challenging both statist interpretations of international relations and the policy insularity of international organisations, perhaps leading toward a form of global governance that re-constructed our understanding of development policy formation and decision-making. Some of the more hopeful predictions envisaged a future where advocacy networks would evolve into a form of participatory policy making, where genuine policy *partnerships*, if not democratic processes, might emerge between civil society and development actors such as the World Bank. This was a form of corporatism, but one where key players, the civil society organisations, had claims to legitimacy via their representation of the 'voices' of the unempowered, and their associated attempt to hold agencies such as the World Bank to account.

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One result of this explosion of interest in networks was a marked increase in the academic attention paid to International NGOs (INGOs). As intermediaries, sometimes described as 'nodes', linking North and South civil society groups together, and also connecting those actors with sympathetic agents within international organizations and donor governments, INGOs were regarded as key players in foreign aid policy 'sub-systems'. Queries persisted among academics (most notably Edwards and Hulme) and within INGOs themselves as to how close a partnership between NGOs and governments and multilateral organisations was desirable, but the promise of network-based influence remained strong.

Ten years on from Fox and Brown, did the brave new global governance future in development assistance come to pass? In the case of the World Bank, did the transnational advocacy networks of the early to mid-1990s lead to partnerships based on 'critical cooperation' between the Bank and INGOs, and, through INGOs, civil society in developing countries, and did this lead altered development policy formation?

One thing that is without doubt is that, over the past decade, the rhetoric of networks and, especially, 'partnership' has become all-pervasive in public governance and commercial discourse. Private firms, under the rubric of corporate social responsibility, trumpet the benefits of forming cooperative relationships with social welfare NGOs, and even in some cases development INGOs. The eighth United Nations Millennium Development Goal is to 'develop a global partnership for development'. And while Oxfam Great Britain talks about improving its partnerships, often with Southern 'partners', being an organisational priority (Oxfam GB 2007), the World Bank declares that it places 'partnerships among governments, civil society, and the private sector at the centre of policy design and development planning.' (World Bank 2007, 1) Indicative that the Bank may be appropriating and, sometimes, manipulating this rhetoric is its characterisation of its recent Country Systems Approach to safeguard implementation, that transfers responsibility for safeguard assessment over to borrower countries, and, in effect, downgrading it, in terms of partnerships with governments and local communities.

Despite this profusion of rhetoric, there continues to be too little detailed analysis into whether international network-oriented relationships involving INGOs and multilateral actors such as the World Bank are actually 'partnerships', or are instead alliances, collaborations, 'managed networks' or simply forms of cooption disguised by participatory rhetoric. What has emerged, however, is a growing body of literature on whether or not the networks emerging in global development are open or closed and elitist, with analysts, often in response to the 2002 manifesto, *High Noon*, of Jean-François Rischard, the Bank's vice-president for Europe, arguing the latter.

What is less clear is the answer to the question, 'who is influencing who?' Susan Park (2005) argues that advocacy networks have been one, crucial step in a longer, constructivist process of norm consumption, then diffusion, by the World Bank, in relation to acknowledging the environmental costs of the economic growth model. Jonathan Murphy (2005) is less sanguine, finding that civil society, and especially INGO elites that become members of networks involving the Bank, are as likely to yield to the 'disciplinary power' of the Bank's development models as challenge them; Foucault would have appreciated the potential of the 'knowledge Bank'.

Closer encounters between INGOs and the Bank, where something approaching a 'partnership' is envisaged, have proved to be rarer than might have been expected ten years ago. The experience of Oxfam Australia/Community Aid Abroad in Timor Leste, where it acted as project manager on, and was promised input into the design of, the Bank-instigated Community Empowerment Project, highlights why many INGO managers, if not their CEOs, remain wary of engagement with the Bank. In that case, the World Bank insisted on the wholesale application of its Indonesian community empowerment design (the Kecamatan Development Project) to Timor, insisted on disbursement targets and financial administration requirements that matched its own operational needs, and then attempted to micro-manage the project roll-out. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the quasi-partnership between Oxfam and the Bank on this program lasted only a year. Other INGOs, most notable Care International, have fulfilled discrete contracts with the Bank, but there is little evidence of expanded partnerships or 'critical cooperation' where the Bank's policies and procedures are challenged.

The promise of an expanded notion of global governance in international development, with INGOs playing key 'connecting' roles between local civil societies and donors and multilateral organisations, remains unfulfilled. The

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capacity of INGOs to exert influence over World Bank policy remains unclear. And it remains uncertain whether further efforts by INGOs to engage with the Bank in order to extend this influence will improve their being able to answer the questions: Who do you represent? How do you represent them?

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