

Disciplinary Monopolies in Development Research: A Response to the Research Evaluation Process

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The World Bank's research was recently evaluated by a committee – consisting entirely of academic economists – that provided several important and timely recommendations in its assessment of the World Bank's research.² But it did not make what we consider a more fundamental critique. Namely, that development is about a lot more than economics, and that, accordingly, economics should not have (as it currently does at the Bank) a near-monopoly on determining the content and validity of development research. This point has been addressed (albeit briefly) in Sir Nicholas Stern's comments on the Evaluation Report, but it warrants further consideration.

Development is a diverse field speaking to virtually every aspect of human endeavor, and the core elements of this diversity should be reflected in the training of the Bank's research staff and the content of its research agenda. No single discipline can or should expect to be able to speak in an informed way to this diversity, yet at present all but a handful of the Bank's 83 full-time research staff are economists. Like any other discipline, economics is limited in its ability to understand questions. This applies, we would argue, to issues within its domain, but is more especially true of issues outside its domain. While economists have made a lot of progress in recent years to understand key issues like institutions, collective action and politics, the vast majority of non-economist social scientists (and indeed many economists) would argue that areas of social, cultural and political action are best studied by the other social sciences who specialize in these topics, namely anthropology, sociology, political science and psychology. Development studies is an important area of research in the non-economic social sciences that has, over the years, provided key insights into areas that are of fundamental importance to the Bank, such as governance, participatory development, understanding well-being, and culture. As several influential scholars have shown (most prominently Scott 1998³), development policy ignores these ideas at its peril. This oversight is especially unfortunate as the Bank finds itself becoming increasingly concerned with issues of governance, local development, and institution building.

¹ We thank Martin Ravallion for valuable comments.

² The *Report* we refer to is "An Evaluation of World Bank Research, 1998-2005," September 2006. The *Report* was written by a panel comprising Abhijit Banerjee, Angus Deaton (Chair), Nora Lustig and Ken Rogoff. On the evaluation of Bank research on poverty, the Panel was assisted by Esther Duflo, Murray Leibbrandt and Martin Wittenberg. The report can be found at:
<http://econ.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTDEC/EXTRESEARCH/0,,contentMDK:21165468~menuPK:598503~pagePK:64165401~piPK:64165026~theSitePK:469382,00.html>.

³ James Scott (1998) *Seeing Like a State: How Well-Intentioned Efforts to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* New Haven: Yale University Press

A fundamental problem with DECRG, the Bank's internal think-tank, is that less than five per cent of its researchers have substantial training and interest in the non-economic social sciences. This creates a kind of disciplinary monopoly; as such, development policy at the Bank tends to reflect the fads, fashions, controversies and debates of one discipline. (Which is ironic, since a core tenet of economic policy is to point out the collective benefits that accrue from the absence of monopolies and barriers to trade.) The strengths and limitations of economics are mirrored in its policy prescriptions: on some issues (e.g., fiscal crises, assessing broad project impacts) it is clearly best placed to provide key policy advice, but on others (e.g., culture, process evaluations, group dynamics, conflict) it has little comparative advantage. Competing perspectives from other disciplines are simply not available to refute (or endorse) the economists' viewpoint or to provide other key insights that are simply absent from the tool kit of economists (or are precluded, by the prevailing assumptions, from even being considered).

This also affects the Bank's disciplinary demography. Over the years, generations of economists who have been recruited by the Bank have created an argot within the Bank that is closely aligned with the argot of economics, which in turn creates high entry costs for other disciplines. Competing perspectives cannot enter without translation, which dilutes their clarity and effectiveness; this, in turn, only reinforces the (often disdainful) views of economists regarding the rigor and relevance of other social science disciplines, thereby creating a vicious circle. This circle needs to be replaced by a more virtuous one, in which disciplines respect one another's expertise and seek to find constructive ways of integrating and learning from one another for the betterment of development theory, policy and practice.

Another unhappy consequence of the economist's disciplinary monopoly at the Bank is that DEC's vital quality-control role suffers. Many departments in the Bank, for example, purport to produce social science from a non-economics perspective to satisfy their agendas and constituencies, but the relative absence of non-economists within DEC makes it difficult for DECRG researchers to play the role of internal referees, a task which they routinely do for economic analysis produced from within the Bank. Moreover, as the Bank finds itself (rightly) expanding into non-economic realms, it is a challenging (sometimes overwhelming) task for the 4 non-economists within DECRG to provide the detailed level of oversight and advice required to check the imperative that all institutions face to produce work to justify agendas. Consequently, the non-economics analytical work within the Bank suffers, and does not – at least as often as it should – reflect the “best practice” (with respect to content or methodology) of work within those disciplines.

Further evidence of the disciplinary monopoly is the fact that no non-economists were asked to assess the Bank's research program, let alone the research that has been done from a non-economics perspective. Given that about 5% of DECRG staff are non-economists, perhaps one of the twenty evaluators could have been a sociologist or anthropologist? It shouldn't have to be a radical suggestion that economists assess the work of economists, sociologists the work of sociologists, etc, yet we ended up with a committee largely comprised of elite academic economists, who, with all due respect, have limited knowledge of what serious policy/operational work actually entails and, with a couple of notable exceptions, little knowledge of (or sympathy for) other disciplines.

This is not to say that economists cannot be sympathetic or informed readers of work in neighboring disciplines. The evaluator of the largely non-economic and inter-disciplinary body of work on community development, for instance, demonstrates an appreciation for the particular virtues and rigors of qualitative work, and cross-disciplinary thinking. On the other hand, the evaluator of the edited volume *Culture and Public Action* dismisses the authors in the volume – with the exception of Amartya Sen and Mary Douglas – as “quite unknown people”. Without going into the issue of whether an “unknown” scholar is incapable of good research, the reviewer has, with that pejorative phrase, devalued contributions from one of the world’s premier social theorists (Arjun Appadurai), UNESCO’s leading anthropologist (Lourdes Arizpe), and influential heterodox economists such as Arjo Klamer, Timur Kuran and Jean-Philippe Plateau. She also tells us that the book is not relevant to Bank policy – a point refuted by nine positive reviews in leading development studies, economics, and anthropology journals, and a column by David Brooks in the *New York Times*, who like it primarily because it makes a compelling case for an alternative approach towards policy-making⁴. The reviewer’s critique does not at all engage with the substance of the book. It is more of a rhetorical put-down that seems to emerge from disciplinary arrogance, and the only inference one can draw from it is that policy formulations that do not come from her world-view have little or no validity.

Of course, reasonable people can have differing views on what constitutes good development research – and the reviewer is entitled to her point of view. But as the reviewer has often (correctly) argued in her own research, a formal evaluation requires an element of objectivity to be useful. This evaluation – which is an aggregation of single-person assessments of entire bodies of work – is a highly subjective exercise whose claim to legitimacy is based on the assertion of the eminence of the reviewers. But, imagine the fuss that would be made if a journal sent articles submitted to it to just one referee; that fuss would be even greater if that referee was assessing work outside her own area of expertise. And it would be resoundingly loud if that referee was assessing work that was, at heart, a critique of her world-view. It is strange – to say the least – for someone whose work is critical of a particular disciplinary perspective to be judged by a person who exemplifies the perspective that is being critiqued.

The lesson here is that by picking evaluators of a certain stripe, senior management has strongly signaled, perhaps inadvertently, that we should be trying to emulate these evaluators. We think this is a fundamental problem. More constructively, and moving forward, we hope that one outcome of this process is that we (researchers at the Bank) maintain our high scholarly output and reputation while continuing to:

- (a) Expand the number of staff in DECRG with substantial interest and training in the non-economic social sciences.
- (b) Learn from, and engage with, alternatives to the dominant views in development research and policy.
- (c) Speak to the broad range of areas in which the Bank now works, which is crucial if the Bank is to continue to identify and support more effective solutions to global poverty.

⁴ The reviewer also asserts that the book does not have the “standing that would lead to it being assigned in class.” A simple Google search reveals about 40 classes in various universities around the world, including a few economics courses, which have been assigned chapters from the book. This, of course, does not include the syllabi that have not been posted on the web.

- (d) Build on ideas drawn on interacting directly with operations, something we should be promoting, not apologizing for, when seeking to recruit new staff—it is not the “tax” we pay for doing the research we want to do, but the very precondition which gives us our jobs at the Bank, while hopefully also providing a truly unique source of new ideas and/or a "real world" corrective to (support for) ones we’ve cooked up in our offices.

In short, as in the world of goods and services, the world of development ideas and evidence should be characterized by diversity, free trade and equitable competition, not monopolies, high barriers to entry, and disdain for others who do things “differently”. Development problems rarely map neatly or obviously onto a single discipline; accordingly, the diversity of DEC’s research staff and the content of its research agenda should be such that it can to respond most effectively and imaginatively to those problems.