The Disciplinary Monopoly in Development Research at the World Bank
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The World Bank's internal think tank, the Development Research Group (DECRG),[1] is virtually unmatched in terms of the volume, quality, and impact of its work on development issues. Among other things, its staff publish in the most prestigious scholarly and applied journals; they help produce, analyze, and disseminate the household surveys used to determine whether global poverty is rising or falling; they work closely with client counterparts around the world to help establish datasets enabling policies to be designed and programs to be placed on the basis of a comprehensive evidence base; and they design rigorous assessments to discern the impacts of development policies and projects. For all these important accomplishments and contributions, however, it falls short of its potential. By promoting economics as the sole lens through which to understand and respond to the development process, it restricts what is studied, delimits how those issues are analyzed, and thereby offers clients an unnecessarily narrow menu of policy options and strategies. In short, it has established a monopoly on development research, with most of the attendant distortions that economists, ironically enough, associate with monopolies.

Let us begin by stating the obvious: development is a diverse field speaking to virtually every aspect of human endeavor. As such, one might expect the core elements of this diversity to 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 (or be expected) to be able to speak in an informed way to this diversity, yet at present all but a handful of the Bank's 100+ research staff are economists.[2]. Like any other discipline, economics is limited in its ability to pose and understand questions. This applies, we would argue, to issues within its domain, but it is more especially true of issues outside its domain. While economists have made a lot of progress in recent years in understanding key issues like institutions, collective action, and politics, the vast majority of noneconomist social scientists (and indeed many economists) would argue that areas of social, cultural, and political action are best studied by the social sciences that specialize (and thus have a "comparative advantage") in these topics—namely, anthropology, sociology, political science, and psychology. Development studies, for example, is an important area of research in the noneconomic 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, the understanding of well-being, and culture. As several influential scholars have shown,[3] 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.

This state of affairs in DECRG both reflects and perpetuates a disciplinary monopoly that manifests itself in the fact that development policy at the Bank tends to reflect the fads, fashions, controversies, and debates of one discipline. (This is deeply 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, assessment of 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, for that matter, endorse) the economists' viewpoint or to provide other key insights that are simply absent from the toolkit of economists (or are precluded—by the prevailing assumptions, priority setting procedures, and resource allocation mechanisms—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 DECRG's vital quality-control role suffers. Many departments in the Bank, for example, purport to produce social science from a noneconomics perspective to satisfy their agendas and constituencies, but the relative absence of noneconomists within the Development Economics

Vice Presidency (DEC) makes it difficult for DECRG researchers to play the role of internal referees, a task they routinely perform for economic analysis produced from within the Bank. Moreover, as the Bank finds itself (rightly) expanding into noneconomic realms, it is a challenging (sometimes overwhelming) task for the 3.5 noneconomists 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 quality of the noneconomics 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. Those ostensibly representing the "social perspective" on development face strong organizational imperatives to generate "products"[4] with clear "operational relevance" to justify their existence; occupying a marginal position within the Bank more generally, they have responded to these pressures by tending to hire staff with backgrounds as practitioners rather than social researchers (indeed, even many of the senior staff in the Social Development Department do not have PhD-level training in a noneconomics social science). Not surprisingly, when the moment inevitably presents itself for an intellectual showdown between themselves and the economists (most of whom have PhDs in economics from elite universities) on questions of theory, methods, and evidence, they routinely lose. Unhelpful stereotypes are reinforced, and a painful cycle endlessly repeats itself.

A prime example of the disciplinary monopoly in action is the disciplinary insularity that guided the recent major evaluation of the World Bank's research.[5] Not a single noneconomist was asked to assess the Bank's research program, let alone the research that had been done from a noneconomics perspective. One might not unreasonably have expected the committee membership to have at least vaguely approximated the disciplines represented in the department, as well as some of the primary users of our research. It shouldn't have to be a radical suggestion that economists assess the work of economists, sociologists the work of sociologists, etc., yet the committee was composed almost exclusively of elite academic economists, most of whom, with all due respect, have limited knowledge of what serious policy/operational work actually entails and, with a couple of notable exceptions, even less 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 noneconomic and interdisciplinary body of work on community development, for instance, demonstrates a keen appreciation for the particular virtues and rigors of qualitative work and cross-disciplinary thinking. But the evaluator of the edited volume *Culture and Public Action*,[6] a young development economist who is considered a star in the field, dismisses the contributors to the volume—with the exception of Amartya Sen and Mary Douglas—as "unknowns." Without going into the issue of whether an "unknown" scholar is incapable of good research, the reviewer has, with that pejorative term, 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 policy, a point refuted by nine positive reviews in leading development studies, economics, and anthropology journals, and a feature article by a *New York Times* columnist, all who praise it primarily because it makes a compelling case for an alternative approach to policymaking. The reviewer's critique therefore does not 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 worldview have little or no validity.

Of course, reasonable people can have differing views on what constitutes good development research; the reviewer is entitled to her point of view. The 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. Evaluating a body of research in social sciences necessarily requires a large element of subjectivity, and we are not sure that an alternative method would have been better. Indeed, there are several points made by the evaluation team with which we are in substantial agreement. Imagine the fuss, however, 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 worldview. 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 DECRG researchers 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:
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1. Expand the number of staff in DECRG with substantial interest and training in the noneconomic social sciences.
2. Learn from, and engage with, alternatives to the dominant views in development research and policy.
3. 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. Build on ideas drawn on through interacting directly with World Bank operations, which provides a truly unique source of new ideas and/or a "real world" corrective to (support for) ones researchers have cooked up in their offices.

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 the World Bank’s research staff and the content of its research agenda should be such that it can respond most effectively and imaginatively to those problems.

Notes

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[1] During the terms of Joseph Stiglitz and Nicholas Stern as chief economist, the name of the research department was changed to the Development Research Group (from the Development Economics Research Group) to signal its openness to noneconomics points of view. However, in recent years, this usage seems to have gradually disappeared, and most DEC staff, except for a few holdouts, have reverted to using the old name. In some respects, this represents an interesting repetition of events played out at the founding of the World Bank, which from its inception had an entity called the Research Department. By 1948, however, this name had been changed to Economics Department, though with the rise of project (as opposed to program) lending during the 1950s, as a result of the ascendance of bankers and lawyers, "the Economics Department lost its departmental status, becoming the small and underfunded Economics Staff"; see Jeffrey M. Chwieroth, "Organizational Change 'from Within': Exploring the World Bank's Early Lending Policies," mimeo, London School of Economics, Department of International Relations, 2007 (p. 21). We are not, of course, calling for a similar fate to befall today's DECRG; for our present purposes, we note only that broader political forces play a large role in determining the power and intellectual salience of a given discipline at a particular historical moment. On this, see also John Markoff and Veronica Montecinos, "The Ubiquitous Rise of Economists," *Journal of Public Policy* 19, no. 1 (1993): 37–68.

[2] World Bank research staff who have PhDs in social science disciplines other than economics are Varun Gauri (government and public policy), Monica Das Gupta (anthropology and demography), and Michael Woolcock (sociology). Vijayendra Rao has a PhD in economics but has substantive interests in anthropology and development studies. There are approximately eighty-three full-time research staff at the Bank, though at any given time there are also dozens of consultants employed to assist with various research projects. Staff outside the Research Group can and do publish in scholarly journals, though they obviously have less time, incentive, and mandate to do so.

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

[4] See David Mosse, "Social Analysis as Product Development: Anthropologists at Work in the World Bank," in Oscar Salemink, Anton van Harskamp, and Anta Kumar Giri, eds., *The Development of Religion/The Religion of Development* (Amsterdam: Eburon B V, 2005), pp.77–87.

[5] The procedures underpinning this assessment, and the documents produced as a result of it, are available at http://econ.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTDEC/0,,contentMDK:21165468~pagePK:64165401~piPK:64165026~theSitePK:469372,00.html.

[6] Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton, eds., *Culture and Public Action* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2004).