



**HAL**  
open science

# Knowledge battles at the World Bank: how institutional activists introduced the norm of participation into international development policy

Olivier Nay

► **To cite this version:**

Olivier Nay. Knowledge battles at the World Bank: how institutional activists introduced the norm of participation into international development policy. *Shaping Policy Agendas*, Edward Elgar Publishing, pp.137-161, 2020, 10.4337/9781788976992.00014 . hal-03811765

**HAL Id: hal-03811765**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03811765v1>**

Submitted on 28 Oct 2022

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## 8.

# ***Knowledge Battles at The World Bank: How Institutional Activists introduced the Norm of Participation into International Development Policy***

Published in Dolowitz David, Hadjiisky Magdaléna, Normand Romuald, eds., *International Organizations and the Globalization of Governance: Micro-Processes and Actors' Configurations*, Cheltenham, Edward, 2020: 137-162

**Olivier Nay**

University of Paris 1 - Panthéon Sorbonne

### **Abstract**

*This chapter studies the genealogy of participatory approaches at the World Bank in the late 20th century. It examines how the issue of participation initially gained traction within the organization before being turned into a policy standard for development. From a theoretical standpoint, it pays particular attention to insiders who imported and incorporated participatory ideas into the Bank's agenda.*

*The chapter is divided into three sections. The first builds upon the assumption that mounting criticism from transnational NGOs and advocacy campaigns provided a vital incentive for the Bank's agents to introduce participatory methodologies into project development. The second section concentrates on the role of "institutional activists" within the Bank. It examines how a group of social reformists promoted participatory ideas internally, with the view to dispute the economic orthodoxy of the institution. The last section focuses on the ability of these insiders to form alliances with external allies, on whom they rely to advance the issue of participation in the Bank's strategic thinking.*

*The chapter concludes that participatory ideas underwent multiple cognitive reinterpretations and adaptations as they were subject to internal knowledge-building activities.*

Over the past three decades, the idea of participation has become an internationally-established norm for public policy. At all government levels, countless participatory experiences have been designed to give a voice to groups of citizens, NGOs and so-called “civil society organizations” in decision-making processes. Participatory policy received gradual public recognition in a growing number of countries, from local projects to national programmes. Participation tools and methods circulated transnationally through multiple platforms and crossing points. Some international organizations were instrumental in the transfer of participatory ideas (Goldfrank, 2012). Social activists and advocacy groups (Mertus, 1999), and groups of international experts and practitioners specializing in public governance (Porto de Oliveira, 2017), including national experts providing technical assistance, national political elites, consulting firms and academics, also played a major role as knowledge transfer entrepreneurs (Saurugger, 2010; Petric, 2012; Bherer et al., 2017). The transnational diffusion of participatory ideas has in no way aligned or standardized participatory practice. On the contrary, such ideas have induced a great diversity of national experiences and adaptations by local authorities to take account of local circumstances (Wampler and Hartz-karp, 2012).

This chapter provides an analysis of the World Bank as a catalyst for social ideas that have given traction to the norm of participation in the international agenda for development. It seeks to describe how some of the Bank’s staff took participatory approaches on board in the 1980s and 1990s, and then contributed to the gradual recognition of participation as a global norm to be implemented in public governance reforms and project development in so-called “developing countries”. In this regard, this chapter explores the role of international organizations (IOs) as knowledge producers involved in the construction of transnational expertise. It focuses on organizational activities through which emerging ideas on participation were incorporated in the organization and shaped as a policy framework. It follows the idea that IOs act as “globalizers” (Woods, 2006) as they convey and disseminate policy ideas, and turn them into global standards to be implemented by governments in their client countries.

As IOs are vast and complex bureaucratic structures with multiple internal units, decentralized structures, and a large permanent staff, they can barely be seen as homogenous “actors” acting with consistent goals and rational choice.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, we suggest that the understanding of the World Bank’s internalization and dissemination of participatory approaches implies entering the organization. It requires analysing social and professional activities associated with the work of experts and staff involved in internal knowledge-building and decision-making. It also entails exploring practices of the many actors working in the environment of the Bank, who collaborate on a regular basis with the Bank’s bureaucrats. This perspective leads to four analytical perspectives on knowledge and power in IOs.

First, this chapter suggests that the importation of participatory ideas within the Bank cannot be reduced to a cultural process reflecting a holistic transformation of norms and values within western bureaucratic states. Ideas do not circulate as drifting objects: they enter a specific organizational setting through transactions and exchanges in which

---

<sup>1</sup> For instance, the World Bank Group (WBG) consists of five different entities, with more than 120 offices worldwide and 10,000 employees working on 12,000 projects in 189 countries (statistics from the WBG).

various groups of professionals get involved, bringing their own views, interests and expectations.

Second, this chapter supports the view that a set of ideas, once circulating within the organization, is subject to knowledge battles among groups of experts and technical agents who strive to turn abstract ideas into policy prescriptions. Depending on their professional views, which are often associated with both their specialization and with their position within the organization, groups of bureaucrats (decision-makers, managers, internal experts and researchers working as permanent staff of the organization) provide different interpretative frameworks and compete to establish a legitimate definition of the problem. Inside the organization, some groups have a vested interest in supporting emerging or disruptive ideas (what might be called “heterodox ideas”) while others tend to resist, circumvent or distort them in order to preserve prevailing norms and paradigms endorsed in the organization (what might be called “the orthodoxy”).

Third, this chapter argues that such transactions and exchanges transcend the boundaries of the organization itself, as some “external” actors working on a daily basis with the Bank’s staff may be enrolled in “internal” discussions on policy standards. Therefore, attention should be paid to the “ecosystem of the Bank”<sup>2</sup> rather than just its bureaucratic structure. This perspective implies exploring the professional ties between international bureaucrats and the many government agents with whom they interact (state delegates, national officials and expert networks who are accountable to the main shareholders of the Bank, as well as those working in client countries). It also entails exploring collusive transactions and professional networks bringing together the Bank’s staff with a wide variety of knowledge actors working for/in contact with the Bank (such as NGO leaders, opinion leaders, academics, researchers, independent experts, private consultants, individual practitioners, think tankers, and journalists).

Fourth, while focusing on transactions in the context of the World Bank, we suggest that ideas are not stable during circulation processes. Rather, ideas are subject to successive reframing before they are shaped into a consensual definition that is made public. They endure multiple interpretations and acclimatization processes from units and professional teams competing for influence over the agenda of the organization. Therefore, ideas experience considerable change before they get framed as a policy standard.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> In this article, the ecosystem refers to the professional and social worlds that develop within the context of the organization. The Bank’s ecosystem is made up of interconnected professional networks, communities or smaller groups involving the Bank’s staff (and internal bureaucratic units) and the many actors (individual or collective) who operate in the immediate environment of the Bank. The notion provides a conceptual framework for understanding professional interdependencies, daily interactions and, in this paper, the circulation of policy ideas across the organization’s boundaries. It encourages the study of interdependencies between the Bank’s internal units and staff activities on one hand, and the wide range of representatives, stakeholders and technical partners with whom staff work on a regular basis on the other hand (for instance experts, consultants, practitioner networks, activist organizations, NGOs, academic communities and think tanks). The notion of ecosystem also has a territorial dimension, as many actors (or organizations) in contact with the Bank have located their office near its headquarters.

<sup>3</sup> This chapter draws on material from the Bank’s historical archives (available on line and at the Bank’s headquarters in Washington DC), as well as a dozen interviews (between June 2017 and February 2018) carried out among Bank staff, independent researchers and an NGO director who worked for the Bank in the early 1990s. Some empirical cases explored in this chapter are taken from an article published in French in Nay, 2019.

This chapter focuses on three interrelated dynamics that spurred the import and circulation of participatory approaches within the World Bank. It leads to three analytical parts. The first argues that the incorporation of new ideas can be conceptualized as an adaptive and incremental response to the external pressure from NGO networks and social movements calling for change in the way loan projects for development were designed and implemented. It builds on the assumption that pressures emerging in the environment of the international financial institutions were key incentives for the Bank's staff to consider new methodologies in project development. The second part shows that such external incentives cannot be appropriately captured without concentrating on the role of "institutional activists" acting as knowledge entrepreneurs within the Bank. In particular, it examines how social scientists and reformist decision-makers imported new ideas on the inclusion of the poor in project development, with the aim of disputing the prevailing economic-centred orthodoxy of the Bank. The last part focuses on the capacity of these insiders to bring "external allies" into the Bank's knowledge-building activities so as to advance the cause of social participation in strategic thinking on good governance and public sector reforms.

## **PRESSURE FOR CHANGE: THE WORLD BANK FACING GLOBAL CAMPAIGNS FOR PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT**

In the discourse of transnational NGOs, as in the official historiography of the World Bank, the early 1990s is often described as being a turning point in the way international donors and their technical agencies designed and developed their assistance policies. During this period, participatory ideas met with rapid success. Reforms advocated by international financial institutions included targets to make development aid more "inclusive" and empower the poor. This led to increased use of new methods and tools to involve local communities more widely in the preparation, implementation and evaluation of development projects. Arguments in favour of "popular participation" and "community participation" gained legitimacy among development professionals. As explained in the second part of this chapter, some experts of the World Bank were already familiar with these perspectives.

This 1990s were notable for the first protest movements in major international conferences (Khagram et al., 2002), especially those discussing sustainable development and human rights (Clark, 2001). Activist NGOs organized themselves into transnational coalitions in order to put pressure on governments and international institutions (Burgerman, 2001). They demanded to take part in major policy discussions that were considered to have been "confiscated" by expert networks connected to bilateral donors and their technical agencies. They also called for better recognition of local knowledge and the deepening of participatory schemes to better involve local communities, women and the poor in project development. In retrospect, the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 and the Beijing World Conference on Women in 1995 are often considered as being watershed events for the mobilization of transnational NGO coalitions taking a stand to support bottom-up approaches in development policy.

The growing pressure from activist organizations prompted debates within international development institutions from the early 1990s onwards. The World Bank was one of the first institutions to set up a working group on participation. It was called

the Learning Group on Participatory Development<sup>4</sup> (hereafter referred as to the Learning Group). A few years later, the Learning Group published a “flagship report” (*The World Bank and Participation, 1994*) justifying the Bank’s shift towards participatory development. During the same period, the EU, the OECD and the UNDP were taking participation on board as a cross-cutting issue in their agendas. They published their first reference documents supporting greater participation of “civil society organizations” at all levels of government decisions.<sup>5</sup>

However, this article proposes to consider a longer period going back to the early 1980s, in order to understand how the idea of participation gradually became a legitimate policy issue for international institutions. It is also essential to pay particular attention to the microsociological processes in order to understand the inception phase.

Very early on, social movement studies (SMS) scholars became interested in strategies for collective action within the framework of international institutions. Several studies chart the rise of social movements and advocacy coalitions which, from the late 1970s onwards, operated beyond national borders and sought to exert pressure on international organizations in order to mobilize resources and advance their cause (Scholte, 2000; Goldman, 2005). A number of NGOs demanded greater transparency in policy development, better environmental protection and the protection of disadvantaged populations’ rights, including workers, peasants, indigenous people, cultural minorities, and women (Cohen and Rai, 2000). Within a few years, mobilizations particularly targeted international economic institutions and broadened their scope to the issue of “global justice” (O'Brien et al, 2000; Smith, 2001; Friesen, 2012). Since the studies of the 1990s demonstrating the emergence of transnational advocacy networks (Smith et al., 1997; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Florini 2000), research on social movements has converged around the idea that international institutions have become strategic locations that allow national protest movements to coalesce into global activist networks (Tarrow, 2001; Sommier et al., 2008).

In face of growing dynamics of contention, the secretariats of international organizations have been inclined to develop inclusion mechanisms as an attempt to better channel social demands (Zürn et al., 2012). International economic and financial institutions have gradually integrated some social demands into their agenda, as the World Trade Organization (WTO) did for example, after having been the target of global campaigns from peasant movements (Reitan, 2007) and NGOs advocating greater

---

<sup>4</sup> The Learning Group was set up in December 1990 at the initiative of two World Bank shareholder countries, Germany and Sweden, to evaluate about twenty participatory projects financed with loans. Over a period of three years, it involved 150 experts from the Bank and 70 external members, including representatives of national ministries and other IOs (such as the OECD), consultants, academics, researchers from private foundations and representatives of US and British NGOs.

<sup>5</sup> In development aid agencies, experts frequently distinguish two different dimensions of participation in development. On one side, participation refers to tools and methods for involving citizens in the design and implementation of policy projects, primarily in local contexts. On the other side, it refers to techniques used by political authorities and administrations to open up policy governance to the wide range of actors, stakeholders and intermediaries involved in development policies (such as NGOs, civil society organizations, unions and employers’ organizations, community-based and faith-based organizations, indigenous organizations, professional associations, and business partners). We argue that this distinction is theoretical and reifying: these two dimensions reflect, at different institutional levels, the rise of a single standard of participation promoting the entitlement of citizens and collective entities representing social interests to be involved in public affairs.

transparency and accountability (Smythe and Smith, 2006). This has also been the case for the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in the context of negotiations on the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (Gayon, 2009). The World Bank was also exposed to advocacy alliances fighting against the social and environmental impacts of Bank-funded water resource management projects and resettlement policies (Brown and Fox, 2001), as well as movements campaigning against the unsustainable debt of poor countries (Baillot, 2017).

In the 1980s, the World Bank was one of the first international institutions to be targeted by NGOs promoting the participation of the poor in development projects (Cleary, 1996; Brown 1998; O'Brien et al., 2000; Friesen 2012). Although the World Bank had expanded its mandate to poverty alleviation in the 1970s, it refocused its lending policy on economic projects ten years later, in the wake of the election of Ronald Reagan as President of the United States.<sup>6</sup> Under the influence of the U.S. Department of the Treasury, the Bank launched its first structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) based on the macroeconomic theories of the Chicago school.<sup>7</sup> This new policy aimed to stimulate economic growth in national markets. It also had a major impact on the social and economic fabric of recipient countries as it reduced their economic sovereignty. In many, of them, it led to price instability, mass unemployment, falling wages and the impoverishment of part of the population.

Within just a few years, the World Bank became one of the main targets of global protest campaigns. Coalitions of environmental NGOs were the first to coordinate their actions and convey criticism of development projects funded in client countries.<sup>8</sup> Their earliest contacts with the Bank dated back to the 1970s, when it decided to organize specialist workshops to debate environmental and social impacts arising as a result of major infrastructure projects, such as dams and irrigation systems. Specialized NGO experts were then invited to share their field experience. In the following years, the Bank organized *ad hoc* meetings with NGOs on social issues related to poverty. This provided the basis for the creation of the NGO World Bank Committee, a small entity within the Department of International Relations, which sixteen large Northern NGOs then formally joined.<sup>9</sup> This committee became the first place where the Bank's technical staff and practitioners from activist circles could meet and have discussions.

---

<sup>6</sup> In 1974, the World Bank's President Robert McNamara introduced the issue of poverty alleviation into the financial institution's strategy. In the following years, the Bank included social services in the list of policy priorities covered by project loans, whereas it had previously favoured a strategy focused on infrastructure for economic development. During this period, the Bank provided funding for health, education and nutrition-related projects. It also included some objectives related to environmental risks and involuntary resettlement caused by its projects.

<sup>7</sup> Structural adjustment programmes tied the Bank's financial allocations to market-oriented reforms, including trade liberalization policies, privatization of national companies (including for the delivery of public services), deregulation policies, tax cuts, and cutbacks in public spending.

<sup>8</sup> At the time, the World Bank was engaged in the construction of major infrastructure, including dams that resulted in both displacement of people and significant changes in habitats and natural environments. Environmental NGOs mobilized to denounce the complete lack of consideration for the populations affected by these projects.

<sup>9</sup> The details concerning the creation of this committee remain relatively unclear: according to the International Union of Associations (UIA), it was set up in 1981; according to the Partners/History page on the Bank's website, it was set up in 1982; according to Nelson (1995), it was set up in 1984. According to Long (2001), there were no meeting agendas until 1987.

However, in 1984, the NGOs became dissatisfied with their inability to control this committee's agenda, so they set up an autonomous body called the NGO Working Group on the World Bank. This body was open to NGOs based in developing countries, and it established a secretariat within the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA). It could then organize meetings itself and conduct independent research. However, as the Group was sponsored and co-funded by the Bank, many national movements refused to participate and decided to act through protest campaigns. This is the context in which the first collective mobilizations took place, denouncing the impact of the Bank's infrastructure projects on the living conditions of local populations. In September 1988, for the first time, a "counter-meeting" of NGOs attracting activists from around the world was organized in parallel with the World Bank and IMF meetings in West Berlin. NGOs denounced the social impacts of structural adjustment programmes. They also addressed poverty, hunger eradication, and debt cancellation as major challenges for poor countries (Amnesty International, 1989). They gained wide media coverage and established a permanent forum for NGO coordination with which the Bank would from then on have to learn to interact (Gerhards and Rucht, 1992). From that year onwards, these counter-summits were held every year, culminating in the "Fifty Years is Enough" campaign led by NGOs in Madrid in 1995, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the creation of the Bretton Woods institutions (Cleary, 1996; Goldman 2005).

During these years, a growing number of organizations decided to open offices in Washington D.C., where the World Bank's headquarters are located (Fox and Brown, 1998). For instance, in 1987, several civil society groups and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundations founded the Bank Information Center (BIC) to put the Bank's policies under increased scrutiny. These groups used various different repertoires of contention, from vocal protests with high media coverage to discrete lobbying activities with the members of the United States Congress so as to secure the introduction of social and environmental criteria in World Bank loan policies.<sup>10</sup>

The idea of "participatory development" became a rallying collective demand brought by both environmental NGOs and other transnational movements committed to various causes, such as transparency and accountability, debt cancellation, women's rights, and the protection of indigenous peoples. Researchers, practitioners and activists used the concept to justify local experiments seeking to promote "popular participation", "people's participation", and "community participation", which were perceived as offering a means of promoting social emancipation and greater autonomy for the poor. In the 1970s, the social conception of participation spread among activist researchers and in NGO circles. Paulo Freire's book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,<sup>11</sup> provided a source of inspiration for intellectual debate. At the beginning of the 1980s, participatory approaches began to circulate in development thinking, and they were then experimented in agriculture reforms and natural resources management via

---

<sup>10</sup> In 1985, after lobbying the Senate, a group of NGOs obtained a commitment that the U.S. financial contributions to the World Bank would be conditional upon the introduction of criteria for improving the "social and environmental performance" of loans. Through the "Pelosi Amendment" attached to a 1989 US Financing Bill, activists obtained from Congress that the US Executive Director of the World Bank would vote against any Bank project that had not undergone a prior environmental impact assessment (Pallas, 2013, p. 91).

<sup>11</sup> The English-speaking version was published in 1970.

“participatory rural appraisals”. They also provided new insights for social, health and food security programmes (Chambers, 1994). Aside from the notion of participation, ideas about “empowerment” also began to spread in development studies. From the end of the 1980s, the notion of participation enabled NGO coalitions to align their strategies and to influence the World Bank’s agenda.

Activist mobilizations were critical when it came to the creation of the first spaces where Bank staff could channel their relationships with NGO coalitions. At the end of the 1980s, contacts between the Bank and NGOs became more systematic (Fox and Brown, 1998), particularly at the level of the Bank’s regional offices (Covey, 1998). The creation of an “NGO Unit” within the Strategic Planning Division was agreed in 1987 during an internal reorganization of the Bank. Relations with NGOs were placed under the responsibility of the Operations Policy Department (OPR). The notion of participation also gradually spread to contracted experts hired to study and assess Bank-financed projects. They started to publish case studies, demonstrating the Bank’s interest in developing participatory tools in its lending practices, particularly in project management in client countries.<sup>12</sup> In the early 1990s, the Bank opened lending operations to project co-financing, increased “social funds” for community participation, and subcontracted national NGOs as service providers and technical implementers. Regional offices adopted “participation action plans” and hired “civil society specialists” (present in over 80 offices in the mid-1990s). At its headquarters, the Bank significantly increased the number of observable consultations with NGOs, labour unions, community groups, faith-based organizations and foundations.

The World Bank’s new focus on participation can thus be perceived as shift towards greater institutional openness, at a time when environmentalist and social activist coalitions significantly increased their pressure international development institutions. Admittedly, transnational mobilizations were a long way from bringing together movements with convergent aims. During the 1980s and 1990s, Washington-based NGOs were characterised by rivalry, frequent tensions and recurrent disagreements, regarding both collective strategies and policy objectives (Covey, 1998). They remained deeply divided even as the Bank established new mechanisms for institutional participation.<sup>13</sup> However most activist organizations converged in their call for the Bretton Woods institutions to have greater accountability, and a better inclusion of the poor in development projects. These social demands gained prominence and greater legitimacy among policy experts, social scientists and practitioners working in the ecosystem of the World Bank.

This holistic view of social mobilizations and institutional change provides an explanation why the Bank’s decision-makers decided to promote participatory

---

<sup>12</sup> Between 1973 and 1988, only 6% of the Bank’s loan projects had provisions for NGO involvement, the proportion increased to 22% in 1990 and over 50% in 1994 (source: World Bank, *Cooperation Between the World Bank and NGOs: FY 1994 Progress Report*, Washington DC, 1995).

<sup>13</sup> Tensions emerged between international NGOs with privileged access to the Bank – NGOs with highly professional staff, mostly from rich countries and some from Latin America – and activist coalitions which firmly opposed structural adjustment programmes – many of them being activist movements present in low-resource countries. In 1997, these tensions led to an open conflict when one of the most critical coalitions, the Development Group for Alternative Policies (D-GAP), agreed to officially participate in the Structural Adjustment Participatory Review Initiative Network (SAPRIN), which was a Bank-financed initiative.

development as a new guiding standard for policy reforms in the early 1990s. However, it does not shed light on knowledge-transfer and norm-setting processes at the level of the organization. It does not explain how some of the Bank's staff embraced the participatory approach as a priority concern, and then strived to promote it through knowledge production and dissemination. The focus on the internalization of participation makes it necessary to look inside the Bank and study staff activities from a microsociological perspective.

## **INSTITUTIONAL ACTIVISTS AS KNOWLEDGE ENTREPRENEURS**

The spreading of participatory approaches cannot be adequately conceptualized without paying critical attention to professional activities inside the World Bank. This part focuses on social dynamics in organizational context. It pays attention to the entrepreneurial role played by insiders who were interested in capturing participatory ideas that were emerging within research circles and practitioner networks. Therefore, this part seeks to demonstrate that some staff members played a critical part in the inception of the idea of participation within the organization.

### *Institutional activists*

Drawing on recent developments in social movement literature, we seek to conceptualize the role and influence of a minority group through the concept of "institutional activists" (Santoro and McGuire, 1997; Pettinicchio, 2012). The concept refers here to government organizations' professionals who supports global causes or social demands championed by activist movements. Institutional activists are public decision-makers, experts, researchers or practitioners who import critical views within their own institution with the purpose of triggering or stimulating policy change.<sup>14</sup> They challenge their own organization's agenda as they seize ideas from social movements and advocacy actors with the ambition to alter some established policy orientations. To some extent, they can be identified as insiders promoting outsider causes. They can also be identified as critical knowledge entrepreneurs who promote ideas challenging the orthodoxy of their institution. Their main skill is their ability to interact with several different professional worlds, and in particular three of them which can be considered as "linked ecologies" (Abbott, 2005): the bureaucratic professions of international institutions, the environment of NGOs, activist movements and civil society organizations involved in multilateral fora, and research professions spanning universities, think tanks and private research foundations. Institutional activists thus play a role of knowledge translators and gatekeepers having collusive relationships with outsider actors who strive to influence the public organization's agenda (I will call them "external allies" in this chapter). At one side of the spectrum, institutional activists may remain very close to activist organizations, with which they have ties of loyalty; in this

---

<sup>14</sup> Many similar concepts appear in the literature on mobilizations and social movements. "Governmental activists" (Verhoeven and Duyvendak, 2017) is the closest notion. "Insider activists" (Browne and Bakshi, 2013) or "social movement insiders" (Santoro and McGuire, 1997) refer to the same social activity, but they differ in that they designate primarily social activists who strategically choose to work with/for public institutions, as a way to provoke policy change. Pettinicchio (ibid., p. 501) mentions other notions, such as sympathetic elites, institutional entrepreneurs, elite mobilization, inside agitators... In the finance industry, the notion of "activist shareholder" is also referring to agents using participation in the capital of a corporation to put pressure on its management (Logsdon and Van Buren, 2008).

case, they act as “infiltrated agents” who enter a government institution in order to introduce social views into the public agenda. However, at the other side, they can also be “mere sympathizers” who are sensitive to demands and grievances from social movements, forging alliances outside the organization, but without ties of dependency vis-à-vis these movements.

Institutional activists are a minority in their own organization since their intention is to import heterodox ideas so as to reorient the dominant discourse. However, as insiders, their advantage is that they can access institutional resources which external activists lack: access to informal information, the ability to exchange views with the organization’s decision-makers, use of the organization’s brand and funding to promote their views, the opportunity to join internal working groups and access undisclosed internal documents, cultivation of contacts with expert networks and use of policy instruments to implement alternative policies. As such, institutional activists are in a position to use conventional means to promote unconventional strategies, giving them a comparative advantage over non-governmental players who act from outside the organization (Verhoeven and Duyvendak, 2017). However, their legitimacy is more fragile because they are positioned between multiple worlds, so they can easily lose the trust of their peers within the organization as well as that of their partners outside the organization.

Paying attention to institutional activists makes it possible to go beyond conventional binary perspectives on collective mobilizations, which artificially oppose, on one side, social campaigners and advocates involved in social movements and, on the other side, bureaucrats who are deemed to be disciplined agents promoting the views of their institution “with one voice” (Pettinichio, 2012). This perspective challenges the opposition between “social activists” (assumed to be driven by social and ethical claims emerging in civil society and grassroots movements) and “bureaucratic agents” (assumed to be run by the principals or the constituencies of their organization). It offers an opportunity to explore social processes through which arguments, visions and knowledge circulate at the boundaries of organizations. It helps to study how controversial views enter a bureaucratic institution and are then gradually incorporated into mainstream knowledge, spurring professional agents to reconsider their conventional conceptions when implementing the public agenda. Moreover, the literature on social movements has long shown that a dissenting idea is all the more likely to be included in the agenda of government institutions if it is conveyed and supported by elites inside public organizations (Zald 2000; McAdam et al., 2001; Caniglia 2002; Pettinichio 2016).

In this regard, the World Bank offers a striking example of a knowledge import dynamic led by insiders who have embraced new social perspectives on development, initiated by rural development studies and pushed by NGO activists advocating better consideration of the poor in development policy. In the particular context of the World Bank, these activists can be described as “global social reformists”.<sup>15</sup> In the early 1980s, within the Bank, these reformists could be found among the small group of

---

<sup>15</sup> The expression was coined by Bob Deacon (1997) to refer to experts, decision-makers, and scholars who sustain policy reforms promoting socio-economic welfare, social justice, citizenship, and participation. In the context of the Bank, global social reformists are any professional championing social development views, and expressing critical views on market-oriented reforms inspired by neoliberal theories in the 1980s and 1990s. I am grateful to H el ene Baillot who brought this expression to my attention.

anthropologists and sociologists recruited by the organization to carry out research analysis on social factors impacting project efficiency. As “researchers” within the Bank, they worked in a relatively isolated way. They had limited contacts with the technical staff predominant in operational and financial departments, and mainly from engineering professions responsible for infrastructure matters and reforms of agricultural and farming systems. They mixed very little with the neoclassical economists, whose number increased considerably in the mid-1980s at the instigation of the Bank’s largest shareholder, the United States, with a view to giving a theoretical framework to the new lending policy under structural adjustment programmes. Being a minority in the organization, with limited institutional resources at the outset, the social scientists relied on networks of researchers and practitioners working outside the Bank.

Such a perspective on professional groups follows the idea that IOs, as worldwide organizations, are composite and fragmented social worlds. They are made up of competing offices, units and departments. They comprise professional groups supporting differing views when it comes to promoting policy ideas, depending on their technical focus, their level of specialization, their internal position and interests, and also their educational background. As a consequence, on the subject of knowledge import dynamics, it can be posited that an organization would never embrace new ideas “as a whole”, without alterations and adaptations due to “local” interpretations, especially when these ideas are perceived as critical and potentially disruptive for the agenda. In most cases, external ideas are subject to internal knowledge battles. When we turn our attention to internal transactions between professions within IOs, most organizations appear as “battlefields of knowledge” opposing internal units (Long and Long, 1992; Beerli, 2017). For instance, Chweroth (2010) identified important struggles at the IMF in the 1980s and 1990s, between “gradualists” and “big bang supporters” over the interpretation and application of capital liberalization. Similarly, Weaver (2008) described internal tensions associated with the adoption of the governance and anticorruption agenda at the World Bank, and Stiglitz (2002) described serious intellectual disagreements inside the research department in the late 1990s, with some researchers (including Stiglitz himself) opposing the Bank’s main economic orientations. Here below, I identify a divide at the World Bank between global social reformists – who include most social scientists and minority economists working on certain core aspects of “social development” such as poverty and inequalities, income redistribution, social policies, participation, empowerment, and environmental issues – and supporters of neoclassical economics who subscribed to new theories on institutional economics in the early 1990s.

We will distinguish here between two institutional activism trajectories by focusing on two groups of reformists who worked in different areas in the Bank. The first coalesced around the Romanian sociologist Michael Cernea, who convened within the Bank a team of social scientists specializing in the participation of the poor. The second group formed around a technical director, Ismail Serageldin, who played a critical role in the initiation of exchanges between Bank staff and the Washington-based NGO networks, and who later on supported civil society participation procedures in operational activities. The following part strives to show that these two insiders, although being key actors, should not be considered as heroic figures trying to change the Bank’s

practices on their own. It is far more fitting to consider these institutional actors as knowledge brokers who helped turn innovative ideas into policy prescriptions.

### *The inception of anthropological views in the Bank's internal discussions*

The Bank's first exposure to participatory approaches dates back to the early 1980s, when researchers and practitioners began publishing monographs and reports on the participation of the poor in the appraisal and implementation of development projects, in particular in rural studies (Chambers, 1994). Indeed, anthropologists, sociologists, geographers, historians and economists specializing in rural communities and farming practices became interested in development studies, which had long been considered as the knowledge field of engineers and macroeconomists.

During this period, new theories on "participatory development" entered the Bank's thinking through a small group of researchers who sought to develop research originally conducted on the socio-anthropology of development. The widening of the Bank's agenda to include the issue of poverty in the 1970s had given rise to a new interest in social dimensions related to projects operations. It was therefore necessary for the Bank's shareholders to develop in-house research capabilities in order to improve knowledge of the specific needs, social representations and lifestyles of the project beneficiaries. This idea was supported in particular by the United States Government through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which encouraged the Bank to develop its own research activities. Within the space of a few years, the Bank recruited numerous economists and policy experts to implement projects in specific sectors. It employed its first sociologist in 1974 (Michael Cernea), and then its first anthropologist in 1978 (Gloria Davis). In the early 1980s, the Bank thus played an important role in the rise of development sociology and anthropology (Atlani-Duault, 2009). This was at a time when such research did not yet constitute a disciplinary approach that was recognised and valued by the social science departments of universities. The Bank thus provided many researchers with a place in which they could present their latest research and find professional recognition, which was not yet on offer in academic life. In particular, the Bank's research network of academics, experts and practitioners specializing in rural development played a critical role in giving prominence to participatory theories.

The group formed alongside Michael Cernea constituted the gateway through which pioneering studies on participation entered the Bank at the beginning of the 1980s. Although he was appointed Senior Adviser for Sociology and Social Policy, Cernea would find it difficult to rally some support internally, as the Bank's ecosystem remained dominated by operational officials whose primary focus was on projects' technical and financial feasibility (underpinned to a small degree by a number of economic studies). Therefore, Cernea only managed to carry out his research project by bringing outside allies inside the institution. He invited researchers from bilateral technical cooperation agencies, as well as young sociologists and anthropologists specialized in rural studies and the environment. The group included Conrad P. Kottak, Robert Chambers, Ted Scudder, Norman Uphoff, Walt Coward, Fran Korten and Richard Pollnac. At the Bank, Cernea organised seminars, giving members of the group an opportunity to present their

work on agricultural systems and forest management.<sup>16</sup> The group created a micro-environment for research, which developed an internal critique of Bank-financed projects. Cernea began to challenge the technical and financial criteria favoured by operational officials by advocating an approach focusing on the issue of “social change”. He placed particular emphasis on the need to involve grassroots organizations at every stage of the projects (from needs assessment to evaluation).<sup>17</sup> The Bank’s social scientists, however, had little voice and a lack of visibility within an organization dominated by technical staff and, increasingly, by economists.<sup>18</sup>

The book edited by Cernea in 1985 on public participation, *Putting People First: Sociological Variables in Rural Development*, had an unexpected impact within the World Bank. It developed themes that were at the time largely overlooked in the market-oriented approach of structural adjustment programmes. Admittedly, Cernea was not the first researcher to study the diversity of social practices in rural communities. Two years earlier, the anthropologist Robert Chambers had published a book entitled *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (1983). Chambers was a specialist in agricultural development policies and public administration. He had been one of the very first researchers to produce work on participation, drawing on his experience in bilateral development assistance in Kenya. Facing a lack of recognition within the British academic system,<sup>19</sup> his sociological work was more favourably received by the group of anthropologists of the World Bank. The book edited by Cernea in 1985 adopted an almost identical title. The authors criticized the lending practices of the time and called for full consideration of sociocultural factors in project design and implementation. They objected to lending practices that reduce project activity to mere financial techniques, given that their effectiveness is highly dependent on the behaviour of “beneficiaries” such as rural populations and communities. Although published by the Bank, the book remained confidential until it achieved unexpected success among the Bank’s staff after Cernea had given an interview in the organization’s newsletter.<sup>20</sup>

The issue of participation was not just pioneering. Above all, it was supposed to help improve loans’ financial and technical effectiveness<sup>21</sup>. Several internal departments commissioned studies on the subject, which led to numerous reports.<sup>22</sup> Admittedly, the 1985 book had little immediate impact on the operational officials at the Bank who drew

---

<sup>16</sup> “Michael M. Cernea-Judith Freidenberg (transcript interview)”, *Oral History Interview for the Society of Applied Anthropology*, University of Kentucky Libraries, June 30, 2003, p.9.

<sup>17</sup> In 1988, he published an analysis of the issue entitled *Nongovernmental Organizations and Local Development* (Cernea, 1988).

<sup>18</sup> Recruited as researchers in the McNamara era, economists gained influence in the 1980s. They began to access positions as technical experts in the Bank’s operational services, including the highly influential strategic planning services. Gradually, some also entered managerial positions, which gave them influence over the recruitment of staff, organization of the offices, and project financing. “Transcript interview with Gloria Davis”, *World Bank Group Oral History Programme*, Washington D.C., June 28 and 29, 2004, p.11.

<sup>19</sup> At the end of the 1970s, he failed in his attempt to be recruited as a professor at the University of Sussex’s Institute of Development Studies.

<sup>20</sup> The book was highly successful in practitioner networks and academic circles, especially in non-Western universities. It was reviewed in various scientific journals after 1986. Its wide circulation justified the publication of a new edition in 1991, by Oxford University Press.

<sup>21</sup> “Michael M. Cernea-Judith Freidenberg (transcript interview)”, *op.cit.*

<sup>22</sup> The most-quoted publications include: Listen to the People (Salmen, 1987), Community Participation in Development Projects (Paul, 1987), Transforming a Bureaucracy (Korten and Siy, 1988), Nongovernmental Organizations and the World Bank (Paul and Israel, 1991).

up structural adjustment loans based on the Chicago school's economic formulas. However, it did help to develop new approaches internally, and these were to find their place within the institution. In the space of a few years, the idea of participation gained ground within the Bank. For the new departments specialized in social and environmental matters, it provided an agenda that could help promote social justice objectives. But above all, this idea provided some inputs in terms of project management, in line with managers' and investors' expectations of improved efficiency. In the early 1990s, the first debates on the ineffectiveness of the Bank's loans paved the way for wider discussions on participatory development among staff members.

### *The formation of a reform group and the new social agenda of the Bank*

The dissemination of the idea of participation and its conversion into an institutional norm can hardly be understood without focusing on the Bank's bureaucratic life and, in particular, on internal knowledge struggles. In the wake of the research activities of anthropologists who promoted participatory approaches in the 1980s, some agents mobilized within the Bank a few years later, with the intention to open spaces for dialogue with NGO networks and to consolidate participatory approaches as a means to increase the aid effectiveness. Being driven by the will to change the Bank's normative framework centred on the Washington consensus<sup>23</sup>, they took a stand for the development of a "social agenda" that justified an enlargement of the Bank's financial activities. This section seeks to explore the formation of what can be called an "internal reform group", mostly composed of social scientists, which attempted to promote a social conception of development whereas the Bank remained dominated by the Chicago school's economic conceptions. This group first emerged in the early 1990s under the leadership of a senior manager of the institution, Ismail Serageldin, who built his professional career within the Bank on the promotion of a new social agenda.

Serageldin can be identified as a global social reformist within the Bank, even though he mainly occupied top management positions in operational services. While being a senior executive at the Bank, he became a "sympathetic elite" ally<sup>24</sup> whose internal career was built on close relationships with NGO activists, grassroots organizations and progressive academics operating in the ecosystem of the Bank. Serageldin was an Egyptian economist who trained at Harvard University. In 1972, he joined the Bank as a "young professional". He then successfully climbed professional levels within the institution. He occupied different positions in technical departments and quickly rose throughout the Bank's hierarchy. He was appointed Director of Programs in West Africa in 1984, during which time he became involved in new policy programmes bringing him into contact with NGOs. In particular, he supported projects aimed at promoting women and environmental issues, on which the Bank was wide open to criticism from non-governmental actors.

At the end of the 1980s, while structural adjustment policies were beginning to cause open protests from activist movements, Serageldin organized early meetings with

---

<sup>23</sup> This refers to the corpus of reforms imposed by the Bank on low-income countries, as inspired by the economic thinking of the Chicago school and implemented as part of structural adjustment programmes from the mid-1980s onwards.

<sup>24</sup> The notion was formulated by S. Tarrow (1998). It refers to top decision-makers who support protest movements and tend to facilitate the incorporation of their demands in policy-making.

Washington-based NGOs and became their privileged interlocutor. Through his brokering role with NGOs, he quickly took ownership of participatory ideas and started to convey them within the Bank, for example by fostering links between recently-recruited social scientists and operational services under his authority. He helped introduce social concerns into the monitoring and evaluation of Bank-financed operations. In 1992, after the unprecedented mobilization of NGOs against the Bretton Woods institutions at the Rio Earth Summit, Serageldin was one of the very few leading Bank officials able to dialogue with environmental NGOs. For this reason, in 1993 he was appointed Vice President of the Bank in charge of the new portfolio entitled Environmentally Sustainable Development (ESD), created in the wake of the Earth Summit.

As Vice President, Serageldin ensured that the Bank's social scientists were placed in units under his supervision. He turned them into an informal reform group united by shared beliefs on development and dedicated to promoting social and environmental policy issues in all the Bank's departments. Despite being in a minority group within the institution, he assigned them the task of challenging the neoclassical economists' dominance within the institution. The completion of the work of Learning Group on Participatory Development (see above) gave Serageldin an opportunity to involve this group in the production of the new policy standard promoting participation and inclusive governance. He was responsible for overseeing the final outputs of the Learning Group and entrusted their coordination to a team of anthropologists<sup>25</sup> from the Social Policy and Resettlement Division, which came under the remit of his Vice Presidency. It was during the final stages of the work of the Learning Group that the social perspective on participation, which had concentrated on social practice and emancipation of the poor at the project level, was subject to a reframing process which transformed the idea into a governance standard. The preparation of a flagship report provided an opportunity to realign ideas, merging the issue of grassroots participation promoted by social anthropology with the Bank's new policy framework focusing on "good governance"<sup>26</sup>. The "social" and "popular" aspects of local development practice were included in a general discussion on institutional governance, emphasizing the issues of quality, effectiveness and sustainability in development policies.

Serageldin became the chief internal supporter of the Bank's "social agenda". In 1993, the evaluation of 142 population resettlement projects provided him with an opportunity to promote the involvement of NGOs in Bank projects. From 1994, he encouraged statistical departments to integrate new human and environmental indicators into the calculation of economic growth.<sup>27</sup> In the same year, he decided to create a Bank-sponsored forum in which environmental NGOs could express their views, at the Bank's first ESD conference. He became one of the strongest advocates campaigning for the launch of a debate on "human capital" at the Bank (Bebbington et al., 2004). He had

---

<sup>25</sup> Researchers such as Gloria Davis, Scott Cuggenheim, Deepa Narayan, Lawrence Salmen and Shelton Davis participated in this group.

<sup>26</sup> The good governance agenda was developed at the Bank from 1992-1993. It sought to prioritize the issue of institutions' performance and efficiency, at a time when evaluations were identifying major failures of development strategies based on trade liberalization, deregulation and economic privatization.

<sup>27</sup> Serageldin edited a publication in 1994 which supported this approach: *Making Development Sustainable: from Concepts to Action* (coedited with A. Steer). Under his own name he published another position paper in 1996: *Sustainability and the Wealth of Nations: First Steps in an Ongoing Journey*.

regular contacts with the Bank's economists and statisticians, both professional groups with increased influence on knowledge development carried out by the Development Economics Vice Presidency (DEC), a new department created in 1995 by the World Bank's President James Wolfensohn with a view to concentrating the organization's research capabilities.<sup>28</sup> However, Serageldin above all surrounded himself with research teams made up of social scientists. Also, as from 1995, when knowledge-based communities were set up inside the Bank, it was decided that the Department of Social Development placed under Serageldin's leadership would include the Bank's anthropologists, sociologists, geographers and political scientists (Mosse, 2004). This internal restructuring reflects the formation of an internal reform group over the period 1990-1994, advocating a reorientation of the Bank's priorities around socio-environmental issues. After the success of the Learning Group on participation, this group continued its efforts to mobilize allies from NGO networks and the academia, with the intention to increase legitimacy of their views within the institution.

### **BRINGING EXTERNAL ALLIES INSIDE THE BANK**

This part pays particular attention to social activities through which minority insiders attempted to enlist supportive outsiders in order to further develop their unconventional views within the institution. In the context of the World Bank, it suggests that social reformists pushed their objectives forward through external collaboration with NGO activists and well-established academics who support participatory ideas. The work with "external allies" from the environment of the organization provided reformists with relational and intellectual resources, which helped them legitimize their social perspectives and build theoretical arguments to be exploited by technical staff, analysts and researchers. Thus they increased their ability to challenge the Bank's neoclassical paradigm centred on market growth.

In the early 1990s, social reformists supporting participatory development were still an active minority within the World Bank. They were dispersed across various segments of the organization and present in significant numbers in only one department. Although increasingly popular, their ideas had little influence on the institution's financial policy. A few years later, ideas on "social development" had acquired much greater legitimacy at all levels of the Bank. They gained prominence in internal debates, as the Learning Group became an important brainstorming arena for policy discussion on innovative view for development. They were embedded in the institution's agenda in 1993, with the establishment of a new Vice Presidency in charge of social and environmental policies.

During this short period, several developments helped ensure the success of social approaches to development. International debates were evolving very rapidly, as demonstrated by the success of the UNDP's conceptual approach to "human development", as well as by the immediate popularity of the Human Development Index (HDI), which aimed to go beyond the purely economic concepts promoted by financial development institutions. At the same time, the structural adjustment programmes encountered severe failures. Market-oriented macroeconomic policies were increasingly

---

<sup>28</sup> Serageldin had regular contact with Michael Bruno, Senior Vice President of Development Economics (DEC) and Chief Economist (1993-1996).

being contested. Environmental and social issues were discussed at multilateral conferences, some of them being considered successful by donor countries, such as the Rio Earth Summit (1992).

Despite their inclusion on the Bank's agenda, social ideas did not deeply alter the Bank's strategy based on the pursuit of neoclassical economical goals (Stiglitz, 2002). For the organization's economists, the discovery of "new institutional economics" (NIE) was a real boon to efforts to renew thinking about growth.<sup>29</sup> While slowly opening up to social and environmental challenges for development, predominant economic thought from 1993 onwards focused on institutions' performance, without questioning the key role of the market as a space for intervention.

Faced with the continued economic orthodoxy of the institution, social reformists at the Bank therefore tried to mobilize support within the ecosystem of the institution, with a view to mobilizing resources and advancing their ideas internally. They drew support from prominent figures from other professional environments representing the "linked ecologies" of the Bank.<sup>30</sup> They thus found "allies" who could help them pursue their cause, in particular in activist and academic ecologies.

The first collusive links were developed with actors from NGO networks who established offices in Washington DC in the 1980s, especially large organizations that had long-established links with government actors. The relationship with Oxfam and its representative, John D. Clark, provides a revealing example of the mutually reinforcing exchanges that international bureaucrats can forge with NGO actors. Clark had been responsible for Oxfam GB's advocacy and public action campaigns since 1979. In the late 1980s, he became one of the main allies of the few social reformists who wanted to promote social development within the Bank. With his professional and social profile, he was archetypal of the activist elites of the North: after higher education at Oxford University, he was recruited as a director at Oxfam GB, a position he combined with work publishing in specialised journals. Like a double agent, he could present himself with the dual identity of activist (among his NGO counterparts) and expert (when interacting with government actors). He had a perfect command of the specialized vocabulary used by international development institutions. He had an excellent ability to conceptualize, which enabled him to participate in the development of international advocacy to empower civil society groups in low-income countries. Through his activities at Oxfam GB, he had good connections with British bilateral development assistance and specialized think tanks, where he regularly published papers and opinion pieces.

These various characteristics led Ismail Serageldin to identify Clark as an appropriate interlocutor to represent the NGO community at the Washington D.C.

---

<sup>29</sup> Much of the spread of NIE was due to the in-house success of Douglass North's book, *Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (1990), which has become a point of scholarly reference among the Bank's economists. NIE offered a reflection on the stability of economic and political institutions. It paid close attention to the institutional environment in which economic reforms are undertaken. In the early 1990s, NIE became a leading theoretical source allowing Bank economists to move beyond market-oriented recommendations and to offer a vision of "good governance" aimed at improving institutions' efficiency.

<sup>30</sup> Here, we refer to the notion popularized by Andrew Abbott (2005) to describe stable systems of relationship connecting different professional jurisdictions.

headquarters. Being from a British NGO characterised by moderate activism, Clark would be best placed to debate participatory approaches in terms consistent with the Bank's financial strategies. He also offered a picture of peaceful cooperation linking the Bank and the world of NGOs. This was during the same period as more radical campaigns run by activist groups to denounce the impact of the Western-led loan policies on rural and poor populations in developing countries, such as the above-mentioned "50 years is enough" campaign.

As Oxfam's representative, Clark became involved in discussions with the Bank in the late 1980s. In 1990, he was among the few NGO representatives to be invited to participate in the work of the Learning Group. The publication of his book *Democratising Development: The Role of Voluntary Organisations* (Clark, 1991), in which he studies empirical cases of participatory development, clearly provided him with legitimacy as an expert on participation. Because of his professional skills and high social capital, he was easily able to integrate the ecology of the Bank. As he was considered to be the most appropriate candidate to showcase the Bank's openness, he was recruited on a permanent contract and joined the staff in January 1992. The outsider became an insider. He was then appointed Head of the NGO Unit within the Operations Department. He stayed a further 16 years in the organization, as chief of the civil society programme, then with senior professional status of "Lead social scientist".<sup>31</sup> His integration illustrates the revolving doors phenomenon, which permits social leaders to access the professional ecology of international organizations, while still being able to represent non-governmental worlds.

Social reformists also developed mutually supportive relationships with academia. Since the 1970s, international development organizations have constantly strengthened their links with a wide range of universities, think tanks and private foundations<sup>32</sup> (Petric 2012; Stone 2017). Admittedly, the development of such links is not specific to reformers within these organizations; it is a general phenomenon, and nowadays there is extensive cooperation on research involving international organizations and the very large number of knowledge producers. However, such cooperation is based on opportunities for networking with peers. At the World Bank, economists usually work with the economics departments of world-class universities, while social scientists look to social science departments as a point of reference to stimulate research activities on social issues in development. For instance, in part 2, it was argued that the success of Michael Cernea's work in the mid-1980s was related to his ability to build relationships with anthropology departments.

The insiders were thus keen to secure the contribution of prominent academics who could help them conceptualize the tenets of social and environmental development. Admittedly the Bank had notably already recruited its own researchers in the 1970s. However, in the early 1990s, internal research was largely dominated by economists

---

<sup>31</sup> During his tenure at the Bank, Clark was seconded for four years to the UN Secretary-General's private office, where he supervised a programme on civil society. He maintained close relations with the development community in the UK (his country of origin) where he participated in a task force on Africa under Prime Minister Tony Blair. In 2014 he joined the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), an influential think tank close to the British development assistance establishment.

<sup>32</sup> This cooperation goes back a very long way for academically-oriented organizations such as UNESCO and the OECD.

with a vested interest in market liberalization. With the creation of the new Development Economics (DEC) Vice Presidency, the economists thus had a visible and well-resourced department for producing the Bank's economic thinking (Broad, 2006).<sup>33</sup> Despite the growing number of non-economists among research staff,<sup>34</sup> social scientists still had limited resources within the institution. Having been grouped together under the Environmentally Sustainable Development (ESD) Vice Presidency provided them with the possibility to form an epistemic community within the Bank. However, it was not sufficient to guarantee them real influence: social scientists were still a minority in the Finance and Private Sector Development (FPD) Vice Presidency and they were kept away from the DEC Vice Presidency where economics research was concentrated. Those who supported participatory approaches therefore sought to cooperate with university academics in order to offset the internal predominance of economists and pursue the reflection on social development.<sup>35</sup>

Serageldin, as ESD Vice President of the Bank, surrounded himself with scientific staff within a Social Development Task Force commissioned to develop the Bank's strategy on environmental and social development. The Task Force was considered as an internal counterweight to DEC, where economics research was predominant. All of the Bank's social scientists participated in ten "satellite groups" of the Task Force. It also had a number of economists specializing in poverty and inequality, such as David Dollar and Martin Ravallion, as well as researchers from universities and think tanks who had been invited to provide their analysis on social development. The Social Capital Satellite Group had the greatest success internally. The world-renowned economist and political scientist Mancur Olson (University of Maryland), known for his work on collective action, was an active member. With Serageldin's support, he was involved in launching an initiative on social capital before his death in 1998.

Robert Putnam, a Harvard professor, played an instrumental role in spreading ideas about social participation within the Bank. In 1992, when he was busy writing up his research on "social capital", he was invited by Serageldin to a conference on culture and development in Africa. From 1993 he became one of the most consulted academics in the new ESD Vice Presidency. As Vice President, Serageldin took up Putnam's theses, which reappropriated the economic concept of "capital" to construct an interpretation extended to social relationships. As early as 1993, he published an internal article entitled "Sustainability and Wealth of Nations", undertook to reformulate the concept with a view to defending the "inclusion" of voluntary associations and their "participation"

---

<sup>33</sup> The DEC department was entrusted with the supervision of World Development Reports. Wade (1997) observed a management style based on "command and control" in the early years of the department. While neoclassical economics was dominant at the Bank, however, one should not underestimate theoretical divisions among economists within research teams. The years 2000-2002 were marked by strong internal criticism, which were sometimes reported in the press (for example that of Branko Milanovic). Tensions led to the departure of leading economists such as Joseph Stiglitz (chief economist) in 1999, Ravi Kanbur (lead author of the WDR 2000) in 2000, and William Easterly (lead economist) in 2001.

<sup>34</sup> The anthropologist David Mosse (2004) estimated that, in the early 2000s, the Bank had about 150 researchers specialized in anthropology, human geography, political science and sociology.

<sup>35</sup> In an interview, Serageldin explained that contact with university academics helped to counter the strong resistance encountered among the Bank's economists. "Transcript Interview with I. Serageldin", *The World Bank Group Archives, Oral History Program*, October 25-26, 2000, Washington D.C.

in the civic community as key dimensions of development in which the Bank should invest financially.<sup>36</sup>

In the late 1990s, the concept of social capital spread extensively throughout the Bank. It perpetuated and anchored the idea of social participation and inclusion within a well-established economics concept. It was taken up and discussed by the Bank's economists, who had until then been indifferent to economics studies on poverty, and still less responsive to anthropological research on development (Hammer and Pritchett, 2006). Social capital became a new intellectual project attracting the involvement of the institution's social scientists, such as Michael Woolcock, Deepa Narayan and Scott E. Guggenheim (who was a close collaborator of Michael Cernea). Their theoretical activism also required the enlistment of outside supportive researchers who were encouraged to further develop new theoretical perspectives on participation and inclusion. The most important ally to social reformists was Jonathan Fox, Assistant Professor of Political Science at MIT, who held a fellowship at the Council on Foreign Relations, an influential think tank, from 1995 to 1996. He was then appointed Professor of Latin American Studies at the University of California in 1996. He published various studies on NGO participation and grassroots movements in development (Fox and Brown, 1998). The second ally was Anthony Bebbington, a specialist in Latin American NGOs. Before joining the World Bank, he had been working for London-based think tanks since 1992 (the Institute for Environment and Development and the Overseas Development Institute). In 1995, he was hired by the Bank to join the research team working on social capital. This period in Washington D.C. enabled him to be recruited by the British academic system, then at the University of Colorado (Boulder). He joined the Bank for a second time in 1999-2000, before returning to the university system. Fox and Bebbington published work examining research development on social capital within the Bank, in which they had been involved (Fox, 1997; Bebbington et al., 2004).

Building alliances with external supporters thus helped insiders to give greater legitimacy to a socially-driven conception of development theory and practice within the World Bank. The idea of the participation of the poor in development projects led them to draw conclusions about social capital, inclusiveness, empowerment, community-driven development, as well as stakeholder engagement and other bottom-up approaches. These conceptions were then discussed and channelled into the thinking of institutional economists in the late 1990s. In this respect, the notion of social capital gained considerable traction in policy development in the Bank. From this time, the Bank began to heavily promote the concept among its partners and clients, partly as a response to mounting criticism of the neoliberal conditions attached to loans (Fine, 2007).

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I have examined the entrepreneurial activities of global social reformists within the World Bank, identified as "institutional activists", many of them being part of the minority group of social scientists. I argue that social reformists challenged the

---

<sup>36</sup> Serageldin distinguished between four types of capital: "man-made capital" (economic and financial assets), "natural capital" (environmentally provided assets), "human capital" (individual resources, based on health, education and nutrition), and "social capital" (cultural and social institutions for better inclusion in and participation to the society).

internal supremacy of the neoclassical economics orthodoxy, and actively promoted participation as a way of enhancing the Bank's social agenda. In the second half of the 1990s, participatory ideas spread to the whole development expert community. Participation became a global norm influencing most practical guidelines for development policies, from local project management to global governance. It paved the way for the dissemination of related concepts (such as "inclusiveness", "social capital", "empowerment", "human capital", "ownership", "resilience") fostering social inclusion criteria in international policy discussions on sustainable development, poverty reduction and, more recently, on climate change.

However, the discussion on insider activism should not be limited to a Promethean vision interpreting the inception of social theories within the Bank solely as the result of a handful of enlightened knowledge entrepreneurs who strived to channel debates on development from economics towards the social field. As we showed in the first part, participatory approaches were circulating as early as the 1980s among circles of anthropologists and expert networks specialized in rural development. They were conveyed by NGO coalitions lobbying international financial institutions. Debates also started to take place in other international organizations which, during the same period, were beginning to publish studies on participation as a means of increasing development aid effectiveness. This was the case with the OECD, UNDP, and USAID (Jennings, 2000). Through linked ecologies of development professions, and constant interactions between international institutions involved in policy knowledge transfer, new social development theories circulated transnationally through multiple platforms at the same time.

Likewise, the core argument in this paper does not maintain a rose-tinted vision of the "success" of participatory ideas in international institutions. Ideas are not stable products. They undergo multiple reinterpretations and adaptations as they circulate and receive traction within professions and organizations. The adoption of participatory ideas in World Bank's technical documents, guidelines and policy instruments resulted in multiple cognitive alterations, shifting from social perspectives into a policy-oriented standard: while the original idea of the 1980s focused on the emancipation of the poor, the global norm of the 1990s concentrated on efficiency for better policy results. As participatory approaches became part of the Bank's rhetoric, they were subject to numerous reframing operations through which they were merged with the Bank's reform agenda valuing "project efficiency" and "good governance". Hence the process of incorporating participation led to reformist ideas being embedded within the Bank's primary focus on institutional performance. In sum, participatory ideas went through a taming process: once incorporated into the Bank's normative framework, they were framed as being a new tool for policy and governance, at a distance from the socially-driven conceptions pursued by social reformists.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Abbott, A. (2005), 'Linked Ecologies: States and Universities as Environments for Professions', *Sociological Theory*, 23, 245-274.
- Amnesty International (1989), *West Berlin: The Anti-IMF/World Bank Protests of September 1988*, London: Amnesty International.

- Atlani-Duault, L. (2009), 'L'anthropologie de l'aide humanitaire et du développement : histoire, enjeux contemporains et perspectives', in Atlani-Duault L., Vidal L., *Anthropologie de l'aide humanitaire et du développement: des pratiques aux savoirs, des savoirs aux pratiques*, Paris : Armand Colin, 17-40.
- Baillot, H. (2017), 'Nous ne devons rien, nous ne paierons rien'. *Jubilee 2000 et la redéfinition du mode de problématisation de la dette des pays pauvres (1996-2000)*, Thèse de doctorat en science politique de l'Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne.
- Bebbington, A., Guggenheim, S., Olson, E., Woolcock, M. (2004), 'Exploring Social Capital Debates at the World Bank', *Journal of Development Studies*, 40 (5), 33-64.
- Beerli, M. J. (2017), 'Legitimizing Organizational Change through the Power of Quantification: Intra-Organizational Struggles and Data Deviations', *International Peacekeeping*, 24 (5), 780-802.
- Bherer, L., Gauthier M., Simard L. (2017) (eds.), *The Professionalization of Public Participation*, London: Taylor and Francis.
- Broad, R. (2006), 'Research, Knowledge, and the Art of 'Paradigm Maintenance': The World Bank's Development Economics Vice-Presidency (DEC)', *Review of International Political Economy*, 13(3), 387-419.
- Brown, D., and Fox J. (2001), 'Transnational Civil Society Coalitions and the World Bank: Lessons from Project and Policy Influence Campaigns', in M. Edwards and J. Gaventa (eds.), *Global Citizen Action*, Boulder, Co: Lynne Rienner, 43-57.
- Browne, K. and Bakshi, L., (2013), 'Insider activists: The fraught possibilities of LGBT activism from within', *Geoforum*, 49, 253-262.
- Burgerman, S. (2001), *Moral Victories: How Activists Provoke Multilateral Action*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Caniglia, B.S. (2002), 'Elite Alliances and Transnational Environmental Movement Organizations,' in J. Smith and H. Johnston (eds.), *Globalization & Resistance: Transnational Dimensions of Social Movements*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 153-172.
- Cernea, M. M (1988), *Nongovernmental Organizations and Local Development*, World Bank discussion papers, 40.
- Cernea, M. M. (ed.) (1991), *Putting People First: Sociological Variables in Rural Development*, New York: Oxford University Press (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1985).
- Chambers, R. (1983), *Rural development: putting the last first*, Harlow: Prentice Hall.
- Chambers, R. (1994), 'The Origins and Practice of Participatory Rural Appraisal', *World Development*, 22 (7), 953-969.
- Chwieroth, J. M. (2010), *Capital Ideas: The IMF and the Rise of Financial Liberalization*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Clark, A.-M. (2001), *Diplomacy of Conscience: Amnesty International and Changing Human Rights Norms*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Clark, J. (1991), *Democratizing Development: the Role of Voluntary Organizations*, West Hartford, Conn.: Kumarian Press.
- Cleary, S. (1996), 'The World Bank and NGOs', in P. Willetts (ed.), *The Conscience of the World: the Influence of Non-Governmental Organisations in the UN system*, London: David Davies Memorial Institute, 63-96.
- Cohen, R. and Rai, S. (2000), 'Global social movements: towards a cosmopolitan politics', in R. Cohen and S. Rai (eds.), *Global social movements*, London: Athlone, 1-17.
- Covey, J. (1998), « Critical Cooperation? Influencing the World Bank through Policy Dialogue and Operational Cooperation », in J. A. Fox and D. L. Brown (eds.), *The Struggle for Accountability: the World Bank, NGOs and Grass-Root Movements*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 81-119.
- Deacon, B. (1997), *Global Social Policy: International Organizations and the Future of Welfare*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Fine, B. (2007), 'Social Capital', *Development in Practice*, 17 (4-5), 566-574.
- Florini, A. M. (ed.) (2000), *The Third Force: The Rise of Transnational Civil Society*, Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Fox, J. A. (1997), 'The World Bank and Social Capital: Contesting the Concept in Practice', *Journal of International Development*, 9 (7), 963-971.

- Fox, J. A. and Brown L. D. (1998), 'Assessing the Impact of NGO Advocacy Campaigns on World Bank Projects and Policies', in J. A. Fox., D. L Brown (eds.), *The Struggle for Accountability: the World Bank, NGOs and Grass-Root Movements*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 485-551.
- Friesen, E. (2012), *Challenging Global Finance: Civil Society and Transnational Networks*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gayon, V. (2009), 'Le crédit vacillant de l'expert', *Cultures & Conflits*, 75, 53-73.
- Gerhards, J. and Rucht, D. (1992), 'Mesomobilization: Organizing and Framing in Two Protest Campaigns in West Germany', *American Journal of Sociology*, 98 (3), 555-596.
- Goldfrank, B. (2012), 'The World Bank and the Globalization of Participatory Budgeting', *Journal of Public Deliberation*, 8 (2), 1-18.
- Goldman, M. (2005), *Imperial Nature: The World Bank and Struggles for Social Justice in the Age of Globalization*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Jennings, R. (2000), 'Participatory Development as New Paradigm: The Transition of Development Professionalism', *Paper prepared for the Community Based Reintegration and Rehabilitation in Post-Conflict Settings Conference*, Washington DC, 5 October, 20-21.
- Keck, M. E. and Sikkink, K. (1998), *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Khagram, S., Riker, J. V., Sikkink, K. (eds) (2002), *Restructuring World Politics: Transnational Social Movements, Networks, and Norms*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- Korten, F. F. and Siy, R. Y. (eds.) (1989), *Transforming a Bureaucracy: the Experience of the Philippine National Irrigation Administration*, West Hartford, Conn.: Kumarian Press.
- Logsdon, J. M. and Van Buren H. J. (2008), 'Justice and Large Corporations: What Do Activist shareholders want?', *Business and Society*, 47 (4), 523-548
- Long, C. (2001), *Participation of the Poor in Development Initiatives: Taking their Rightful Place*, London: Earthscan Publications.
- Long, N. and Long, A. (1992) (eds.), *Battlefields of knowledge*, London, Routledge.
- McAdam, D., Tarrow, S., Tilly, C. (2001), *Dynamics of contention*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mertus, J. (1999), 'Doing Democracy 'Differently': The Transformative Potential of Human Rights NGOs in Transnational Civil Society', *Third World Legal Studies*, 15(8), 205-234.
- Mosse, D. (2004) « Social analysis as product development: anthropologists at work in the World Bank. », in A. Giri, A. van Harskamp and O. Salemink (eds.), *The development of religion / the religion of development*. Amsterdam: Eburon B.V., 77-87.
- Nay O. (2019), 'L'ouverture des organisations internationales: trois interprétations sociologiques', in D. Lagrange, M. Louis et O. Nay (dir.), *Le tournant social des organisations internationales*, Rennes, Presses universitaire de Rennes, 37-54.
- Nelson, P. J. (1995), *The Limits of Apolitical Development*, London: Macmillan.
- O'Brien, R., Goetz, A.-M., Scholte, J. A., Williams, M. (eds.) (2000), *Contesting Global Governance: Multilateral Economic Institutions and Global Social Movements*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pallas, C. L. (2013), *Transnational Civil Society and the World Bank: Investigating Civil Society's Potential to Democratize Global Governance*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Paul, S. (ed.) (1987), *Community Participation in Development Projects: the World Bank Experience*, Washington D.C.: World Bank.
- Paul, S. and Israel, A. (eds.) (1991), *Nongovernmental Organizations and the World Bank: Cooperation for Development*, World Bank Regional and Sectoral Studies, Washington D.C.: World Bank.
- Petric, B. M. (ed.), *Democracy at Large: NGOs, Political Foundations, Think Tanks and International Organizations*, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- Pettinicchio, D. (2012), 'Institutional activism: Reconsidering the Insider/Outsider Dichotomy', *Sociology Compass*, 6, 499-510.
- Pettinicchio, D. (2016), 'Elites, Policy, and Social Movements', in B. Wejnert and P. Parigi (eds.), *On the Cross Road of Polity, Political Elites and Mobilization*, Emerald Group Publishing, 155-190.

- Porto de Oliveira, O. (2017), *International Policy Diffusion and Participatory Budgeting*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pritchett, L. and Hammer J. (2006), 'World Bank Economists and Social Capital: Scenes from a Marriage', in A. Bebbington, M. Woolcock, S. Guggenheim, E. Olson (eds.), *The Search for Empowerment: Social Capital as Idea and Practice at the World Bank*, West Hartford, CT: Kumerian Press, 63-90.
- Reitan, R. (2007), *Global Activism*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Salmen, L. (1987), *Listen to the People: Participant-Observer Evaluation of Development Projects*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Santoro, W. A. and McGuire, G. M. (1997), 'Social Movement Insiders: The Impact of Institutional Activists on Affirmative Action and Comparable Worth Policies', *Social Problems*, 44 (4), 503–519
- Saurugger, S. (2010), 'The social construction of the participatory turn: The emergence of a norm in the European Union', *European Journal of Political Research*, 49 (4), 471-495.
- Scholte, J. A. (2000), 'Cautionary Reflections on Seattle', *Millennium*, 29(1), 115-121.
- Smith, J. (2001), 'Globalizing Resistance: The Battle of Seattle and the Future of Social Movements', *Mobilization*, 6 (1), 1-19.
- Smith, J., Chatfield, C., Pagnucco, R. (eds.) (1997), *Transnational Social Movements and Global Politics: Solidarity Beyond the State*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Smythe, E. and Smith J. P. (2006), 'Legitimacy, Transparency, and Information Technology: the World Trade Organization in an Era of Contentious Trade Politics', *Global Governance*, 12 (1), 31-53.
- Sommier, I., Fillieule, O., Agrikoliansky, E. (2008), 'Les altermondialistes entre national et global', in I. Sommier et E. Agrikoliansky (dir.), *La généalogie des mouvements altermondialistes en Europe. Une perspective comparée*, Paris: Karthala, 11-39.
- Stiglitz, J. E. (2002), *Globalization and Its Discontents*, New York: Norton.
- Stone, D. (2017), 'Partners to Diplomacy: Transnational Experts and Knowledge Transfer Among Global Policy Programs', in A. Littoz-Monet (ed.), *The politics of expertise in international organizations: how international bureaucracies produce and mobilize knowledge*, Abingdon: Routledge, 93-110.
- Tarrow, S. (2001), 'Transnational Politics: Contention and Institutions in International Politics', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 4, 1-20.
- Tarrow, S. (2011 [1998]), *Power in Movement. Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Verhoeven, I. and Duyvendak, J. W. (2017), 'Understanding governmental activism', *Social Movement Studies*, 16 (5), 564-577.
- Wade, R. (1997) 'Greening the Bank: the Struggle over Environment, 1970-1995', in D. Kapur, J. Lewis, R. Webb (eds.), *The World Bank: its First Fifty Years*, Perspectives vol. 2, Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 611-734.
- Wampler, B. and Hartz-karp, J. (2012), 'Participatory Budgeting: Diffusion and Outcomes across the World', *Journal of Public Deliberation*, 8 (2), article 13.
- Weaver, C. (2008), *Hypocrisy Trap: The World Bank and the Poverty of Reform*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Woods, N. (2006), *The Globalizers: The IMF, the World Bank, and Their Borrowers*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Zald, M. N. (2000), 'Ideologically structured action: An enlarged agenda for social movement research', *Mobilization*, 5 (1), 1-16.
- Zürn, M., Binder, M., Ecker-Ehrhardt, M. (2012), 'International Authority and Its Politicization', *International Theory*, 4 (1), 69-106.