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World Bank Criticized for 'Ducking Human Rights'

Posted By David Bosco ■ Monday, July 22, 2013 - 6:35 AM ■ Share

The advocacy group Human Rights Watch is out with a beefy **new report** criticizing the World Bank for paying inadequate attention to human rights in its lending programs:

As they currently stand, the World Bank's safeguard policies are **insufficient** to ensure that human rights are respected in its projects. While the bank has committed not to finance project activities that would contravene borrower country obligations under relevant international environmental treaties and agreements, it is silent on obligations under international human rights treaties. The bank has policies on involuntary resettlement and indigenous peoples, but even these policies fall short of international human rights standards. Funding decisions relating to rights concerns lack transparency and appear arbitrary and inconsistent, Human Rights Watch found.

The absence of a clear commitment not to support activities that will contribute to or exacerbate human rights violations leaves staff without guidance on how they should approach human rights concerns, or what their responsibilities are. Staff members have unfettered discretion to determine the extent to which they will consider human rights risks, take measures to mitigate or avoid harm, and even to bring problems to the attention of senior management or the board. The lack of clear procedures and policies on human rights means that people whose rights are adversely affected have no way to hold the bank to account.

As is the case with **democracy**, human rights have been a touchy issue for the lender. The bank's underlying **charter** instructs its personnel to keep well clear of internal politics:

The Bank and its officers shall not interfere in the political affairs of any member; nor shall they be influenced in their decisions by the political character of the member or members concerned. Only economic considerations shall be relevant to their decisions, and these considerations shall be weighed impartially.

Over time, of course, the understanding of what is "political" and what constitutes interference has shifted. The bank used to believe that combating corruption and promoting internal governance reform crossed the line; that's no longer the case. The bank has waded pretty far into domestic politics, but explicit consideration of democracy and human rights in bank lending is still a step too far.

One doesn't have to go farther than the bank's own website to witness the institution's discomfort. It features a "frequently asked questions" post on the bank and human rights, available **here**. Even this short document appears to be a painful compromise between the institution's competing camps and its member states:

There is a growing body of research from development experts that shows the linkage between human rights and development and many development partners are increasingly integrating human rights into their programs.

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David Bosco reports on the new world order for *The Multilateralist*.

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Human rights embody value commitments which are not uniformly interpreted. Furthermore, the concept of universality underpinning the international human rights framework is a complex one, which must be assessed in progressive terms, and interpreted according to its current legal, political and historical context.

The World Bank needs to undertake analytic work to examine how human rights fit within the constitutional framework and what positive contribution they could make to the development process.

As the bank frames the issue, how much human rights should inform its work is less a question of international legality or ethical principles than an empirical one -- do human rights norms aid development? The stronger the evidence that respect for human rights promote development, presumably, the more central it will become to the bank's work. Tentatively, the bank also advances a different line of argument: that aiding development is itself a contribution to human rights:

Although its policies, programs and projects have never been explicitly or deliberately aimed towards the realization of human rights, the Bank contributes to the promotion of human rights in different areas, e.g., improving poor people's access to health, education, food and water; promoting the participation of indigenous peoples in decision-making and the accountability of governments to their citizens; supporting justice reforms, fighting corruption and increasing transparency of governments.

Let us work on the economic and social piece of human rights, the bank seems to be saying, and let's leave the often fraught civil and political aspect of rights to other, more political multilateral actors:

We recognize that our partners in the broader UN family have a comparative advantage in this area. Unlike the World Bank, many of them have mandates that contain an explicit commitment to human rights, including, in some cases, monitoring and enforcement capabilities.

Human Rights Watch, at least, isn't content with that division of labor.

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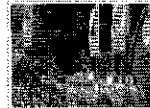
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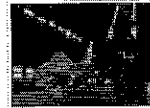
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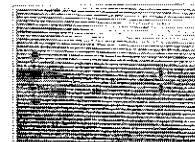
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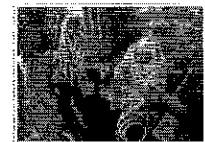


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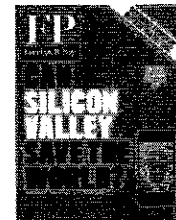
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