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‘Knowledge management’: a case study of the World Bank’s research department

Robin Broad

This article looks at ‘knowledge management’, using a case study of the World Bank’s research department, located in the Bank’s Development Economics Vice-Presidency (DEC). Despite the Bank’s presentation of its research arm as conducting ‘rigorous and objective’ work, the author finds that the Bank’s ‘knowledge management’ involves research that has tended to reinforce the dominant neo-liberal globalisation policy agenda. The article examines some of the mechanisms by which the Bank’s research department comes to play a central role in what Robert Wade has termed ‘paradigm maintenance’, including incentives in hiring, promotion, and publishing, as well as selective enforcement of rules, discouragement of dissonant views, and manipulation of data. The author’s analysis is based both on in-depth interviews with current and former World Bank professionals and on examination of the relevant literature.

KEY WORDS: Governance and Public Policy; Aid; Methods

Knowledge and its management

Let me start with a confession: when I began the research project that would lead to this article (among others), I did not even know that the term ‘knowledge management’ existed. I was then and am still a professor of international development at a university in the USA. I had done a significant amount of research and writing on the international financial institutions and ‘development’ (buzzword alert) since I first lived in the rural Philippines in the 1970s.

It turns out that, while I was teaching and writing about such things, ‘knowledge management’ had become a pretty big deal in the private sector. Not only is there a growing literature on knowledge management – generically defined as ‘how organizations create, retain, and share knowledge’ (Cummings 2003:1) – but also there are whole publications devoted to the subject. Witness *The Journal of Knowledge Management Practice* (formerly the *Journal of Systemic Knowledge Management*) or *Inside Knowledge: The Original Knowledge-Management Publication*. The point, as the latter explains on its website, is that:

*The knowledge that exists within your organisation is your only sustainable source of competitive advantage. We believe this makes knowledge management a strategic imperative for you. But how do you ensure that your KM initiative is effective, that it delivers on its promises and that your organisation sees a return on its KM investment?*¹

And it also turns out that the 'development industry' (buzzword? contradiction in terms?) was leaping into the 'knowledge management' arena. This, I must quickly assure you lest you stop reading, I did know. Indeed, by the late 1990s, key public institutions that 'do' development were in need of a new meta-word and meta-fix. This was especially the case at the World Bank, where then-president James Wolfensohn was presiding over an institution that needed a clearer mission to keep it centre-stage. Yes, the World Bank still had its project-lending function. And yes, the Bank still had its focus on making sure that recipient countries structurally adjusted to the 'correct' set of neo-liberal macro-economic policies.² But the problem was that its central role as a lender was waning. The heyday of the debt crisis was over (so countries, especially middle-income countries, were no longer as desperate for loans), and commercial banks were once again lending to 'Third World' countries (so there were other potential sources for loans). So too was China on the horizon as a lender. Being a provider of 'aid' or 'development assistance' via project loans or even policy-based lending was not going to be enough to ensure that the World Bank would remain the powerful player that it had become.

So, in 1996, then-Bank president James Wolfensohn launched an initiative to magnify the research and dissemination role of the World Bank by transforming the institution from what was called a 'lending bank' into *the* 'Knowledge Bank':

Development knowledge is part of the 'global commons': it belongs to everyone, and everyone should benefit from it. But a global partnership is required to cultivate and disseminate it. The [World] Bank Group's relationships with governments and institutions all over the world, and our unique reservoir of development experience across sectors and countries, position us to play a leading role in this new global knowledge partnership.

We have been in the business of researching and disseminating the lessons of development for a long time. But the revolution in information technology increases the potential value of these efforts by vastly extending their reach. ... We need to become, in effect, the Knowledge Bank. (Wolfensohn 1996)³

The implication was that the World Bank was a place where all views, all ideas, all empirical data on development would be available to the world. Given this mission to increase the World Bank's role in creating, aggrandising, distributing, and brokering 'knowledge' – that is, in 'knowledge management' – it makes sense to look more carefully at how World Bank research is conducted and distributed to see if this is, in fact, the case.

The Knowledge Bank or the Paradigm-Maintenance Bank?

The World Bank is not only the main lender for 'development'. It is also the world's largest development research body, a role that is centred in the World Bank's Development Economics Vice-Presidency (DEC).

DEC is important also because it serves as a research department for other bilateral aid agencies and other multilateral development banks, which often follow the course laid out by the Bank. So too with the World Trade Organisation, which, according to an internal Bank document, 'looks to the Bank to provide analysis on trade integration policies'.⁴ And Bank research is consulted by policy makers across the globe. In academia, as well, relevant

courses often rely heavily on Bank research papers. In short, DEC is the research powerhouse of the development world.

And DEC is important to this article because it demonstrates how badly the Bank fails in this regard – or, depending on one’s view, how well it succeeds at controlling the definition of development ‘knowledge’ and at managing its distribution and projection to suit the Bank’s purposes.

The Bank likes to claim that DEC conducts the *crème-de-la-crème* of development research – with ‘research projects’ that are and ‘must be rigorous and objective’.⁵ After a careful look inside DEC (including a couple of dozen interviews with former and current Bank staff), I have reached a different conclusion: through its research, the World Bank has played a critical role in the legitimisation of the neo-liberal ‘free-trade’ paradigm over the past 25 years, and its research department has been vital to this role.

The work of perhaps the best-known World Bank researcher, David Dollar, exemplifies the ‘paradigm-maintenance’ role.⁶ For many in the media, academia, and policy-making circles, Dollar’s work on trade and economic growth has been transformed into a widely cited, empirically proven fact (read ‘knowledge’) that ‘globalisers’ – Dollar’s term for countries wedded to the Washington Consensus, especially to liberalised trade – experience higher economic growth rates than ‘non-globalisers’. Indeed, Dollar’s and his co-author’s work is the one source cited by Thomas Friedman in his best-selling book *The World Is Flat* as proof that ‘economic growth and trade remain the best antipoverty program in the world’ (Friedman 2005: 315). As Dollar phrased it in a co-authored 2002 article in *Foreign Affairs*: ‘... openness to foreign trade and investment, coupled with complementary reforms, typically leads to faster growth’.

How did Dollar’s work become so prominent? Why does the work of DEC researchers who support the dominant knowledge framework – the neo-liberal policy agenda – get widespread attention? I discovered a set of six inter-related processes and mechanisms through which DEC, at times collaborating with other parts of the World Bank, performs its paradigm-maintenance role by privileging knowledge producers and knowledge that ‘resonate’ with the neo-liberal globalisation ideology. These mutually reinforcing structures include a series of incentives – increasing an individual’s chances to be hired, to advance one’s career, to be published, to be promoted by the Bank’s External Affairs department, and, in general, to be assessed positively. And they also include selective enforcement of rules, discouragement of dissonant discourse, and even the manipulation of data to fit the paradigm. This incentive or reward system is typically unstated, may even negate the formal or stated procedures and, as such, functions as soft law. This is done in a way that undermines debate and nuanced research conclusions, instead encouraging the confirmation of *a priori* neo-liberal hypotheses as *de facto* knowledge.⁷

There follows a brief overview of the six sets of mechanisms.

Hiring

The structures through which these incentives play out are multiple, and they begin with hiring biases. While countries of birth and nationality may lead to a superficial assessment that the staff are international and diverse, the Bank is far from diverse. Bank staff are overwhelmingly PhD economists. Boundaries of disciplines in and of themselves set intellectual boundaries, defining acceptable questions and methods. DEC houses fewer than a handful of non-economist social scientists.

Further concentrating thought, the USA and the UK (and primarily the former) university economics departments supply most of the PhD economists doing research and writing within DEC (and within the Bank in general).

The Bank's generous pay scale and benefits are also part of this incentive structure. This is what a former Bank economist terms *'the golden handcuffs'*. (Unless buzzwords or otherwise stated, quotes are from my interviews.) While the Bank claims these are necessary to attract the best and the brightest, what they actually do is limit dissent by increasing the 'opportunity cost' of any dissidence.

Promotion

There are a number of ways in which promotion incentives help to shape the work towards paradigm maintenance.

The overarching goal of any researcher who wants to make a career of the Bank is to achieve, after five years, 'regularisation', the Bank equivalent of academic tenure. Along the way, there are annual reviews. It is important to note that '... most Bank employees are on short-term contracts. There is substantial anecdotal evidence that this is distorting incentives away from creative thinking and towards career-path management' (Gilbert *et al.* 2000: 81).

To get good reviews, DEC professionals need to publish, ideally in both internal Bank publications and externally, especially in academic journals. Reviews also look at a DEC researcher's influence on Bank operations and policy. The Bank has set up formal structures to try to ensure the transfer of research 'knowledge' to operations. Most notable is that one-third of a researcher's time must be spent doing what is called operational 'cross-support'. In devising a work programme, the researcher is aware that he/she will *'need marketability for 1/3 time'* when she/he is a *de facto* 'free agent'. In terms of the characteristics of a 'marketable' DEC researcher, as one Senior Economist in DEC explains, *'Operations looks for high-profile folks with "resonance"'*. To paraphrase, if you are in Operations and you are looking to buy the time of a researcher, you look to add someone who is likely to improve the chances of your project getting through. *'You want a Dollar'*, one interviewee states bluntly without provocation. Conversely, asks one non-neo-liberal-economist researcher rhetorically: *'Why would Operations want me?'*

Selective enforcement of rules

DEC's paradigmatic bias is also reflected in the process of reviewing ongoing research for publication. The Bank likes to claim that there is uniform, objective, external review, but that is not the perception of individual researchers themselves. While there may be written rules with specific requirements (which this author has yet to see, despite repeated attempts), evidence suggests and interviews confirm that reviews of proposed research, manuscripts, and individuals are done 'selectively'.

Most of those interviewed for this article commented that research critical of the neo-liberal model or opening the door to alternatives (i.e. without that necessary 'resonance') is likely to undergo stricter external review and/or be rejected. The review process, says a former Bank professional, *'depends on what the paper is [about] and who the author is. If you are a respected neoclassical economist, then [approval] only needs one sign-off, that of your boss. If it's critical, then you go through endless reviews, until the author gives up...'*

Discouraging dissonant discourse

Rather than revealing the Bank to be an honest agent of different views or even an institution willing to broker debate, my research exposes a number of ways in which dissonant discourse, while allowed at the 'fringe' of the research department, is generally discouraged. Dissent is

allowed on more marginal issues, but seldom on the core tenets of the neo-liberal model. How does this discouragement of dissent occur?

Discourse is part of the answer. On numerous occasions when the author asked Bank staff about someone whose work has raised dissent, the response was invariably that the person was '*idiosyncratic*' or '*iconoclastic*', or '*disaffected*'. In other words, people who do not project the Bank's paradigm are diminished or ostracised or deemed 'misfits'. Former DEC official David Ellerman has described the Bank as 'an organization where open debate is not a big part of the culture' (Ellerman 2005: xix).

This lack of openness to dissent is all the more troubling in the context of the rapidly evolving post-Seattle and post-Asian-crisis debate on development. Since the late 1990s, with the rise of a global backlash against the neo-liberal model, there has been – outside the Bank – a vibrant theoretical and policy debate about neo-liberal economic globalisation, as evidence grows of its negative impacts on economic, environmental, and social development. During this period, Bank projects and policy-based lending have come under heavy attack for contributing to these negative impacts. Yet, the Bank has been able to continue to operate relatively unchecked in its research work.

Take David Dollar's work.⁸ There has been widespread external criticism of Dollar's methodology by non-doctrinaire economists outside the Bank – from Harvard economist Dani Rodrik, Center for Economic and Policy Research director/economist Mark Weisbrot, London School of Economics Robert Wade, to Cornell professor (and former Bank professional) Ravi Kanbur, and others (including the present author). Rodrik, for example, reaches a conclusion opposite to Dollar's: 'The evidence from the 1990s indicated a positive (but statistically insignificant) relationship between tariffs and economic growth' (Rodrik 2001:22).

Yet, the Bank continues to project Dollar's work as if it is undisputed fact. This suggests a certain presumption within the Bank about what the right answers should be, and a willingness to ignore or discard evidence that complicates the answer. Ignoring the complications or caveats allows for the presentation of subjective and conditional conclusions as objective and scientific discourse – as knowledge. '*The point,*' explains a DEC economist, '*is that one type of research is encouraged, people know what type it is and they produce it, while another type is given short-shrift.*'

Selective presentation of data

What does the Bank do if data/research do not support a neo-liberal hypothesis? There is disturbing evidence that the Bank crafts, and even manipulates, the executive summaries and press releases of reports so that they reinforce the neo-liberal paradigm. A case in point of an executive summary that is so well crafted that it no longer meshes with the text of the report is a 350-plus-page 2003 Bank document on 'Lessons from NAFTA for Latin American and Caribbean Countries' (World Bank 2003). The summary (p. viii) states that 'real wages [in Mexico] have recovered rapidly from the 1995 collapse ...'. However, the text itself does not support this conclusion, as researcher Sarah Anderson noticed as she read it carefully: 'Table 1 of the summary shows that real wages in both local currency and in dollars have dropped since 1994... Figure 4 in the main body of the report shows that real Mexican wages relative to those in the US are also below their 1994 levels.'⁹

Anderson wrote to the report's co-author Daniel Lederman to ask how a table showing a drop in real wages in the 1994–2001 period could have been summarised as a return to a level 'roughly equal' to 1994. Lederman responded that the wage trends were complicated and

therefore the summary was meant to 'be vague'. As Anderson replied: '... to say that wages have returned to their 1994 levels when they have not is not merely "vague" but is inaccurate'.

Yet, Anderson seems to have been one of the few to read the report carefully enough to note this key discrepancy (or 'falsehood', as she more accurately phrases it). Indeed, on 9 January 2004, the *Washington Post* ran a long, lead editorial on the success of NAFTA, based in part on the World Bank report. Incredibly enough, the *Post* editorial chastised NAFTA critics who say that wage growth has 'been negligible', and instead noted that 'wage levels that match those existing before the peso crisis represent an achievement'. In other words, the Bank seems to understand and play to the fact that most people, including most journalists, will read only the press release and summary. In this case, in a significant arena for potential policy debate and reform, the Bank fooled a major newspaper whose editorials are read and used by key policy makers.

External projection

My research also concluded that the Bank's External Affairs department functions as a projector of DEC's paradigm-maintenance role. Dollar, for instance, did not have the backing of DEC only. The Bank's External Affairs department stepped in to publicise his work; it is External Affairs that has the 'money, media contacts, and incredible clout' to fly an author around the world.

External Affairs' rise in stature dates from the early Wolfensohn years under the leadership of Mark Malloch Brown (1994–1999). (Malloch Brown was later rewarded, becoming Administrator of UNDP and, in 2005, Chief of Staff to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan.) In Wolfensohn's second term, External Affairs' budget soared to become, by 2004–2005, comparable to the full annual budget of the Heritage Foundation. External Affairs has grown, the present author would hypothesise, at least in part in response to the increasing external questioning of the Bank and its model. External Affairs has become vital in the polarised public debate over the Bank's role.

Conclusion

These six sets of incentives raise significant questions about the World Bank's own argument that it produces and disseminates work of the utmost quality and integrity. My research should certainly raise alarm about further concentrating and aggrandising this role of knowledge production and marketing in the World Bank – indeed, alarm about any institution that seeks to monopolise and manage knowledge.

We also get a further, illuminating insight into World Bank 'knowledge management' by its reactions to my research. After reading a draft of my original article, a former consultant to the World Bank mused: 'I wonder what the reaction will be from the people in the Bank. A deafening silence? An invitation to participate in a task force to see how to improve things? A witch hunt to find your informants?'¹⁰ True to form, the knowledge managers burst into action. After the original, longer academic article on DEC appeared in a peer-reviewed academic journal, two gentlemen from the Bank contacted the journal's editors. Although I was not privy to the communication, I gather that the gentlemen found my scholarship to be 'poor' and the journal's review process wanting if such an article could be published.¹¹ The editors (who had, in fact, overseen a rigorous review process) offered journal space for the two to rebut my article, with the understanding that I would then be given the customary academic opportunity to reply. But such open academic debate appears not to have been to the liking of the complainants – who feared, I infer, that it would give my article further prominence.¹²

Clearly, there was something about my ‘knowledge’ that needed to be ‘managed’. I will let my case – that of one mere academic writing in one mere academic journal – stand as a concluding coda, as further evidence of the need to break up the monopolisation of ‘knowledge’ and its ‘management’. As Susan George, a member of the journal’s International Editorial Board, wrote: ‘Could it be that the letter of complaint [from the World Bank] helps to prove rather than to disprove Broad’s case – it struck me as a classic example of manning the barricades in the interests of paradigm defense.’¹³

My research suggests that there is an urgent need to question ‘paradigm maintenance’ and to fundamentally re-think research – and knowledge production and dissemination – at the World Bank. Does the Bank really need a biased research department? Does the Bank really need an External Affairs department to tout research that reinforces the highly discredited neo-liberal model? Would not knowledge – and development – be better served by supporting multiple and diverse independent research institutions, especially in the South? Should not the goal be to stimulate a more diverse development debate?

Development knowledge should not be managed. It should, indeed, be debated – not only by academics such as myself, but more importantly by those who are supposed to be its ‘beneficiaries’.

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Notes

1. ‘About *Inside Knowledge* magazine’, at www.ikmagazine.com/about.asp, retrieved 27 March 2007.
2. For those readers who are buzzword connoisseurs, structural adjustment loans became known as ‘anti-poverty loans’ and then ‘development policy support’.
3. James D. Wolfensohn, Annual Meetings Address, World Bank, Washington, DC, 1 October 1996, retrieved 29 September 2004. See also World Bank 1999. Another term now used is ‘knowledge sharing’, which the Bank seems to have come to believe has a better buzz than ‘knowledge management’. For more on Wolfensohn’s Knowledge Bank initiative, see the work of Diane Stone 2000, 2003 as well as the work of Jeff Powell and Alex Wilks at the UK-based Bretton Woods Project. See also King (2002), Ellerman (2002, 2005), Gilbert and Vines (2000), Standing (2000), and Kapur (2006).
4. See ‘Leveraging Trade for Development: World Bank Role’, paraphrased in Bretton Woods Project, ‘World Bank to “Intensify” Work on Trade’, 4 April 2001. See also Dethier (2005). The then Chief Economist Stern emphasised this in a 2001 meeting with the *Financial Times*, which reported: ‘...the chief economist of the World Bank... promised that the bank would provide intellectual firepower to the World Trade Organization... “The World Trade Organization doesn’t have the research capacity the World Bank does and looks to us to push the trade research agenda”, he said. “...The World Bank is the only organization with the depth of knowledge at the country level you need to discuss trade issues seriously”’ (Beattie 2001:14).
5. World Bank, Research Advisory Staff (n.d.) ‘Evaluations of World Bank Research: Research Support Budget Projects’, available at www.worldbank.org/html/rad/evaluation/home.htm, retrieved 22 October 2004.
6. The term ‘paradigm maintenance’ is taken, with gratitude, from the perceptive article by Robert Wade (1996).
7. My original article (Broad 2006) from which this present article is adapted expands upon these six mechanisms, and provides more detail on DEC’s structure, role, and impact; and how DEC came to embrace the neo-liberal globalisation paradigm.

8. A list of Dollar's writings is available at <http://ideas.repec.org/e/pdo54.html#works>.
9. The sources for this paragraph and the next two are World Bank (2003), along with the relevant press release dated 17 December 2003; Sarah Anderson (2003) letter to 'Fellow NAFTA-watchers', and Sarah Anderson (2003) email exchange with World Bank economist Daniel Lederman, 18–19 December; Daniel Lederman (2003) email exchange with Institute for Policy Studies researcher Sarah Anderson, 18–19 December; and 'NAFTA at 10' (2004) *Washington Post*, editorial, 9 January, A16. See also the response to the Bank report by Bakvis (2003) of the ICFTU.
10. Professor Robert Wade, London School of Economics, email to author, 4 April 2006.
11. The letter is quoted in Susan George, "'Paradigm Maintenance', or why we can't trust the World Bank's research', available at www.tni.org/archives/george/paradigm.htm (retrieved 3 February 2007). George received the letter of complaint as a member of the journal's International Editorial Board. The website cited here includes George's letter of response to the Editorial Board of 22 November 2006, as well as an introduction (dated 24 January 2007) contextualising her letter. See also Bretton Woods Project, 'Bank Attempts to Silence Critics', Update #54, 31 January 2007, at www.brettonwoodsproject.org.
12. Soon thereafter, the *Financial Times* (Callan 2006) reported on an extensive external review of DEC headed by (among others) Princeton economist Angus Deaton and former head of research at the IMF Ken Rogoff (Bannerjee *et al.* 2006). The 'audit' review reached conclusions that were shockingly similar to mine.
13. Susan George, letter 22 November 2006 to Editorial Board of *Review of International Political Economy*.

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