6 The World Bank and Apolitical Development

Much of the World Bank’s influence depends on its success in representing itself, its activities and the ‘development’ it promotes as ‘apolitical.’ World Bank officials have long been aware of the importance of the apolitical image: President Eugene Black wrote in 1962 that ‘[w]e ask a lot of questions and attach a lot of conditions to our loans.... [W]e would never get away with this if we did not... render the language of economics morally antiseptic....’ (in Swedberg, 1986, p. 388).

This chapter explores the apolitical image, shows how this image empowers the World Bank, and argues that the Bank’s engagement with NGOs, along with other factors, stretch the image’s credibility. Two myths underlie the apolitical image: the myth of the primacy of member countries’ sovereignty; and the myth of development as an apolitical, technical process achieved through gradual economic change, political stability, and integration into the global capitalist economic system. These myths constitute a formidable barrier to cooperation with non-governmental organizations. Where the World Bank does engage NGOs, the relations strain its apolitical image and confront the myth of sovereignty and of apolitical development with the highly political nature of the Bank’s work and influence.

Engagement with NGOs is one of several ways the myth of apolitical development is being stretched at the World Bank. The Bank’s emphasis on ‘governance’ issues and pressure from without and within for greater attention to civil and political rights in borrowing countries are challenging the Bank’s underlying myths (David Gillies, 1993; Jerome Levinson, 1992). In these areas as with NGOs, the realities of a changing world confront myths and structures that have served the Bank through previous changes.

The World Bank is neither apolitical nor a neutral servant of the wishes of its member states, but an organization with a measure of autonomy, considerable power over many of its borrowing members, and a variety of ways to exercise that power. Many of those channels of influence are effective only in the presence of the sovereignty and development myths: development plans with profound political and
distributional implications can be promoted forcefully if their basis is agreed to be apolitical and scientific. And when real economic choices are sharply constrained by debt and the absence of financial and institutional alternatives, emphasizing borrowers’ formal sovereignty softens the hard realities of power relations in their dealings with the Bank.

Tensions between the apolitical image and a highly political reality, and between the technocratic myth of development and the economic and social realities of poverty in borrowing countries, form a contradictory foundation for liaison with NGOs. As bases for World Bank operations, the sovereignty and development myths are fragile, but have been held together successfully through the Bank’s dealings with governments and with quasi-governmental bodies. The tensions and contradictions are sharpened by current efforts to involve NGOs in Bank-funded operations, by a new ‘popular participation learning process,’ and by the attacks of some of the World Bank’s NGO critics.

THE WORLD BANK AND ‘APOLITICAL’ DEVELOPMENT

The World Bank goes to some lengths to represent its own activity as above politics. This description of dispassionate analysis of technical problems by objective professionals is typical:

... a loan proposal or a policy question that reaches the Executive Directors ... has been very thoroughly discussed and analyzed by a group of trained professionals recruited on a broad international basis, with differing points of view, wide international experience, and an ever increasing sensitivity to the individual culture and problems of member countries (World Bank and IDA, Questions and Answers n.d., p. 6).

The claim of freedom from political considerations has been called a ‘principal element of the mythology of Bank lending ...’ (Ayres, 1983, p. 71). Thomas’ interviews of Bank staff show that the mythology also contributes to staff’s preference for the Bank as employer over a bilateral aid institution.

The Apolitical Image and Economic Orthodoxy

Legal scholar A.A. Fatorous (1977, pp. 23–5) argues that the apolitical and technical image is the most important dimension of the Bank’s