David Lewis

The Struggle for Accountability: The World Bank, NGOs and Grassroots Movements, edited by Jonathan A. Fox and L. David Brown. (1998). Cambridge: MIT Press. 570 pp. $32.00 (paperback).

This book focuses on the recent histories of efforts by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other civil society actors to hold the World Bank more accountable for the social and environmental consequences of its projects. Bringing together a diverse group of 12 authors (consisting of a combination of academics and NGO activists from north and south), this is a formidable volume in terms of its size and scope. Its 13 chapters are divided into three broad sections. The book begins with two chapters that map out different forms of transnational NGO coalitions and trace NGO advocacy approaches ranging from confrontation and protest to operational collaboration. The analysis by Jane Covey on recently evolving intermediate forms of "critical cooperation" is particularly insightful.

The second section of the book presents four case studies of transnational NGO advocacy coalitions in relation to World Bank projects in Indonesia, the Philippines, Brazil, and Ecuador, tracing varying strategies and levels of success. This is followed by a further five chapters that analyze the changing polices of the World Bank in relation to central issues such as involuntary resettlement, the rights of indigenous people, and access to water resources. The volume goes on to examine the ways in which the bank has attempted procedural reforms in relation to its accountability mechanisms—the information disclosure policy and the creation of an Inspection Panel. According to Lori Udall, it is "too early to tell" how far the latter is improving transparency. Finally, the last two chapters draw conclusions in relation to two central research questions: Have the campaigns influenced policies and projects, and how far did the campaigns represent those directly affected?

The authors assess the question of accountability by examining whether the bank has complied with its own social and environmental reform goals. A key strength of the book is that it seeks to construct an empirically grounded conceptual framework in which the accountability of large bureaucracies such as the World Bank can be analyzed. The book is successful in building an interactive framework based on a focus on "transnational bargaining over resources within and between three intersecting arenas: the world's leading international development agency, diverse nation-states, and increasingly transnational civil societies" (p. 536). The data show how all three arenas remain internally divided over issues of sustainable development and public accountability. The cases discussed in the book show a high degree of variation in outcomes (Arun III in Nepal was cancelled after a successful campaign, whereas Thailand's Pak Mun Dam was merely resisted, with a reduction in the number of people displaced) because bargaining and negotiation processes can be seen to cut across all three sets of actors in highly context specific ways.

This is quite the most detailed and systematic exploration of these complex themes that has so far made it into print. The book manages to present detailed microlevel studies of the efforts of NGOs to bring about institutional and policy change within the bank, but at the same time, several of the authors are able, with broader brush strokes, to make innovative links to current theoretical debates. This is one of the book's key strengths, because despite the growing literature on NGOs and development policy, there are very few cases of comparative, high-quality research-based work. Much of the debate about the accountability of the World Bank is frequently conducted with considerable passion but with relatively few hard facts. The chapter by Fox on changing resettlement policy shows clearly important differences between "organizational learning" and "organizational adaptation" and presents evidence to show that the bank's observed shifts in this area have been frequently driven more by a set of external pressures and short-term negotiated responses than by real insights and internalized change based on increased respect for people's rights.

Yet the book remains a balanced one, with no illusions about either the bank or the NGOs seeking to influence it. As might be expected, Fox and Brown conclude that "World Bank practice still falls far short of its promises for reform," but at the same time, the editors point out that transnational civil society coalitions are still somewhat "thin on the ground." For the changes in the World Bank to gather the momentum needed to translate into significant progress toward accountability within policy and practice, the authors argue that reformist elements within the bank will require stronger coalitions with pro-accountability forces within both state and civil society. Since the book was published, there will be those who will argue that, post-Seattle, we may have moved into a new phase of global civil society action in relation to international financial institutions. Nevertheless, the concerns highlighted here remain important and timely. This book can be highly recommended to anyone seeking a scholarly and penetrating study of these controversial issues.

David Lewis is a lecturer at the Centre for Civil Society at the London School of Economics. Before joining the center in 1995 to take responsibility for the master of science program in management of nongovernmental organizations, he worked at the Overseas Development Institute in London and as a visiting fellow at the Centre for Development Studies at Bath. He has undertaken research and consultancy work for a number of development agencies in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.

Reviews

Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly 2002 31: 145
DOI: 10.1177/0899764002311008