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## THE WORLD BANK TRIBAL POLICY: CRITICISMS & RECOMMENDATIONS

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## THE WORLD BANK TRIBAL POLICY: CRITICISMS & RECOMMENDATIONS\*

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The official policy statement of the World Bank, "Tribal Peoples & Economic Development" (Goodland 1982) is intended to minimize the adverse impact on tribal peoples that might be caused by World Bank funded development projects. However, this humanistic objective may actually not be easily realized because the policy as it now stands contains serious contradictions and represents a single philosophical approach that may not always provide the best defense for tribal peoples. Furthermore, this policy would preclude alternative approaches that might in many cases be more appropriate. One of the most serious problems with the World Bank policy is that it does not allow tribal peoples the opinion of rejecting a threatening development project. At the same time the policy takes a dangerously optimistic view of the benefits of such projects for tribal peoples and of the feasibility of safeguarding tribal cultures after a project has been initiated.

The issues that the Bank is addressing are extremely important because national development projects constitute one of the most serious threats to the continued survival and well-being of traditional tribal peoples and cultures throughout the world. While the Bank's concern with these issues is certainly appropriate and timely, in my view the present policy statement is inadequate and in need of major revision. My specific criticisms and recommendations follow.

### BASIC ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING BANK POLICY

The following questionable assumptions appear to provide the philosophical basis of the World Bank's tribal policy:

- 1). all tribes will inevitably be developed;
- 2). development will benefit tribal peoples;
- 3). tribes will be allowed a choice;
- 4). tribes must become ethnic minorities.

Some of these assumptions represent 19th-century colonial approaches toward tribal peoples that conflict with both the spirit and the letter of UN declarations on human rights and various international resolutions. Other assumptions seriously misrepresent the complexity of the development process as it relates to tribal peoples and cultures. In the following sections I will examine each assumption, showing where the Bank policy represents it and why it should be rejected or modified.

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\*An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the Australia New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science annual meeting in Perth, Australia in May 1983. Also see Bodley (1982).

## 1. THE INEVITABILITY OF DEVELOPMENT

The first assumption of the World Bank policy is what I have elsewhere called the "inevitability argument" (Bodley 1977:34-36). It is expressed clearly on page one of the policy as follows: "Assuming that tribal cultures will either acculturate or disappear..." This phrase is strikingly reminiscent of the words of Herman Merivale (1861:510), the English expert on colonial policy, who declared in the mid-nineteenth century: "Native races must in every instance either perish, or be amalgamated with the general population of their country." Implicit in this, is the notion of the superiority of industrial civilization and its moral right to incorporate what it considers to be obsolete cultural systems. The World Bank explicitly states that, "tribal populations cannot continue to be left out of the mainstream of development" (Goodland 1982:3), but we are not told why this is the case.

There are many serious problems with this assumption. In the first place it confuses changes in general level of cultural complexity, such as from tribe to state, with the adaptation of specific cultures to specific environments. Anthropologists have designated the first kind of change, general evolution (Sahlins 1960), and there does seem to be an inherent inevitability in the direction of change, but there is no inevitability that all cultures will go through the changes. Actually there is ample evidence in the archaeological record of great cultural stability for tribal cultures that have adapted to specific local environments. Australian Aborigines for example, maintained a basically tribal way of life for 50,000 years or more until the British colonial intrusion in the late 18th century.

The point is that the incorporation of tribal peoples into national economies is the result of the expansionist policies of industrial states, it is not an inevitable process initiated by tribal cultures. The real danger is that if the inevitability assumption becomes the basis of World Bank policy it will become self-fulfilling and will preclude the possibility of tribal independence.

## 2. THE BENEFITS OF DEVELOPMENT

The World Bank clearly assumes that development projects can be designed to both protect tribal cultures and bring them the "benefits of civilization." The policy refuses to recognize that tribal cultures may be so different from national market societies that forced development will unavoidably destroy their most important features. The Bank acknowledges that in the past national development projects have invariably harmed tribal peoples, but it prefers to blame these failures on inadequate planning (Goodland 1982:3).

The problem with this assumption is that it does not start

with a clear concept of what tribal cultures are like. The definition of tribal that the Bank uses describes tribes as ethnically distinct, small, isolated, non-literate, unacculturated, cashless, impoverished ("the poorest of the poor" p.iii), and dependent on local environments. In order to evaluate the effects of development it would be more useful to emphasize that tribal cultures are economically self-sufficient, egalitarian systems that are designed to satisfy basic human needs on a sustained basis. They are politically sovereign, small-scale societies that control their natural resources on a local, communal basis, and manage them for long-term sustained yield.

It must be emphasized that the kind of large-scale development projects that the World Bank would normally fund would take away the political autonomy of tribes and undermine their economic self-sufficiency, by imposing national political authority and forcing them into the market economy. These changes would in turn undermine social equality and would make local management of tribal resources for sustained yield, difficult, if not impossible. In the end, tribal peoples often do become impoverished by development while only a few may benefit.

### 3. DEVELOPMENT CHOICES

The assumption that tribal peoples can make free and informed development choices is presented as a fundamental principle of Bank policy. For example, page one declares that the Bank will not support a project unless:

...it is satisfied that best efforts have been made to obtain the voluntary, full, and conscionable agreement... of the tribal people... (Goodland 1981:1)

The problem with this is that the actual procedures for obtaining consent are not outlined and it is clear that there will actually be many cases in which the Bank will fund projects that tribal peoples oppose. Furthermore, the Bank refers to its procedures for "involuntary resettlement" (Goodland 1982:20) for those cases in which tribals resist development.

It should also be clear that while the Bank officially endorses what it calls "Cultural Autonomy" (Goodland 1982:28) and "freedom of choice"(1982:27) for tribals, the Bank's policy of cultural autonomy is very different from the "Cultural Autonomy Alternative" that I have advocated earlier (Bodley 1975:168-169, 1977:43-46). The Bank's version of cultural autonomy superficially resembles my own, and even borrows some of my wording, but the Bank deletes local political sovereignty of tribal peoples and would allow them only temporary control over access to tribal land. These are such critical issues for the future well-being of tribal peoples that the two versions of "cultural autonomy" deserve to be compared in detail, and they are quoted side by side below to highlight the differences:

WORLD BANK CULTURAL AUTONOMY POLICY  
(Goodland 1982:28)

1. National Governments & international organizations must support right to land used or occupied by tribal people, to their ethnic identity, and to cultural autonomy.
2. The tribe must be provided with interim safeguards that enable it to deal with unwelcome outside influences on its own land until the tribe adapts sufficiently.

THE CULTURAL AUTONOMY ALTERNATIVE  
(Bodley 1975:168-169, 1977:43-46)

1. National Governments & international organizations must recognize & support tribal rights to their traditional land, cultural autonomy, and full local sovereignty.
2. The responsibility for initiating outside contacts must rest with the tribal peoples themselves: outside influences may not have free access to tribal areas.

Significantly, the form of Cultural Autonomy that I advocated for tribal peoples corresponds closely to the position that tribal political spokesmen have consistently taken over the past decade in Australia, New Guinea, Canada, Colombia, Peru, the Philippines, and elsewhere.

A further difficulty with the World Bank policy of "free and informed" choice is that tribal peoples may not always be "informed" about the long-range consequences of projects. This is particularly the case when many consequences can not be adequately foreseen by the project planners themselves. This point is specifically acknowledged by the Bank, but the policy suggests that careful planning will minimize unforeseen consequences. In my view, this is dangerous optimism that only serves the short term interests of those who will immediately benefit from the implementation of development projects.

#### 4. ETHNIC IDENTITY OR TRIBAL CULTURE?

The explicitly stated objective of the Bank policy is for tribal peoples to become "recognized and accepted ethnic minorities" (1982:28), and "to minimize the imposition of different social or economic systems until such time as the tribal society is sufficiently robust and resilient to tolerate the effects of change" (1982:27). The substitution of "ethnicity" for an autonomous, self-sufficient tribal way of life, is really at the very heart of the World Bank policy. It should be made very clear, that while this approach may prevent large-scale depopulation as tribal areas are developed, and some vestige of tribal identity may be maintained, unique cultural systems will still be destroyed. Replacing tribal culture with ethnic identity by forcing development on unwilling recipients is in direct opposition to article 21 of the United Nations Declaration on Racism & Racial Discrimination of 1978, and clearly opposes the spirit of the UN 1948 Declaration of Human Rights.

I must clearly disassociate myself from this approach because the Bank policy concludes with a paraphrased quote attributed to

me that makes it appear that I endorse the Bank policy of turning tribal peoples into ethnic minorities, whereas I see this as one of the least desirable alternatives. Again, the two passages are placed side by side to highlight the differences:

a tribal culture...

"can continue to be ethnically distinct if it is allowed to retain its economy and if it remains unexploited by outsiders." (in Goodland 1982:29)

"can still continue to be an essentially primitive culture if it is allowed to retain its self-sufficient, subsistence economy and if it remains unexploited by outsiders. (Bodley 1975:125)

The difference between an "ethnically distinct" culture and a primitive or tribal culture is critical, as is the distinction between an economy and an economy that is a specifically tribal economy. The UN Declaration on Racism and Racial Discrimination of 1978 specifically:

"endorses the right of indigenous peoples to maintain their traditional structure of economy and culture...and stresses that their land, land rights and natural resources should not be taken away from them" (article 21)

The World Bank policy would grant tribal peoples an economy and an ethnic identity, but not necessarily their traditional tribal economy and traditional culture. This position has a certain logic, because the World Bank also rejects the retention of local political sovereignty by tribal peoples, and without local autonomy a traditional tribal economy and culture can not be maintained in the face of an intruding national society because tribal lands and resources will not be secure.

#### ALTERNATIVE POLICY APPROACHES

The basic aim of the World Bank tribal policy is clearly to accommodate tribal peoples to national development goals, while minimizing deleterious side effects. This is a reasonable objective where disruptive development programs are irrevocably underway, but it is certainly not the only approach. Furthermore, it is inappropriate for an organization such as the World Bank, which is in a position to shape development policies through its funding decisions, to exclusively take this approach. Other viable alternative policy approaches should not be precluded when projects are still in the planning stage. Alternative approaches would include helping tribal peoples that are already partially integrated with the national society to mobilize themselves politically in defense of their basic right to maintain their way of life. This would, of course, mean supporting local tribal political autonomy and tribal control of natural resources, and it could delay or divert specific development projects. This is no doubt the reason that the World Bank rejects such an alternative, but if

there is no real intent to respect tribal rights than the Bank policy should not pretend otherwise. Another policy alternative would be to recognize cultural-environmental sanctuaries for isolated, fully traditional tribal peoples where no development would take place. The Bank specifically rejects this alternative.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, I will list my main arguments against the underlying assumptions of the World Bank tribal policy, and will include several specific recommendations for revisions in the policy.

### 1. THE INEVITABILITY OF DEVELOPMENT

The incorporation of tribal peoples into national economies with the loss of tribal self-sufficiency, results from specific national development policies. It is not a "natural, inevitable process" that cannot be avoided.

### 2. THE BENEFITS OF DEVELOPMENT

Development policies that weaken the political autonomy of tribal peoples and reduce tribal control over resources will almost certainly lead to detribalization and resource depletion.

### 3. DEVELOPMENT CHOICES

The World Bank policy does not insure freedom of choice for tribal peoples, and they should not be asked to approve development projects when the long-range consequences for them can not be adequately foreseen by project planners.

### 4. ETHNIC IDENTITY OR TRIBAL CULTURE?

The preservation of ethnic identity and the creation of "successful ethnic minorities" should not be equated with the defense of tribal cultures, and may not always be the best alternative in a given development context.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The World Bank should not fund projects that would disturb or displace isolated, fully traditional tribal groups.
2. The World Bank tribal policy should include a full discussion of how partially-integrated tribal peoples will be allowed to choose development projects. There must be mechanisms for tribal peoples to reject threatening projects and negotiate specific details of the project as it affects them.
3. The international banks should not fund projects in states where tribes are denied a political voice within the national government and where state governments deny tribes full communal control over their traditional resource base.

4. A revised World Bank tribal policy should be subjected to critical review by a panel of tribal political leaders from throughout the world and by other recognized authorities representing a wide-range of viewpoints.

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