

TRIBAL PEOPLES & THE WORLD BANK

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In May of 1982 the World Bank published an official statement, "Tribal Peoples & Economic Development: Human Ecological Considerations" (Goodland 1982), outlining its policy toward loans for development projects affecting tribal peoples. The purpose of the World Bank policy is to minimize the damage that national development might cause tribal people. However, this humanistic objective may in fact not be easily realized because the policy contains serious contradictions and represents a single philosophical approach that may not always provide the best defense for tribal people. Furthermore this policy would preclude alternative approaches that might in many cases be more appropriate. This paper will examine the World Bank policy within the context of diverse contemporary approaches to the defense of tribal peoples. I will attempt to identify some of the most critical underlying assumptions of the World Bank policy, and finally I will offer some basic principles that might provide more just guidelines for national development policies.

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The appearance of the World Bank policy is without question a major event that will shape the future of tribal peoples in many parts of the world. It represents direct, practical recognition, by one of the world's most important development agencies of the fact that development projects have invariably been associated

- 3). 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 even be adequately foreseen by project planners.
- 4). 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.

Finally, I offer the following principles:

- 1). Isolated, self-sufficient tribal groups should be left undisturbed in permanent sanctuaries. Development projects should not be cited in these areas unless specifically requested by the people themselves.
- 2). Tribal groups that are already involved with the market economy, and who are not primarily self-sufficient, should be granted a political voice within the national society, and should retain full communal control over their traditional resource base, with the right to reject development by outsiders.

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with the steady impoverishment of tribal peoples. The new policy might appear to provide the basis for a genuine defense of tribal peoples because it declares that the World Bank will simply refuse to finance development projects that violate its guidelines and thereby threaten tribal survival. In concrete terms, the policy declares:

...the Bank will not support projects on tribal lands, or that will affect tribal lands, unless the tribal society is in agreement with the objectives of the project, as they affect the tribe, and unless it is assured that the borrower has the capability of implementing effective measures to safeguard tribal populations. (Goodland 1982:3)

The policy statement is forcefully supported by a discussion of loss of land, epidemics, demoralization, and impoverishment, that directly or indirectly accompanies the economic development of tribal areas. There is also a clear justification, on both moral and purely practical grounds, for defending tribal peoples.

The World Bank policy recommends that projects should be located where they will have the least detrimental impact on tribal peoples, but where they will be unavoidably affected, it calls for protection of tribal resources and tribal integrity, provision of medical care, and for some means for the tribal people to have "an adequate voice in decisions affecting them" (Goodland 1982:3-4). Certainly these are the minimal conditions of survival for tribal peoples caught in the middle of national development, but if previous development experience can be a useful guide, it seems a faint hope that these minimal conditions can long be maintained once a project is underway. Perhaps the

without interference. Here political mobilization for self-defense would be viewed as an unnecessary disturbance, and there would be no development side affects to ameliorate.

If the World Bank policy statement is related to this three-fold classification system, it will be seen to fall easily into the Conservative-Humanitarian category. This is significant because a Conservative-Humanitarian approach is most appropriate where a development project is already underway and it is necessary to help tribal peoples make the best of what may be a very unfortunate situation for them. At the same time, the World Bank specifically rejects a Primitivist-Environmentalist approach, and seems to view political opposition by tribal peoples to development projects as a costly delay to be avoided. The problem with an organization such as the World Bank taking an exclusively Conservative-Humanitarian approach is that it is in the position of funding development projects in the first place, and this is precisely where the broadest approach would be the most critical. At this early stage, no options should be precluded.

In conclusion I will list my main argument and suggest two principles that might better guide national policy toward tribal populations.

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

most serious problem is that realistically the World Bank policy does not allow tribal peoples the option of rejecting a threatening development project. At the same time it 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. Furthermore, it accepts unchallenged existing national development policies toward tribal peoples, while it prematurely rejects the possibility of alternative approaches including political self-determination movements by tribal peoples. It also rejects cultural environmental sanctuaries where tribal peoples could maintain their way of life without disruptive outside intervention. The only course that the World Bank policy ultimately endorses is for tribal peoples to become "accepted" ethnic minorities producing for the national society. In other words, tribal peoples must accommodate themselves to the ever increasing needs of the national society for resources, and in the process they must sacrifice their cultural autonomy and the most significant aspects of their cultures while they may retain acceptable folk customs.

The World Bank policy clearly promises to defend tribal peoples, and there can be no doubt that that is the genuine intention of its framers. However, the final outcome of this policy, as it will affect tribal peoples, must depend heavily on the specific details of the guidelines and the underlying philosophy. Given the importance of this document and its long term implications for tribal peoples and the ecosystems they occupy, surely it

category of approaches to tribal peoples that I have elsewhere (Bodley 1982a, 1982b) called "Conservative-Humanitarian." This is a reasonable approach for certain development situations, but it should not be promoted to the exclusion of other alternatives. While I will not repeat in detail my earlier discussion of the diverse philosophies that underlie different approaches to the problem of tribal peoples and development, three distinct approaches can be briefly outlined as follows:

The Conservative-Humanitarian approach seeks to accommodate tribal people to national development goals, while minimizing deleterious side effects. The long range objective is for tribal peoples to become successful ethnic minorities. This approach is particularly appropriate where disruptive development programs are already irrevocably underway but when amelioration is still possible. A second approach may be labeled "Liberal-Political." This approach involves directly opposing development policies, and seeks the political mobilization of tribal peoples for their own defense. Such political struggle may succeed in diverting proposed development projects into areas that will not disturb tribal groups, or it may help them gain larger concessions. Finally, the Primitivist-Environmentalist approach is concerned with undisturbed traditional tribal groups that are still self-sufficient within intact natural ecosystems. In these cases the objective would be the establishment of cultural-environmental sanctuaries that would prevent any kind of outside exploitation while permitting the tribal peoples to pursue their own life styles

deserves careful examination and wide discussion. In my view, the World Bank policy, is based on an inadequate concept of tribal culture and is seriously weakened by a number of questionable assumptions that may in fact actually perpetuate many of the problems that the policy seeks to eliminate.

I will begin my detailed discussion by examining the following four assumptions that characterize the position taken in the policy:

- 1). Economic development is an inevitable process that all tribal peoples will eventually participate in;
- 2). National development projects can be designed to mesh harmoniously with tribal cultures for the benefit of tribal peoples;
- 3). Tribal peoples can make free and informed development choices;
- 4). The best way to defend tribal peoples is to help them become ethnic minorities within the national society.

The first assumption is the "inevitability argument" that I have discussed previously (Bodley 1977:34-36). It is expressed clearly on page one of the World Bank policy as follows:

"Assuming that tribal cultures will either acculturate or disappear..." (Goodland 1982:1). 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. This view that tribal peoples must inevitably be incorporated

(1982:27). With this policy it may well be possible to prevent the wholesale depopulation of tribal areas, and the people that do survive may retain their ethnic identities, but they will nevertheless be drastically changed.

The substitution of "ethnicity" for an autonomous, self-sufficient tribal way of life, is really at the very heart of the World Bank policy. I must stress this point because the statement concludes with a paraphrased quote that makes it appear that I endorse the Bank's approach, whereas in reality I see the mere retention of ethnic identity as one of the least desirable alternatives. The World Bank cites me as stating that a tribal culture "can continue to be ethnically distinct if it is allowed to retain its economy and if it remains unexploited by outsiders" (Goodland 1982:29). What I actually wrote was that a tribal culture "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 a self-sufficient, subsistence economy. The remainder of my quote makes it clear that drastic cultural transformation follows incorporation into the national economy:

From the moment the distinctive features of a primitive economic system begin to be replaced by the characteristic traits of a modern cash economy, that culture truly begins to cease being a primitive culture. This is also the point at which the price of progress begins to accrue. (Bodley 1975:125, emphasis original)

The World Bank policy, with its emphasis on ethnicity and its generally pro-development stance, seems to fall clearly into the

and transformed by national societies permeates the World Bank policy. For example, tribal culture is described as a "dynamic reality" which needs assistance in order to develop "in a natural and progressive manner" (Goodland 1982:21). Elsewhere it is stated that "tribal populations cannot continue to be left out of the mainstream of development" (1982:3). Tribal reserves are seen as necessary "in order to provide time necessary for adaptation." "Acculturation" is treated as a continuous process that all tribal peoples are part of. Fully independent tribal groups are considered to be merely in the first, temporary, phase of the acculturation process. The assumption is that given enough time they will become productive members of the national society. In the World Bank view this is simply inevitable.

There are many problems with this view of culture change. In the first place it seems to confuse general evolutionary processes, that is, changes in level of general evolutionary complexity, such as from tribe to state, with the adaptation of specific cultures to specific local environments (Sahlins 1960). There may be a certain "inevitability" in the general direction of change toward increasing levels of complexity, and in the tendency of more complex cultural systems to absorb simpler systems. However, it is also clear that even simple cultures that are well adapted to specific local environments may maintain themselves at the same general level of complexity indefinitely. The archaeological record provides ample evidence of such cultural stability. Australian Aborigines, for example, effectively adapted to many diverse local

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 in the Bank document, although the document's framers clearly feel that careful planning will minimize the 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.

The final assumption of the World Bank policy, that transforming independent tribals into ethnic minorities is the best approach, is inferred from the fact that retention of ethnic identity is repeatedly presented as the desired outcome while other alternatives are either rejected or ignored. The World Bank presents its tribal policy as "intermediate" between rapid change and assimilation at one extreme, and isolation with no change on the other side (Goodland 1982:27). However, the policy makes it clear that tribal cultures will not be allowed to maintain their political autonomy and full economic self-sufficiency with complete control over their resources and their futures. The emphasis is clearly on saving people, rather than cultural systems. As the policy explicitly states, the goal is to create "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"

environments and successfully maintained a basically tribal level of complexity for perhaps 50,000 years until the British colonial intrusion in the late eighteenth century. For their part, the Aborigines clearly resisted the loss of their independence, and tribal patterns persisted in remote areas in spite of official integration policies well into the 1960s. Even now, tribal cultures in Australia are undergoing a revival under new government policies that encourage more local autonomy.

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. When the inevitability argument is the basis of tribal policy, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that effectively precludes the possibility of non-acculturation or tribal independence.

The second major assumption of the World Bank policy is that development projects can be designed to both defend tribal cultures and bring them the benefits of civilization. According to the policy statement, the detrimental side effects of development have occurred as a result of "inadequately planned development" (Goodland 1982:3). It is implied that these problems have no necessary connection to the cultural contrasts between nation states and tribes and can therefore be overcome by caution and careful planning. Such optimism is obvious in the following statements:

1. National governments and international organizations must recognize and 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 people themselves: outside influences may not have free access to tribal areas. (Bodley 1975: 169, 1977:43)

The outstanding difference on the first issue concerns local sovereignty. Without tribal political sovereignty, tribal peoples will not be in a strong position to defend their resources against outside intrusion. The World Bank policy would not support the political sovereignty of tribal peoples because this would give the tribals the right to reject national development projects. On the second issue, the World Bank policy would allow only "interim safeguards" against unwelcome outsiders. This would imply a serious weakening of self-determination and would be a further example of the loss of local sovereignty implied in point one of the World Bank's Cultural Autonomy approach.

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. Throughout the world contemporary tribal political leaders are on record against national development projects that would threaten their resource base and undermine their local sovereignty (Bodley 1982a:165-89). Where final decision-making power over development of tribal land resides exclusively with the national government there is no real cultural autonomy for tribal peoples.

It is frequently difficult to anticipate the nature and dimension of the impact that a development project may have on tribal people...Without precautions, the ensuing acculturation process proves prejudicial to such people. (Goodland 1982:iii)

While contact with nationals will inevitably bring some change in tribal practices and attitudes, prevailing basic customs and traditions need not be drastically altered or eliminated. (Goodland 1982:27)

The problem with this view, is that it does not start with a clear concept of what, precisely, constitutes the most critical characteristics of a tribal culture. Without such a baseline concept it is impossible to say when a given change will be "prejudicial" or so "drastic" that tribal culture will be effectively destroyed even though ethnically distinct individuals might survive. It is perhaps significant that the definition of tribal used in the policy statement avoids the most contrastive cultural features and instead merely describes tribal peoples as members of linguistically and ethnically distinct, small, isolated societies, that are non-literate, unacculturated, cashless, impoverished ("the poorest of the poor" (1982:iii), and dependent on local environments. A more useful definition, for the purpose of evaluating the effects of development, would describe tribal societies in very different terms. For example, instead of seeing them as poverty-stricken, they can accurately be described as economically self-sufficient, egalitarian systems that are designed to satisfy basic human needs on a sustained basis. Instead of being unacculturated and isolated, they can be described as politically sovereign, small-scale (Human scale) societies. They characteristically control their natural resources on a local, communal basis, and manage them for long-term sustained

involve the World Bank, a national development agency, a national agency administering tribals, a private consulting firm, and perhaps a "protribal advocate" who presumably knew what would be in the best interests of the tribals. The possibility that tribal peoples might reject outside intervention of any kind seems to be an irrelevant detail. Obviously a "choice" that only provides one alternative is not a choice at all.

While the Bank policy statement may speak favorably of "cultural autonomy," the project implementation procedures that the Bank endorses actually deny cultural autonomy, as argued above. This is a critical point, because the Bank's stated policy of "Cultural Autonomy" closely resembles an approach that I earlier labeled the "Cultural Autonomy Alternative" (Bodley 1975:168-169, 1977:43-46), but the two approaches are actually very different. Both approaches to Cultural Autonomy involve three areas of concern: 1). basic rights of tribal peoples; 2). access of outsiders to tribal areas; 3). competition for tribal resources. Both take the position that outsiders should not compete for tribal resources, but there are important differences on the other issues. The World Bank Cultural Autonomy position on the first two issues is quoted in full below and is followed by my position:

1. National governments and international organizations must support rights 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. (Goodland 1982:28)
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yield. The superior resource management abilities of tribal peoples is acknowledged by the World Bank, at least on the basis of "circumstantial evidence" for tropical rain forest tribals (1982:13-14). However, superior resource management skills is not seen as a defining characteristic of tribal peoples generally and the Bank document clearly minimizes the vulnerability of the tribal adaptation when it is faced with outside development projects. It is especially significant that the kind of large-scale development projects that the World Bank promotes would normally take away the political autonomy of tribal groups 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 do indeed become impoverished, while only a handful may "benefit" from development.

Thus, I argue, in direct opposition to the World Bank assumption that national development objectives can be easily and harmoniously meshed with tribal culture to benefit tribal peoples. In my view national development projects may often be basically incompatible with egalitarian, self-sufficient tribal cultures. Imposed development will almost certainly lead to disruptive wealth inequalities and resource depletion and in the long run will destroy the most important features of tribal cultures.

The third assumption of the World Bank policy, that tribal peoples can make free and informed development choices is presented