

Social development in the World Bank: essays in honor of Michael M. Cernea

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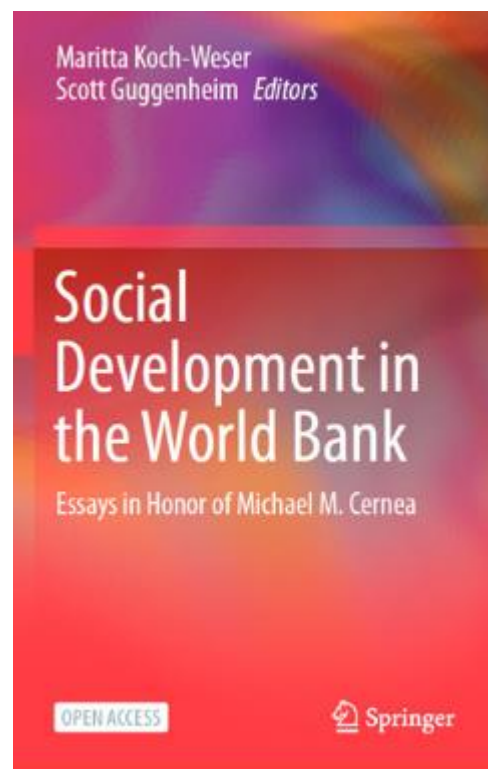
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Michael Cernea, an anthropologist by training, joined the World Bank in 1974 as its first in-house social scientist. This book is a tribute to him and his work, but in its 374 pages it expands to cover the evolution of social science more widely in the Bank. The essays are ordered in three main parts: the early days of bringing social science into the Bank; how sociology and anthropology evolved in the Bank; and a section on the displacement of people by large-scale projects (a turning point for the Bank in its journey towards becoming a people-focussed development organisation).

Different parts of the book will interest different people. For me, as a young agriculturalist working alongside Bank-funded projects in the 1970s and 1980s, the first part is of particular interest: it helps explain what was going on and what I also saw in the field. The blow-by-blow accounts (written with the candour of retirees) are particularly fascinating. They have a ‘Life on Mars’ feel about them: was it really like that? They describe an organisation dominated by economists and technical experts – an “army of colonels” – on a mission to promote national economic development with scant regard for who gained and who lost out. As Leif Christoffersen, the then head of rural development who recruited Cernea describes it, it was “an uphill battle ... with entrenched concepts and narrow theories, a battle with old mind-sets and habits ... carried out at headquarters but also in the makings and implementation of field projects”. I remember seeing some of that.

In the years following Michael’s appointment, Bank staff continued to argue the toss as to whether social development perspectives were useful, affordable or even needed. Eventually

the case was accepted. Cernea (who once said “development anthropology is a contact sport”) can only be admired for his tactical approach, style and sheer persistence in such an environment.

Other sections of the book may be of greater interest to new generations of TAA Members facing challenges similar to those that Michael and his colleagues did. There are lessons here about how to work in and influence large, resistant (or risk-averse?) organisations. Cernea attributed the disciplinary turf- and culture-wars and the almost-wilful blind spots that he encountered (about the adverse social and environmental consequences of many development interventions) to the university training Bank specialists had received, resulting in a lack of appreciation of the value of social development perspectives, and disciplinary defensiveness. I am thankful that having an agriculture degree meant I never had to defend the applied against the theoretical, or one economic orthodoxy against another.

Since then we have become more cross-disciplinary both in training and approach. For example, with the University of East Anglia’s BA in International Development with Anthropology: “you’ll discover how different aspects of international development such as economic growth, and social and cultural transformation, can affect people’s lives. You’ll have the opportunity to draw on other disciplines”. In the same vein, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office’s Chief Scientific Adviser, a mathematical epidemiologist, recently said: “From my experience, I would stress the importance of integrating social science into innovations systems” (Professor Charlotte Watts @FCDOGovUK on Twitter, 21 June 2021).

The section on displacement and resettlement gives a taste of the huge depository of experience the Bank accumulated, much of it negative. Cernea’s response, set out in his essay on the ‘Risks and reconstruction model’, was to make it clear that the inequitable distribution of gains and pains, benefits and losses, is neither inevitable nor justified. Involuntary displacement continues today, particularly in urban contexts; and over 82 million people have been forcibly displaced, the highest number since the Second World War, not by dams or city planners, but by conflict and violence. Cernea’s essay still makes good reading for those working on the present-day consequences of displacement.

For development students especially, Robert Wade’s essay on the Narmada dam project is illuminating. It’s not a pretty picture. But this (and other experiences) led to the Bank turning a corner towards the direction of the organisation we see today.

The final essay, by Anthony Bebbington, provides an overview of Michael’s achievements. He writes: “As a thinker in development, Cernea has to be understood as much in terms of his relationships to particular institutions as to development anthropology and sociology.” It also contains a warning: he notes that Cernea (2018) expressed concern at what he saw as a dilution of the Bank’s social and environmental safeguarding policies.

Most of the material in this book relates to the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. It would be tempting to say, “that was then, it’s different now”. Yet many of today’s development approaches that we take for granted – ownership, participation, empowerment, choice, fulfilment of human rights – have their origins in that period. The major contemporary challenges we face, notably climate change, will increasingly require large-scale and complex solutions that will affect the lives of millions of people. Let’s hope that in 25 years the next generation will not be looking back at what we are doing now and wondering, “what were they thinking of?” And, in any case, that there will be new Michael Cerneas to write about.

Jim Harvey

(TAA Member)