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Economic Ideology and Politics in the World Bank: Defining Hunger

DEVI SRIDHAR

A Virginia planter advised in the 1837 'Farmers' Register' that the most important subject in slave management was sufficiency of food: 'The master who gives his field hands half a pound of meat per day and two quarts of meal ... is better compensated by slave labour, than those who give the ordinary quantity.'

Alan Berg¹

First Nutrition Advisor to the World Bank in 1974

'Health is too important to leave it to the health people' – Jean Louis-Sarbib

'Like war and the generals' – Philip Musgrove

(Conversation between the Bank's Senior Vice-President and a former health economist at the World Bank²)

Since the early 1970s, the World Bank has become the largest financial contributor to health-related and nutrition projects, committing more than US\$1 billion annually towards the Health, Nutrition and Population sector (HNP). Other than as a lending agency, the Bank has innumerable unofficial functions, such as an advisory body, an intellectual research institute and a training centre for developing-country civil servants. Symbolically, the World Bank is the arbiter of development norms and meaning, combining intellectual prestige and financial power. Its annual World Development Report (WDR) and staff working papers have established it as an intellectual powerhouse whose research represents the cutting edge of development.

Given the significant role the World Bank plays in the global nutrition community, an analysis of the policy process for nutrition-related lending is critical. This article examines the interlacing of economic ideology and politics in World Bank nutrition policy. It is an attempt to uncover the workings of power through a close look at the structures, discourses and agencies through which nutrition policy operates, and in particular to discuss the process by which nutrition has remained an area of concern at the Bank.

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The Bank began to fund stand-alone nutrition projects under the presidency of Robert McNamara, who brought to the Bank an agenda outlining the moral imperative of foreign aid both for humanitarian and national security purposes. The first section of this article examines the ways in which the Bank justified involvement in nutrition in the 1970s and the role of economic principles, such as the reliance on market forces, in shaping the Bank's involvement in this issue. The history of why the Bank chose to make loans for nutrition is extremely relevant as it partially explains the significance of economic models in the HNP sector. This section explains how, in the late 1970s, nutrition was transformed from a medical issue to a concern for economists and an 'econometrics of suffering' was developed.

To publicise its new role as a development agency, the Bank focused its 1980 WDR on the importance of investing in the social sector since improved health and nutrition would accelerate economic growth. The Bank then adopted an economic theory on the individual which is commonly referred to as human capital theory. This framework justifies nutrition loans on the basis that they are an investment in the future productivity of a nation. The second section of this article examines the underlying tenets of human capital theory, as well as the implications for health resource allocation.

This shift towards addressing health and nutritional issues was firmly established by the 1993, WDR *Investing in Health* which was the first annual report to be devoted entirely to health. The 1993 WDR launched a new framework for applying economic principles to health through the use of cost effectiveness and introduced other cost-benefit analyses. Turning to the evaluation of potential nutrition projects, the third section of this article examines how the Bank has used the tool of cost effectiveness in health either to justify spending or to identify failures. While the importance of lending for nutrition is constantly in flux at the Bank, the Bank's approach to addressing this issue has remained essentially since the early 1970s. The final section of the article addresses the question, 'why does nutrition have to be looked at in this way in the World Bank?' In particular, it examines the ideological and political factors that have influenced lending for nutrition.

There is increasing interest in the use of anthropological methodologies to study the World Bank, such as that of Robert Wade on environmentalism, Gerhard Anders on good governance technologies, and Diane Stone and Chris Wright on internal reform.³ This article aims to add to the growing literature by revealing how economic analysis and politics intertwine in the World Bank's nutrition operations. Research for this article consisted of semi-structured interviews with current and former Bank staff, consultants and associates between June 2005 and January 2006 as well as critical discourse analysis of key Bank documents.

Mainstreaming nutrition into an economics-dominated organisation: 1971–1980

In 1971, experts from various fields and government officials from several countries gathered at the Massachusetts Institute for Technology (MIT) for the first International Conference on Nutrition, National Development and Planning.

That same year Alan Berg, then working for Food for Peace, published a paper in *Foreign Affairs* arguing that nutrition planning was crucial for development.⁴ This led to the Council for Foreign Relations sponsoring Berg for a year at the Brookings Institution to write a book on nutrition and national development. Published in 1973, Berg's *The Nutrition Factor* is viewed as catalysing the emergence of food and nutrition policy and nutritional planning on the international stage. Berg gave a presentation on his book to the Board of Brookings, which included Bank President McNamara.

Q1

McNamara was intrigued by the economic arguments Berg presented regarding the urgency of addressing undernutrition in developing countries. He contracted Berg to write a policy note on nutrition and economic development. This brief was crucial as it convinced the Bank's Board of Executive Directors and several senior managers that the Bank should start lending for nutrition. Berg made two arguments to the Bank. The first was that nutrition was a development concern that had an impact on productivity. It was not just a medical or social welfare issue. Second, he argued that nutrition needed the involvement of managers. It needed to move away from its association with 'medical, biochemist, welfare' types. The latter issue, the move from the medically oriented approach to the development planners' approach, positioned nutrition in the domain of economics. Berg argued that there needed to be a switch to 'macronutrition'. By this term he meant the transition of nutrition from the clinic and laboratory to development planning in institutions such as the World Bank. The mainstreaming of nutrition in development brought it into the domain of economists who dominate the development apparatus in the Bank.

The Bank management were hesitant to engage with nutrition because of its complexity, its inter-sectoral nature and 'the nature of the Bank's system for assessing and rewarding staff'.⁵ Health-related projects were viewed as a 'bottomless pit'. However, with McNamara's urging, the Bank's Board decided to finance the implementation and evaluation of certain largely experimental actions in countries with high priority.

Berg and others involved in nutrition during the 1970s and 1980s recount how difficult it was to convince the senior economists to lend for nutrition, calling it an 'uphill battle'. As one of the staff noted,

Nutrition has always occupied a strange position. I mean, economists think it's too complicated and there are no clear demonstrations of success. They think the evaluations are ineffective and that food subsidies are a bad idea. During the retreat on this, sceptics want to trash the nutrition programmes so we have to fight quite hard for it. Nutrition goes through cycles at the Bank. The biggest problem is the complexity, and task managers and leaders not knowing how to do it, how to get the project approved, how to push through such a complicated thing.

Similarly, as another member of staff explained,

The bureaucratic politics of mainstreaming nutrition – what a story. There were very very high objections and resistance on the part of senior economists who were more concerned with transferring money than what you did with it. They wanted a return. So the nutritionists turned arguments against them and created productivity numbers. They wanted numbers so we played that game.

Returning to the emphasis on numbers, several nutrition staff would argue that the Bank's main contribution to nutrition was quantifying the economic and social benefits of involvement in this sector.

Econometrics is defined as the application of statistical and mathematical methods in the field of economics to describe the numerical relationships between key economic forces such as capital, interest rates and labour. In the push to convince Bank managers to fund nutrition in the late 1970s, a new metrics of nutrition was created in which theoretical models were used to draw relationships between nutritional gains, labour, discount rates and productivity. Using these models, the previously unquantifiable, such as the value of adequate nutritional status, could be numerically expressed and thus enter into calculations. Economists were uncomfortable with the complexity of nutrition and the difficulty in evaluating the economic gains from nutrition projects. To make nutrition comprehensible to senior economists, production functions were employed such as:

$$Q = A \times L^l \times K^k \quad (1)$$

In equation (1), Q stands for output, A stands for conversion coefficient, L is labour, K is capital, l is the percentage increase in output per 1 per cent increase in labour, and k is the percentage increase in output per 1 per cent increase in capital.⁶ Once this was established, a second equation was derived that included food consumption as a proxy for nutritional status:

$$N(df) = N(dy) \times (dc/dy) \times (dq/dc) \quad (2)$$

In equation (2), $N(df)$ stands for the expected number of low-income individuals who move from 'poor' diet to 'fair' diet, $N(dy)$ is the number of low-income individuals at risk multiplied by the change in real income of each participant, dc is the change in participant food consumption associated with a change in real income, dy is the family income, dq is the estimated proportion of households with 'poor diets', and dc is the current level of food consumption.⁷ Once $N(df)$ is estimated, then the change in labour can be estimated and entered into equation (1). Using these two equations, a direct mathematical link can be drawn between an increase in food consumption and an increase in output per person, or productivity.

In addition, by using the proxy of food for nutrition in this time period, Berg could gain the attention of economists:

[E]conomic distinction commonly is made between food and nutrition – ranking food ‘high’, nutrition ‘low’; or food ‘essential’, nutrition ‘welfare’. Food has obvious tangibility features that nutrition lacks. Food costs and supplies can be measured, subjected to economic analysis, and entered into the national accounts. Nutrition in contrast often is invisible and dimly understood, and it seldom commands a price, especially among those who need it most.⁸

Berg had difficulty convincing the senior economists that the Bank should make loans for nutrition. For example, his initial policy paper for President McNamara was neglected for many months since there was an oil crisis in 1971 that diverted attention away from nutrition.⁹ Since this time, the numerical equations used to describe productivity gains from investment in nutrition have increased in complexity. Economic functions have been continually used to justify Bank involvement in nutrition as well as to increase the likelihood of management approval of nutrition lending.

Concerning nutrition metrics, since this time, the Bank has emphasised the use of production functions to justify involvement in nutrition. This dialogue is the only one that is permitted and used. This can be viewed as an ‘econometrics of suffering’, the situation where mathematical analysis of production relationships is used to determine the magnitude of nutritional deprivation and provides justification for spending to alleviate this destitution. Quantification makes hunger real to economists and planners.

The previous section has discussed how the language of nutrition metrics is one defining influence economists have had on nutrition-related projects. This section examines another influence: how the economic principle of information asymmetry led to a particularly favoured intervention by the Bank to improve nutritional status in developing countries. One of the key concerns in economics is the nature and extent of public sector involvement.¹⁰ The Bank tends to favour the private sector as ‘public sector institutions have often been found to operate less efficiently than those in the private sector’.¹¹ The World Bank argues that government involvement can only be justified in specifically defined cases. These include where there are identifiable failures in the market (that is, the private sector), which arise in the case of public goods, externalities and imperfect information, or where income redistribution is considered desirable.¹²

Bank nutritionists have perceived market failure as one of the key reasons why malnutrition rates are extremely high in South Asia.¹³ In this framework, government expenditure on nutrition has been justified on the basis that markets have failed.¹⁴ Information, in the form of nutrition education, mass communication or counselling, has been viewed as an adequate government response to this market failure. Behaviour modification is expected to occur through nutrition education. This approach is still evident today. As a 2006 Bank report states, ‘[P]eople do not always know what food or what feeding practices are best for their children or themselves ... [t]he need to correct these “information asymmetries” is another argument for government intervention.’¹⁵ Since the pilot projects of the late 1970s, nutrition education, using the tools of growth monitoring and

supplementary feeding, has been the base of the Bank project design. The underlying assumption has been that once individuals and households have the necessary information, behavioural change will occur and malnutrition rates will drop.¹⁶ Proponents of this perspective have used ‘positive deviance’ (children who grow much better than the median of their community) to argue that even in conditions of deprivation, households can adopt strategies to improve the nutritional status of their children. As a 1996 Bank document notes, ‘improvements in child nutrition so often depend on changing feeding and care-giving behaviours in the home’.¹⁷ Thus, the economic influence on Bank nutrition project design is apparent through the emphasis on nutrition education to correct the information asymmetry, as well as the significance of rates of return on investment.

Health as a commodity and health as an investment: 1980–1993

As a result of McNamara’s presidency, which ended in 1981, the Bank moved closer towards the role of a development agency. The 1980 WDR solidified the rhetoric that the involvement of the Bank in health and nutrition was justified on the grounds that investing in the social sector would accelerate economic growth. The Bank adopted an economic theory on the individual which is commonly referred to as human capital theory. Human capital theory employs an instrumental, rather than intrinsic, approach to project beneficiaries.

In general, health economists have used two alternative models for describing the attainment of ‘good health’.¹⁸ The first is the ‘intrinsic approach’, which conceives of health as one of several commodities over which individuals have well-defined preferences. The second approach is the ‘human capital approach’, or the ‘instrumental approach’, which constructs health as stock, or a future investment in an individual.¹⁹ The economic definition of human capital theory is that individuals allocate resources at one point of time in order to bring about certain outcomes at another point of time.²⁰ In this model, health and good nutritional status are valuable because the body is used as a productive resource. The more health one is able to acquire, the more valuable this will be in the future.

As noted earlier, health as investment was first emphasised by the Bank in the 1980 WDR on poverty.²¹ Since this time, the Bank has predominantly relied on the human capital framework to lobby governments to take loans for nutrition-related projects. Applying the concept of human capital to health, Berg argued in 1981 that nutrition and national economy were linked through investment in human beings:

Recently ... the concept of capital has been extended to human beings. Development of the new theory was prompted by the discovery that ‘increases in national output have been large compared with the increases of land, man-hours and physical reproducible capital.’ Investment in human capital is probably the major explanation for this difference.²²

Berg then described the many economic benefits of investment in child nutrition.²³ The first is that of savings on medical costs through reduced demand for

curative medical services (such as hospitalisation). The second benefit is that of reduced productivity losses caused by the debility of the labour force: '[T]he failure to meet basic needs for nutrition means higher death rates and a less productive population.'²⁴ Although conceding that the assumptions were 'heroic', Berg noted that productivity losses could be measured through a comparison of a country's average caloric need to average national caloric consumption. A country's average caloric need could be calculated through the occupational distribution of the labour force. The shortfall in national working capacity could be used to estimate the productivity losses from nutritional deficit.

However, Berg acknowledged the methodological difficulties with estimating productivity losses. First, using an indicator such as physical growth is made complicated because of infection and, possible genetic factors, as well as the reference used for comparison. Second, using an input-based indicator has problems due to recall, intra-household allocation of resources, the special needs of individuals and micro-nutrient deficiencies, as well as food waste. Third, nutritional status is seasonally dependent, indicating that it is hard to relate it to human performance at any given time. Finally, the relationship between income and nutritional status has been shown to be weak.

The third benefit of investment in child nutrition is the extension of working years, malnutrition reducing the number of productive working years. Other economic benefits of nutrition investment include a decrease in the incidence of infectious disease, better care for children, and returns on other investments in human capital, such as education. Thus an economic case was made to 'upgrade the potential productivity of those masses of unskilled, landless, adult workers who have dim prospects of gainful employment'.²⁵ Nutritional investment and subsequent economic development will 'get the person out of the isolated village and change their fears, beliefs and attitudes'.²⁶

Thus, in the human capital framework, initially propagated by the Bank in the early 1980s, child nutritional well-being and health are directly tied to future labour and productivity. This approach is still employed today. For example, in 2005, the World Bank estimated that malnourished children have at least a 10 per cent reduction in lifetime earnings. Thus, investing in child nutrition will have fruitful pay-offs in the future when the child becomes an adult member of the workforce.

A 2005 Bank document entitled 'To Nourish a Nation: Investing in Nutrition with World Bank Assistance', which is used for lobbying governments, states that '[T]he challenges of development require a strong human resource base – a workforce that is physically strong, mentally alert, and healthy. But malnutrition robs a country of these resources.'²⁷ It proceeds to discuss how '[C]hildren with retarded growth become stunted adults who are less productive ... [t]hese problems have implications for human achievement and economic development.'²⁸ It then presents data on how iron deficiency, anaemia, causes 'a 10–15% reduction in work output in many different occupations. Thus, the productivity of entire populations is needlessly reduced.'²⁹ Using this framework, the Bank estimates that returns to nutrition investment are as high as 84:1.³⁰

In the case of countries like India, the World Bank estimates that gross domestic product (GDP) lost to malnutrition is as high as two to three per cent. Worldwide, the Bank estimates that malnutrition costs at least US\$80 billion per year and for

India at least US\$10 billion.³¹ Thus, health and nutrition have been directly linked to economic growth. The initial productivity arguments that Berg used to convince the Bank's Board to initially invest in nutrition-related projects are still being employed today.

320 Using estimates of productivity gain and the human capital framework in the 1980s, the Bank created 'target groups' of individuals who should be the beneficiaries of nutrition projects.³² Since their creation for the pilot projects, the composition of target groups has essentially remained the same. These target groups should be viewed as economic constructs. They were defined by the age and
325 gender that would most impact on economic growth in the future. In the creation of target groups, individuals were identified as a beneficiary or an individual 'at risk' based on a single characteristic, such as age or pregnancy status. The beneficiaries were chosen based on their instrumental importance for the economy, rather than for their intrinsic worth as individuals.

330 World Bank nutrition projects have generally specified three main target groups as beneficiaries: pre-school children and pregnant and lactating women.³³ Pre-school children have been targeted because it is during the first few years of life that a child's most rapid physical and intellectual growth occurs.³⁴ Thus the 'benefits of nutrition and other inputs are . . . maximised when they are timed accordingly'.³⁵
335 A World Bank paper entitled 'Nutrition and Economic Sector Work' states that

Undernutrition's most damaging impact occurs during pregnancy and in the first two years of life, and the effects of this early damage on health, brain development, intelligence, educability, and
340 productivity are largely irreversible. Actions targeted at older ages have little, if any impact . . . Governments with limited resources are therefore best advised to focus actions on this small 'window of opportunity', between conception and 24 months of age.³⁶

345 The World Bank has targeted its projects at pre-school children because improving their nutrition and investing in their human capital will have the strongest impact on productivity.

Similarly, during the nine months of pregnancy and six months of lactation, a woman becomes the target of nutrition interventions. The predominant reason for
350 this inclusion is that it is during these stages that a woman is constructed as a mother or future mother. She must ensure the health of a future member of the workforce. Her nutritional status is valued instrumentally, not intrinsically. If solely her health was valued, then a woman would receive health services and food supplements regardless of pregnancy status. However, this is not the case
355 as non-pregnant, non-lactating women have not been included as beneficiaries in nutrition project design.

Pregnant women have been viewed as instrumentally important to decrease the incidence of low-birth-weight infants.³⁷ The most critical determinant of low birth weight is maternal malnutrition, specifically protein-energy and iron
360 deficiencies.³⁸ Well-nourished women gain, on average, 10 kilogrammes during pregnancy. Low nutrient intake and high caloric expenditure can compromise the health of the developing baby.

Lactating women have been viewed as instrumentally important to ensure that an infant is healthy during its first six months of life. Physiologically, breast milk is the best food for the child during this period, preventing infection while also developing the immune and digestive system. The main interventions that the Bank offers are nutrition counselling (breastfeeding promotion) and supplementary feeding.³⁹ Although a moderately undernourished woman can produce an adequate amount of breast milk, a severely malnourished woman may produce 20 to 30 per cent less breast milk than her well-nourished counterpart. To address this problem, the Bank nutrition projects offer food supplements which replenish a woman's nutrient stores and ensure the child is being breastfed sufficiently.⁴⁰

The second benefit of targeting lactating women is that breastfeeding acts as a contraceptive. Physiologically, infant suckling inhibits ovulation.⁴¹ In addition, cultural factors can result in post-partum avoidance of intercourse. For example, Ayurvedic humeral ideology states that food is progressively transformed from a series of body substances from blood, flesh and bone to breast milk and semen (*dhatu*).⁴² As *dhatu* reserves in the form of semen become depleted through sexual experience, the body attempts to replenish these reserves. This leads to a reduction in the amount of breast milk produced.⁴³ Other cultural beliefs in India include that a mother's breast milk spoils if she has intercourse while lactating.⁴⁴ Thus family planning could also have been a factor in the creation of the target group of nursing women in the 1980s.

The tool of cost effectiveness: 1993–2006

Since the 1993 WDR, cost effectiveness in health has become the flagship tool of the Bank to evaluate various nutrition schemes. The report attempted to reconcile the specificity of health with the traditional methods of economics.⁴⁵ The Bank argued that the tool of cost effectiveness was essential in making the 'right choices among sectors and among designs for any given policy and institutional context'. It was necessary to evaluate the different policy options to 'eradicate' hunger and determine which was the most efficient.⁴⁶ While attractive in rhetoric, the identification and measurement of costs and benefits for projects has been difficult for the Bank to operationalise. Prior to the 1993 WDR, a 1992 World Bank report on cost effectiveness and nutrition presented limited information on the cost per death averted of select nutrition interventions then concludes that the existing data on cost effectiveness is inadequate to properly assess projects. It notes that 'existing studies tend to cite over and over again data from the same few projects'.⁴⁷

Since the turn towards cost effectiveness, there has been confusion within the Bank surrounding an exact formula for measurement of costs and benefits. Discussing cost–benefit analysis, a 1994 Bank document states

Although it would be desirable to have a standard cost–benefit methodology with precise rules for calculation for every situation, this is not the present case ... [A]lthough the conceptual methods for identifying and measuring benefits are well-established, the

application of these methods depends crucially on a variety of judgements on both the measurement of benefits and their values.⁴⁸

The basic method for estimating benefits is first to identify the positive effects of an intervention on areas such as mortality, morbidity, work output and productivity.⁴⁹ The benefits of reduced mortality are generally considered to be the value of lost productivity, for morbidity the value of lost productivity plus the savings in health care, and for work output and productivity the additional days of productive work and the additional productivity per day. The key step is the application of monetary values to each of these areas. Table 1 adapted from the World Bank's *Nutrition Toolkit* illustrates the process.

Since 1993, the World Bank has emphasised the indicator 'cost per death' averted, and since 1993 the 'cost per disability-adjusted life year (DALY)' averted, as useful measures of the cost-benefit ratio of a project.⁵⁰ World Bank staff claim that 'computing the cost per DALY of interventions provides an objective measure'.⁵¹ Table 2 provides an example of a typical Bank cost-effectiveness analysis. The source given for the information in the table is 'based on author's assumptions'.

When presenting a tentative loan for approval to senior managers, the focus has been on whether the design of the project is the most efficient, the most cost effective, to achieve the desired impact. For nutrition, projects have been assessed on the cost per death or the cost per DALY averted. The assumptions by which these numbers were computed are seldom investigated. These analyses are based on theoretical models and quantification which are presentable and understandable to the economist managers. An example of this from Table 1 is the use of the indicator 'the present value of additional lifetime earnings from an increase in height of 1 cm', in which height has become a form of capital such as land. The body has been commoditised to have a certain economic value. Bank staff acknowledge the

TABLE 1. Benefit-cost ratio of providing food to malnourished children

Information	Value
Transfer of 50,000 calories to malnourished children leads to a height increase of	1 cm
Cost per 1000 calories	US\$0.20
Cost per centimeter of height gain in adults	US\$10
Average adult height	160 cm
Increase in 1 cm as percentage of average height	0.625%
Elasticity of labour productivity with respect to height	1.38
1 cm increase in height is associated with an increase in wages of	0.86%
Annual current income	US\$750
Increase in annual wages from an increase in height of 1 cm	US\$6.45
Discount rate	0.03
Real wage increase	0.02
Productive years	18-55 yrs
The present value of additional lifetime earnings from an increase in height of 1 cm	US\$174
Benefit-cost ratio	17.4

Source: Adapted from Margaret Phillips & Tina Sanghvi, *The Economic Analysis of Nutrition Projects: Guiding Principles and Examples* (World Bank, 1996), p. 87.

TABLE 2. Cost per death/DALY averted in iron interventions

Parameter	Iron supplementation of pregnant women	Iron fortification
Target group	Pregnant women	All people
Number	4000	100,000
Average rate (%) ^a	63	50
Programme effectiveness (%)	75	75
Deaths averted	10	10
Immediate productivity gains (%)	20	20
Programme duration (days)	200	Year round
Programme costs (US\$)	8000	20,000
Discounted wage gains (US\$)	221,280 ^b	1,682,720 ^c
DALY gained	624 ^d	4520 ^e
Wage gains divided by programme cost	27.7	84.1
Cost per DALY (US\$)	12.8	4.40
Cost per death averted (US\$)	800	2000

^aRate of anemia for iron supplementation of pregnant women; rate of iron deficiency for iron fortification.

^bCalculated as the product of the number of anemic participants times disability times wages times effectiveness times employment, plus the product of number of deaths times wage times employment times productive life expectancy.

^cCalculated as the product of the number of adult participants times disability times effectiveness times employment times wages, plus the product of number of deaths times wage times employment times productive life expectancy.

^dCalculated as the product of the number of deaths times life expectancy, plus the product of disability times number of malnourished participants times effectiveness.

^eCalculated as the product of number of adult participants times the rate of anemia times disability times effectiveness, plus the product of the number of deaths times life expectancy.

Source: World Bank, *Enriching Lives: Overcoming Vitamin and Mineral Malnutrition in Developing Countries* (World Bank, 1994), p. 66.

lack of rigorousness of these indicators and the implicit value judgments that they are based on. However, those in the HNP sector have been forced to present projects in this manner in order to conform to the Bank mandate as well as the related ideology of the Bank.

Both cost–benefit and cost-effectiveness analyses in nutrition suffer from methodological difficulties in practice. First, the impact of nutrition interventions normally occurs over a long period of time compared to immunisation or other short-term health interventions.⁵² In addition, most nutrition interventions do not occur in isolation. Nutrition education, growth monitoring and supplementary feeding often occur in conjunction with health services, food subsidies and school feeding programmes. This makes it difficult to conduct a proper assessment of the nutritional impact of a project. Third, the use of the indicator ‘cost per death averted’ is an extreme measure of outcome, neglecting the toll of malnutrition on well-being and general health. It does not include a measurement of the quality of life for survivors or the ‘dark side of child survival’ which refers to excessive morbidity.⁵³ Other problems with analysis are difficulties with data collection in the field and the use of different standards for measuring

malnutrition, which are both part of the general problem of large-scale quantitative analysis in nutrition.

Given these methodological problems, some academics have argued that the use of cost effectiveness in decision-making processes can be essentially useless. Development economist Alice Sindzingre notes that models and econometrics work at such a high level of aggregation and use such broad categories that, although they may always be proven true (non-falsifiable), they are still meaningless.⁵⁴ Although cost effectiveness can serve a useful allocative function, the conclusions reached are dependent on the values entered into the equation. For example, suppose that two projects are being evaluated to determine which is more efficient in achieving a death averted. If there is a clear preference for one, it is possible to determine first what the outcome should be, and then work the equation backwards to determine the value of the variables to achieve the preferred options. Reflecting on this, William Ascher notes ‘the staff member can, consciously or unconsciously, convert personal disagreement with policy into technical caveats about the applicability of the policy in specific cases’.⁵⁵

Despite its limitations, cost effectiveness is still a key determinant of a project’s approval by the World Bank. The 1993 WDR used the term over 200 times to reiterate the Bank’s contribution to health, namely in quantification of costs and benefits. Due to its subjective nature and value-added calculation, the label ‘cost effective’ has served as the Bank’s ambiguous symbol. It has been purposefully ambiguous such that it could reflect a diversity of interests and approaches. In each particular situation, depending on certain circumstances, cost effectiveness could assume the form needed to justify involvement and garner support or to indicate a flawed design. In addition, ‘power relations may use this very indeterminacy to select particular descriptions and present them as “the truth” (scientific) because the claim of scientificity (of being the exclusive truth) is a helpful tool for the exercise of power’.⁵⁶ Cost effectiveness has not been employed as a conceptual tool; it has been used as a tactical one.

The Bank presents its operations as being technical and objective, and based on sound, economic analysis. However, the assumptions entering calculations include several value judgments taken by Bank staff, both during McNamara’s Presidency and subsequently. These have been disguised in models and productivity functions which can be used to justify a particular involvement by the Bank in a nutrition project. As Paul Nelson notes,

Economic doctrine helps the Bank shape discourse about development around technique and science rather than values and politics. The presentation of economic theories as scientific formulations shields them from criticism, permitting the Bank to exert financial leverage to promote not ‘its’ way but a certifiably ‘correct way’.⁵⁷

Ideology and politics in the Bank: 1971–2006

During the negotiations with economists over nutrition-related lending in the 1970s, nutrition staff had to make tactical concessions which pushed them

towards econometric models. To ensure the survival of lending for nutrition, HNP staff have continued to translate their case into economic terms: 'the weapon of choice was numbers'.

As the evidence presented in this article demonstrates, nutrition has been framed within the Bank as an issue of human capital. In nutrition projects, the worth of project beneficiaries has been based on their contribution to the economy and thus to social welfare. This can be demonstrated by the allocation of a monetary value to years lost to mortality through using the individual's expected wages and by the creation of target groups. The target group of pre-school children has attracted considerable health investment. This has been justified by the World Bank on the grounds that proper nutrition is crucial for both 'physical and mental functioning' in their adult years.⁵⁸ A healthy child has been defined as a 'public good' in that 'it' (the child) has welfare effects for society as a whole.⁵⁹ Likewise, the target group of pregnant and lactating women has been given importance because of the functional role of mothers in raising children to be productive adults.

The human capital framework for nutrition within the Bank is a general reflection of the dominance of economics in public health development projects, which can be viewed as the 'economic gaze'. The economic gaze refers to the process by which those individuals working within the Bank on public health as well as the beneficiaries of public health projects have been disciplined and regulated through the constraints of economic theory. This has resulted in a situation where staff design projects in a manner consistent with human capital and other economic principles if they would like to gain loan approval from senior managers as well as be promoted.

Within the Bank, the discipline of economics can be viewed as hegemonic, the only way of examining problems, defining their essential features and suggesting solutions. The strength of economic knowledge is seen to lie in its ability to manage the details of a local issue, reduce the complexity and extract indicators and specific policy goals.⁶⁰ Local knowledge is considered messy, complicated, political and incomprehensible to the institution. Thus, an economic approach reduces problems, such as nutrition, to their core elements so that the professional expertise can digest them objectively and prescribe solutions.

For the above reasons, the Bank has been described as an 'economic fortress' by its staff where internal operations and activities are dominated by economic paradigms and frameworks.⁶¹ This is true within the Bank's HNP sector, which has often been run by an economist who ensures that potential project loans are designed to be consistent with the Bank's economic framework and legal mandate. This principle is a constraining factor on HNP staff who would like to justify loans or Bank involvement on other – human rights – grounds.

It has been argued that economists are diverse, so classifying them into a single group is misleading. While this critique is acknowledged, within the Bank there is an overwhelmingly Anglo-Saxon approach to economics.⁶² Unlike other United Nations agencies, English is the working language of the Bank.⁶³ Thus, this requirement favours graduates of institutions that teach in English. As fluency in English is 'tended to be correlated with preferred economic and social status', the Bank's composition primarily is composed of elites.⁶⁴ A 1991 study

of the high-level staff in the Policy, Research and External Affairs Departments of the Bank shows that roughly 80 per cent had trained in economics and finance at institutions in the USA and UK.⁶⁵ Ascher notes that the economists in the Bank behave very much alike, whether they are Indian, Brazilian, English or Canadian.⁶⁶ Thus ideological divisions within the Bank do not reflect a conflict between North and South as much as between the Chicago School and the Sussex School.

The Bank has also been described by its staff as a 'church protecting an orthodox bureaucracy'. One of these principles, a legacy of McNamara's Presidency, is quantification and measurability. As one staff member put it, 'If you can't measure it, then it doesn't exist.' The emphasis on quantitative language has resulted in staff becoming bureaucratic entrepreneurs and attempting to develop packages that can be sold to the economists on the operational teams. Alan Berg was a master of this. In the 1970s, he convinced economists that nutrition was an issue of lost productivity and brought a health issue into the realm of capital and economic growth. Bank nutrition staff gained the attention of senior economists through presenting 'hard numbers' and models.

Nutrition is an issue within the Bank has not had a stable or powerful position. Some economists have argued that the Bank should be a bank and not a health development agency, and that it suffers from 'mission creep'. They have argued that the Bank is a financial institution. It was created to address solvable problems with measurable returns using lending instruments. One member of staff noted that there has been continual resistance on the part of senior economists who have been more concerned with transferring money and delivering lending on time than with the quality of lending.

Despite the push to lend fast, economists have wanted a measurable return. This leads to a further problem that economists have had with nutrition: the effects of nutrition interventions are generally hard to discern, difficult to measure and long-term. In the Bank, Task Managers need to sell a package internally and ensure that it is judged successful by the Operations Evaluation Department. Thus staff are urged to think 'backwards', to pay attention to assessment. However, nutritional status is a complex outcome of multiple forces, making short-term returns unrealistically difficult to obtain. Reflecting on this tension, one staff member noted that 'it is much harder for the Task Leader to target and follow the money In countries with weak capacity or failing governments, it is impossible to show results.'

Since the 1970s, the approval of a project, as well as the career and survival of staff, has depended on his/her marketing success in making social problems economic ones. This has been done by creating equations and models out of complex issues. However, economic ideology alone does not explain the Bank's approach to nutrition. The internal politics of the Bank has been just as critical. The importance given to nutrition lending has constantly been in flux at the Bank. It has never been as prominent in the Bank as it was with Berg. During the 1970s, Alan Berg was highly successful at marketing nutrition using McNamara's support advantageously. This big name gave his projects credibility. One anthropologist within the Bank stated that this was the 'pragmatist' way to get things done, to go through unofficial channels using celebrity names to garner support.

However, nutrition continued to be important during the 1980s under the leadership of Anthony Measham, a savvy translator between nutritionists and economists. In the 1990s the Bank's HNP department turned its attention towards health systems evidenced by a decline in Bank lending for nutrition.⁶⁷ Part of the reason for the loss of interest in nutrition has been the difficulty in showing impact, as discussed earlier.

Nutrition has also had to compete with other social issues for attention. For example, one staff member noted that, due to the leadership of the UK in the G8 in 2006, the primary focus has been on debt relief and HIV/AIDS in Africa. However, as a result of the centrality of health to the Millennium Development Goals and their international importance, nutrition has been able to keep its place at the table. The Acting Director for HNP explained this trend thus:

Right now, to illustrate the centrality of this discussion and how meaningful it is to us and why we're attaching the kind of importance that we are, we will be having . . . what we call the Annual Strategic Forum. It's a small gathering of Mr Wolfensohn, our Managing Directors, our Vice Presidents from all over the institution, and a few other Bank staff to try to set out the strategic tone And the exclusive topic . . . is around how the Bank can do its part to contribute to faster progress on the Millennium Development Goals And within the Millennium Goals and the way in which the corporate priorities of the Bank have been defined, there are several themes where nutrition figures very, very prominently [These things] are really preoccupying Mr Wolfensohn as he entered the middle of his second term and looks at what kind of legacy he'll leave to the Bank and in development. It's very clear to us who work closely with him or hear from those who work closely with him that trying to make the focus of what he does over the next couple of years and what his institution does very much around not just measuring the Millennium Goals but trying to do something to change what happens by 2015.⁶⁸

As the Acting Director's comments reflect, for nutrition to be important within the Bank, it must be framed in a way that attracts the interest of the President and senior management. The position of nutrition within the Bank seems to depend highly on the nutrition spokesperson within the Bank, his/her charisma and his/her ability to form personal connections and manoeuvre the system. As a Bank consultant noted, nutrition requires a Task Manager who is 'capable of making the economic arguments for investing in nutrition, and who has networking skills and an entrepreneurial approach'.⁶⁹

Conclusion

This paper has examined the interlacing of economic ideology and politics in World Bank nutrition policy. These two factors affect HNP staff who must

design projects and work within the Bank in a manner that will ensure project approval and their sector's survival. They must produce designs that fit the operational guidelines of the Bank, while also pleasing senior management. They must make align themselves with the prevailing ideology – the social must be made economic – while also navigating their project through the internal politics.

Within these structures, staff have shown considerable agency. The translation of nutrition into economic terms, along with garnering the support of former President McNamara in 1971 and former President Wolfensohn in 2004, can be viewed as a triumph of ingenuity and good will. Money that would have instead been allocated to loans for infrastructure projects has been acquired to help the undernourished. Powerful incentives and limitations, as well as clever negotiating of the system by certain individuals, define how staff work and approach development issues.

Given the significant role the World Bank plays in the global nutrition community, both as a financier and as a norm setter, it is critical to understand how policy is formulated within the institution. My key point is that nutrition policy is a reflection of the political pressures and institutional constraints operating within the Bank. Technical economic expertise is moulded by the political, institutional and bureaucratic incentives. The prevailing policy is ultimately shaped by 'economic analysis, institutional constraints, and bureaucratic organisation'.⁷⁰

Notes

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