Open Letter to World Bank President Kim: How Your Anthropology Training Is the Key to the Success of the (Currently Failing) World Bank

Editor’s Note: In March of 2012, President Obama announced his choice of Dr Jim Yong Kim for Presidency of the World Bank. Dr Kim is the first PhD anthropologist (and medical doctor) to be named to head the World Bank and one of the few anthropologists to work for the Bank, whose leaders and ranks are largely economists. Dr Kim, a medical anthropologist, earned his PhD at Harvard in 1993.

Dear Dr Kim,

Though you probably never heard this directly when you were studying anthropology, your training in anthropology is perfectly suited to your new position as head of the World Bank. Anthropology actually includes the financial principles that are the key to human survival and prosperity. Indeed, our discipline’s principles provide the basis of international law and were supposed to guide institutions like the World Bank in promoting a form of globalization that promoted long-term human survival and prosperity. Unfortunately, these principles have largely been discarded for the short-term gain of a few at the risk of all humanity.

While I do not recall our meeting when I overlapped with you at Harvard in 1990–1993, where we both finished our PhD dissertations, I am sure you remember, as I do, one of the luminaries of Harvard’s anthropology department, David Maybury Lewis, the founder of Cultural Survival. Maybury Lewis often repeated our discipline’s credo: ‘The key to human survival and prosperity is human (cultural and individual) diversity and adaptability in a variety of environments’. He demonstrated how it served global economic goals and how unenlightened economists had sought to replace this and also to subvert their own teachings that were complementary to this approach.

If you are true to our discipline (and we will try to hold you to it through our professional code, as weak and unenforceable as it currently is), you will certainly recognize this basic credo and understand the implications for your role as World Bank President. The help that cultures and countries need from the global system and from institutions like the World Bank is not technology transfer to generate short-term productivity, or to transform their economies to produce what global bankers think weak cultures should produce or sell in a single, unsustainable, centralized, homogenous global system. Different peoples need the help to live sustainably with and to restore and protect their environments with diverse choices of consumption and production that fit with their traditions and identity as they freely determine them. They need help to transition away from colonial systems that increase consumption and undermine sustainability. That applies to all cultures and societies including our own, which itself is unsustainable.

The principles of anthropology indicate the essentials of a human financial and banking system for protecting human wealth and prosperity (as well as for those interrelated objectives that bankers routinely discard like ‘progress’ and ‘rights’ that are part of being human). Certainly, we as anthropologists use different terms for financial assets, economic freedom and competition, sustainability, security and development than you will hear in the jargon of economists. By translating our discipline’s essential principles of economics...
into words familiar to those now working at the World Bank, you make the Bank a friend of humanity while easily exposing economists’ subversion of their own principles.

Today, many anthropologists (probably justifiably) criticize the World Bank for its destruction of cultures and environments through land appropriations and other forced displacements of peoples from their native territories; disruption of food security and sustainability within resource bases through pressured ‘trade’ and specialization (production and resource sales choices) based on foreign decisions by lender countries; disruption of populations and sustainability through short-term sector interventions that do not look at long-term consequences (including health interventions); manipulated consumption choices in the name of ‘equality’ and ‘poverty reduction’; imposition of foreign political, social and education systems that do not fit traditional economies and resource bases; creation of dependency and debt; promotion of corrupt and violent governments that take some 10 to 15% of bank loans for their personal wealth and armies with the apparent collusion of the Bank, and other actions that could be labelled as (unprosecuted) crimes against humanity, including these that you should already easily recognize as genocide (partial cultural destruction) from your anthropology training.

While most anthropologists probably refuse to believe that you will be able to do anything other than legitimize or sanitize these harms in ways many fear will be co-opting and corrupting our profession, you actually have a wonderful opportunity to bring our discipline’s salutary principles to the Bank’s work.

How the Principles of Anthropology Can Be Restated in a Banking Agenda that Economists Can Understand

The global system, supported by multilateral banks, claims to support competition, free market, sustainability, protection of assets and growth of per capita wealth, but it routinely (probably intentionally) misapplies standard doctrines and measures. Anthropological measures, by contrast, hold economists accountable to long-term protection of wealth per capita and to sustainability.

Sustainable cultures, by definition, protect their assets (their resources, their environments, their traditions and their systems in a working integrated whole) and assure the maintenance of wealth and security, both for the group and per capita. Cultures diversify to fill different niches and protect resources, finding consumption and population patterns that are sustainable and that reflect local choice.

Anthropologists also understand the basic financial principle that wealth is a measure of asset holdings per capita and that long-term wealth depends on maintenance of one’s asset base without squandering it to sales or increased expenses (high consumption due to population or waste). We understand that the measure of well-being is long-term and is based on assets transmitted through generations and not sold off for current income, and that security is based on diversification within one’s niche not dependency on outsiders. We understand that resilience is decentralized and competitive, not directed from the centre by a few for the benefit of the few, to homogenous standards and manipulated to focus on colonial measures of ‘incomes’ or ‘productivity’ rather than true economic measures like assets, per capita wealth and long-term stability. We understand that the appropriate measure of economic ownership does not favour a few individuals owning most global assets for the benefit of short-term productive ‘efficiency’ but of cultural groups maintaining control over their lands and resources in ways that give them incentives to protect them for long-term survival.

We recognize cultural protection and identity as assets for survival, not as a lack of ‘social capital’ or a barrier to implementation effi-
ciency of foreign-directed plans. They are the key to the legally mandated and appropriate form of globalization that respects true economic freedoms and property rights of cultures in their environments. We also know that most cultures are not currently sustainable and should not be locked into certain patterns. We recognize that the role of the development banks is to invest in ways that restore such sustainability. Most cultures are broken or bear an imperial legacy. They are unsustainable and their consumption, investment and production patterns (largely reinforced by their neo-colonial and multilateral bank-supported governments) are worsening the imbalances. That is why the world needs an anthropologist in your position.


It should be easy for you to apply anthropology’s principles of economic accountability and human prosperity through a few clear commitments. Affirm the key principles of economics that are at the core of our discipline by committing to:

1. A post-colonial World Bank that bases its loans on interventions to reverse the disruptions to sustainable systems caused by colonialism (and now by globalization) in order to help replenish assets and re-establish balanced systems (Lempert 2010a; Lempert and Nguyen 2011). The key to this approach is to promoting independence and autonomy (the real competition and free choice of the ‘market’ and the protective globalization consistent with international law) rather than dependency and risk (Lempert 2009).

2. Country plans that are multi-generational sustainable development plans, with inclusive long-term sustainability plans for the world’s 6,000 cultures (including plans for each culture in every country the Bank works), not foreign investment plans in short-term exploitation for productivity increases (Lempert and Nguyen 2008). The international banks have yet to do sustainability planning in ways that protect wealth rather than force asset sales, technology transfers, and quick and illusory short-term aggregate ‘income’ gains. As a medical anthropologist, certainly you recognize how health interventions and other sector-wide inputs without an integrated sustainability plan may end up destroying cultures and their sustainability. By driving up consumption, current economic plans violate known economic principles by actually lowering per capita assets over time (land holdings, water, clean air, productive resources and other assets per capita) to assure long-term poverty and unsustainability. Moreover, global ‘development’ banks have corrupted and politicized their professionally required measures in order to hide this. In assuring sustainability of cultures, commit to standard financial measures of assets and wealth, not of income and productivity.

3. Legal accountability to international laws and ethics codes to assure legality and cultural protection. The World Bank has yet to adopt enforceable ethics codes or hold itself to international or public law and to lawsuits, or to screen its actions to assure real accountability to international laws and principles (Lempert 1997a, 1997b, 2008). In addition to opening yourself up to legal processes (including to the full meaning of the Genocide Convention and laws on crimes against humanity), rather than act like a sovereign above the law, you need to commit yourself and everyone who works with you to applied versions of codes like the anthropology ethics codes that you were certified as supporting. You can also start by eliminating all of the secrecy clauses that destroy transparency in the Bank’s work and undermine the rule of law, public oversight and the efficiency of the Bank’s work. Commit
to transparency in all dealings with foreign governments to dispel the notions that the activities of the Bank are part of criminal collusion with corrupt and oppressive government elites.

4. Professional standards rather than politics and conflicts of interest that riddle the work of international institutions today. From project design through to evaluations, not only have economists distorted the agenda of the World Bank but they have undermined the essence of professionalism (Lempert 2010b). As a doctor and anthropologist, you certainly recognize that standards are the key to professionalism, though they have been neglected today at the World Bank for economic theology of globalization and for political interests of donor countries and collusive, recipient, dependent governments.

So, how about it? The clock is ticking. Many of us do not think there is much time left for avoiding environmental catastrophe and wars on a mass scale that previous World Bank policies have helped to create. You have the position, the training and ethic to do something about it. Your anthropology degree certifies commitment to essential principles of humanity that we share and that you are expected to uphold and to teach, including in the leadership position at the World Bank. Those of us in the profession are ready to stand by you and to help. Let us hear that you remember our discipline’s teachings and that you are ready.

Respectfully,
David Lempert, PhD, JD, MBA, ED (Hon.)

David Lempert is a PhD social anthropologist, Stanford MBA and lawyer, who has worked in international development for more than 30 years, including projects with the World Bank, UNDP, UNICEF, USAID, EC, WWF, IUCN, other development organizations and government-aid programmes, as well as various U.S. and other government departments. He is author of A Model Development Plan and several accountability indicators to hold international organizations accountable to professional standards and the law. E-mail: superlemp@yahoo.com

References


