



World Bank Group Archives Exhibit Series

Robert S. McNamara, World Bank President:
April 1, 1968 – June 30, 1981

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WORLD BANK GROUP





The World Bank Group Archives Exhibit Series contains exhibits originally published on the Archives' external website beginning in 2002. When the Archives' website was transferred to a new platform in 2015, it was decided that older exhibits would be converted to pdf format and made available as a series on the World Bank's external database, [Documents & Reports](#).

These exhibits, authored by World Bank archivists, highlight key events, personalities, and publications in the history of the World Bank. They also bring attention to some of the more fascinating archival records contained in the Archives' holdings.

To view current exhibits, visit the [Exhibits](#) page on the Archives' website.



Robert S. McNamara, World Bank President: April 1, 1968 – June 30, 1981

Robert S. McNamara became World Bank President on April 1, 1968 and served two full five-year terms and a partial term, leaving on June 30, 1981. When McNamara came to the World Bank, it was lending about \$1 billion per year.



Robert S. McNamara, 1981

When he left in 1981, Bank lending stood at about \$12 billion a year. In addition to the dramatic increase in volume of loans, McNamara refocused Bank lending beyond infrastructure and projects to basic human needs and poverty reduction. The Bank that McNamara left in 1981 was completely transformed from the institution thirteen years earlier, when he became President. It was a much larger organization, and much more complex.

McNamara's Annual Meetings speech in Nairobi in 1973, when he first used the term "absolute poverty" was a turning point in his presidency. He proposed forming the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), which makes major contributions to increasing global food production and reducing hunger.



He mobilized Bank resources to launch an international onchocerciasis (river blindness) control program. And in 1978 the World Development Report, the Bank's flagship publication on development issues, was launched.

The strengthening of the research staff stimulated interaction with the academic community and allowed the Bank to claim a role as an intellectual leader in development matters. The World Bank was, to McNamara, "an innovative, problem-solving mechanism...to help fashion a better life for mankind

in the decades ahead."

From the Opening

Message to World Bank
staff, May 1968
(International Bank Notes,
1968)

Statement by Mr. George



Woods, President of the World Bank Group at a meeting with the press, Washington, D.C., November 30, 1967: "Both the Executive Directors and I are enormously pleased that Secretary McNamara has agreed to serve as the fifth president of the World Bank. In my judgment, the problems of economic development, which is the Bank's principal business, are one of the two or three most important influences which will determine the course of international events over the rest of this century. Secretary McNamara has for a long time had a deep interest in these problems and he will bring to them qualities of creative imagination and leadership that are unexcelled."

"In unanimously selecting Secretary McNamara, the Executive Directors – who represent 107 countries – have, I believe, recognized that the United States nominated one of its outstanding public servants to lead this world organization."

"More than any man I can think of, Secretary McNamara can give the Bank group of institutions the impetus that will enable them to continue to meet with increasing effectiveness their world-wide responsibilities. I feel entirely confident in turning the presidency of these institutions over to him."



Mr. McNamara at the UNCTAD meeting in Chile, April 1972