Discussion with Maritta Koch-Weser

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PleASe note: this is a full-verbatim transcript, edited for clarity.

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ELISA: Hello and welcome to Development Reflections, a series by the World Bank Group Archives. I am Elisa Liberatori Prati, the Chief Archivist. In this series we will discuss pivotal moments in development history and hear the personal stories of people in the field. Join us as we bring history to life, reflecting on our past and looking at the lessons learned. A disclaimer though, dear listener, that these discussions do not reflect positions or views of the World Bank Group. Now, on to the episode!

With us today is Dr. Maritta Koch Weser. Maritta is an anthropologist, environmentalist, and social entrepreneur. She spent her career working in international development. She took on managerial positions at the World Bank from 1980 to 1998, and later served as Director General of the World Conservation Union (IUCN). Maritta is one of the editors of Social Development in the World Bank - Essays in Honor of Michael Cernea, a book published by Springer in 2021 that examines the World Bank’s social development initiatives.

Today Maritta will share with us her experience and insights from the field. Welcome Maritta! Thank you for being with us!

MARITTA: Thank you!

ELISA: Let’s start with hearing your general impression of working in the field of social development over the years. Specifically, what advice would you give to someone who is interested in this field of work today?

MARITTA: Well, I would certainly encourage, all those who think about working in this field, saying this field has become more important over the last 40, 50 years than it has ever been before, in our minds. I mean, it was always important. When I started in development anthropology in the late 1970s, this was interesting. This was a dimension that people had missed, but it was - it was not center stage. Today in in many respects it has become more prominent, not because of more studies, but because we see, I mean just now the situation in which we all sit. We are in home offices because there is a pandemic situation, and the technical handles on it are basically available. Finance is available, at least in the better off countries. And yet, we don't come to grips with it in better off countries because of socio-cultural factors and attitudes. So we are all learning.
But, you know, I - looking back on what we fought for in my days at the World Bank, you know, there were - in those days there were no environment ministries. There was no social assessment process. Initially, there were no environmental impact assessments, and then came a world of protected areas on Earth. For instance, today, 15% of the land surface of the world is in some kind of natural protection status. Unthinkable at the time. Same is true for World Heritage sites. You have 1,100 and some by now, the Convention is turning 50 years next year. And so, the task for the sociologist, the young sociologist, I would be talking to today, or the young anthropologist, is keep it. How do you keep it? Because unless the people on the ground really keep it, or go to court to fight for it, all these achievements can be rolled back.

Maybe I'm particularly sort of hurt by recent experiences under the recent government in Brazil, where you know we never saw invasions in indigenous reserves. We never saw invasions, or hardly any, in natural parks and natural desert reserves, and we said look, Brazil has 50% of the Amazon protected. Well, no longer. Basically, the whole system is being questioned and rollback is a real danger. So I think that [for] the social scientists of today, one of the tasks is to deal with new challenges and to keep the achievements of yesterday.

I mean, if you want to go on storytelling you can say, well look how much natural disasters, in terms of the frequency and the gravity, have come to the forefront. And the poorest people that the World Bank deals with live on steep hillsides typically, or in floodplains where nobody else wants to build their house. I mean, in the not-so-distant-future you can say, with a bit of sea level rise, we also will see that 25% of the world population live within 10, 20 kilometers from the seashore. So there’ll be also middle and other classes affected, but there are huge challenges coming along, or already presenting themselves, where social sciences in all shapes and forms will be very important.

**ELISA:** So social scientists were pioneers when you started, and they had to fight as pioneers. And now again, it's time to fight to keep what was conquered. And somehow the same applies to politics these days, right, or democratic systems. To keep them going, you need to fight for them. Don't take them for granted so. ... [crosstalk]

**Maritta:** You cannot take them -- you cannot take them for granted. And in fact, also, until [James David Wolfensohn](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Wolfensohn) became president of the World Bank, nobody even mentioned the word religion. Now look how much religious attitudes around the world make a huge difference. We did not talk about, in my day, until Peter Eigen in his ex-World Bank capacity, founded Transparency International -
but corruption is a huge thing. Drug trade, illicit drug trade, is a huge thing. So yes, I think we have. We have new challenges. And of course, we have challenges that are fired [up] by systems of communication that did not exist at the time.

Elisa: Absolutely.

Maritta: I remember that when I first worked in the Amazon in the early 1980s, there were still these Telex machines, where you punch holes and somehow it got transmitted. Then came the fax. Well now our “beneficiaries,” quote unquote.

Elisa: Yes.

[laughter]

Maritta: They all communicate, all over the world. I will tell you an anecdote. When I worked in the early 80s in this first World Bank Amazonian program, POLONOROESTE [Northwest Regional Integration Program].

Elisa: Sure

Maritta: I was, among others, in charge of the indigenous ... of — it had never been done before, an indigenous protection project. Which meant, to really push for demarcations of indigenous reserves. It's one of my satisfactions in life that this has happened. And health, so that if there were any illegal diamond seekers or so, carrying measles or the common flu to Stone Age tribes, they wouldn't immediately die, on-mass, from it. I went, it was one of my riskiest missions in life. A tribe in Rondônia had been contacted for the first time, face to face, with the Indigenous Protection service. After 10 years of dancing, alright? So, one week later, I come there, and it was really very moving. I mean, these were people from a completely different era in our human history. And now, at COP 26 [Oct 31, 2021 – Nov 12, 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference], two weeks ago, in the opening ceremony, you saw a beautiful indigenous lady; Uru-Eu-Wau-Wa Surui lady, exactly from there, speaking to the COP. Imagine, 40 years.

ELISA: And imagine your emotion in seeing this, right. It happened ...

MARITTA: Yeah, the emotion but also to say, my God in our generation so much has happened good and bad. But anyhow - as a social scientist, it's very interesting, and sometimes frustrating, sometimes very rewarding, to look back, yeah.
ELISA: Absolutely. So let’s talk about the book Maritta, “Social Development in the World Bank.” It documents the initiatives and projects that birthed the social development field. What is the importance of publishing this book and what was its impact on the field and our understanding of the work done?

MARITTA: Well, let me try. We didn't mean to do such a book. We just meant -- when one of our group of early social scientists died, Shelton [H.] Davies, and he was a magnificent fighter for indigenous peoples and inclusion in development. We all wrote very nice notes, you know for the obituary service and so on. And then, one in our group of pioneers wrote back and said, too bad he can't hear this anymore. Why don’t we consider doing a gathering of our generation, whoever wants to come, for Michael Cernea, who was the very, very first sociologist, and who actually had a most interesting, distinguished career in Romania before, and in difficult communist times. So we did a seminar in Germany, and people came from Norway and from Egypt and from Oxford and from Cambridge and from China. And, I mean, it was fantastic. And then we all had little speeches, and we wanted to just do a Festschrift as one does. And then they - we looked at the literature. What's actually there? On this start of social science, where there had only been economics and engineering and public policy planning, what does today's student have? And of course, there are case studies, but there was no overview as to how this turn came about. And so, with a little extra effort, we thought, we could get a broader sort of portrait. And so we did. But I mean, many, many contributions. The first part really tells the story from the non-social scientist. So anyhow, the first part then is, for the first time ever, quite a series of articles of your regular Bank manager up and down the line, as sociology was not there yet or was just coming on.

The second part is about real-life experience and innovation. The second part then gives you sort of professional profiles of people who then were the social scientists, including Michael Cernea and Scott Guggenheim, myself, and others. Gloria Davis, who's no longer with us. Shelton Davis. So the student of today – I was thinking about some universities that have special programs in development studies, would see – so what did it look like? What did they really address? What was the product? And so on and so forth. What is the professional profile? And then after that the third and last part is exemplifying, in more depth, one of the conundrums of social development and planning, and that is resettlement.

The World Bank, in its policies, both on environment and social development, was really a forerunner. We influenced most OECD [Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development] countries and their bilateral aid. You know, we at that time, the Bank, [I see had] a different role from what it has today, because around it a whole orchestra playing the music has come up, but we were really the first
ones also on resettlement, and became so good that people would really try to get into an area where there might be a resettlement project funded by the Bank, because then, you know... I remember, when we were talking about Jamuna [Bangabandhu] Bridge in Bangladesh, you were very concerned about sort of early identification as to who was really there and would be entitled for any resettlement. This big topic in the third part of the book will stay with us for a long time, because in so many places on Earth, the people live close to a road that needs to be widened. It’s not so much anymore about the big hydropower dams, but it’s about other infrastructure. So we thought, we should point that out.

I think the book also points to areas where we – it’s not a book that just celebrates “look, what a great thing we did or developed,” because, in a number of ways the shoe did not fit or still does not. For instance, if you work closely with communities, what you really need is quick response. You have to do experimentation so, you need quick small money. Now that’s not very cost-benefit type of thing from the vantage point of big lender. Big loans give you the same amount of work, almost, as smaller ones might. We were always in a tension, and I think the book portrays this quite well, between the big and the small, the slow and massive. I sometimes compared it to elephants and rabbits. The elephants the World Bank was constructing and the rabbits that local communities might have used more quickly and while certain government was still in power.

We also failed on resettlements, to come back to that – long term responsibility systems were really not quite on the Bank’s books. Bank projects had five years, sometimes with a second loan extension, 10 years. But if you resettle thousands, and hundreds of thousands of people, the impact and the consolidation of resettlement will take much longer, and so our responsibility systems did not quite respond to, or correspond, to the guidelines we had in mind. So anyhow, that’s about the book, Elisa.

**ELISA:** Yeah. In fact, something that comes up in the book is that “Putting People First”, right? A term that was coined by Michael Cernea over 40 years ago in the Bank. And it has become the slogan of an entire movement for social development – correct me. But what inspired this shift, and how do we evaluate it four decades later? Are we succeeding at truly putting people first?

**MARITTA:** Of course, we don't succeed, but I think we do it much more than this was done when Michael Cernea started. To really look at it from the grassroots up, and also to understand – I gave you these examples in the beginning, that it’s not enough to, even in my field in environment now, to decree a park, unless the people are put first who live in it or around it. It’s only going to work if we take them into account, and I think we’ve understood that. Now in many countries, you also see a push back there.
You know, where NGOs came up, in Eastern Europe or other places. Citizens, organizations, people trying to raise their voice. Well, I mean, it's not always very comfortable in some large countries, in Asia or Eastern Europe, and other places. Also, some places in Latin America, of course.

I think what we may have achieved even more than being able to ultimately put people first, although we do put them much more to the front, is listening to people. Of course some of it is, you know, technique to do a survey and this and that and the other. But I think the listening, especially with modern communication tools, people can make themselves heard. And so, I think there has been a huge change. There's also been a huge change in our time already, but now with cell phones. People take pictures, they document, they force the authorities and lending organizations, their own governments, local and national to pay attention. So yes, there's been a tremendous shift. Have we been successful? I’m always careful with that word, success. You never are fully successful in such a difficult field.

**Elisa:** Absolutely, and this listening to the people is very interesting, and again brings us back to Wolfensohn, right, and the voices of the poor. Understanding the importance to capture those voices, to listen to them. And so he was a turning point again also in this, right, those years ago.

**Maritta:** Yes, absolutely. He was, of course. [laughter] Sometimes, his top management was not quite coming along, but I mean, I remember him. We were pushing at the time, when he was there, that cultural heritage, World Heritage, and UNESCO [United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization] sites should possibly be considered in World Bank lending operations. So, he was sitting there over lunch time, one time even with his feet on the table because he was relaxing, and gathering a group of four or five of us around him to brainstorm how we would do this.

Similarly, you know he brought in religious groups. There was this Lambeth Palace dialogue, conversation, roundtables. There were the learning and innovation loans and adaptable lending, which the Board did approve, which goes to the point I made about smaller, smarter, faster lending. Community oriented. So he was a great supporter of this. It takes more than one president to push such a new line. He was indeed a turning point of sorts.

**Elisa:** Indeed. And remember that back in 2011, you had conducted an oral history with the World Bank Group Archives on your years in the Bank. So you were reflecting back in 2011. Is there anything you would like to highlight or revisit? Compared to what was your perspective, thinking, back at the time?

**Maritta:** I think that maybe where I would like to update is simply on the push back. I mean the –
you are confronted with so many situations where good legislation was passed in the time of some World Bank program or loan. I mentioned the indigenous reserves, which are very close to my heart, and where suddenly in recent years, not just now, but already over the years, we see a push back. It’s like a curve that you know went up, became more open, more communicative, more social, and secure. We thought if something is put in law – well laws can be turned over, and they have been, in many a country by a government and a new parliament.

And I think this is what I learned over the last 10 years, that many of the things which I then considered as, you know, certain in a way victories, environmental legislation, environmental councils and institutions, protected indigenous reserves. Well, they are endangered. And then there were other things which we thought they were coming. Like for instance, the registry of precious traditional knowledge, which is dying out among indigenous peoples, as the old priests and medicine men, and so on, vanish, that this would be researched much faster. And again, I think there in hindsight now, I'm much more cautious and say, well, maybe we have not been able to prevent permanent losses in the ways that we thought we had.

Elisa: Sure, I see. And before you go Maritta, two things that I think our listeners would love to hear from you. Maybe an anecdote that stands out to you from your time at the Bank and some words of reflections on the COVID pandemic and some lessons learned. Maybe even a reflection on the role of the international organizations from you.

Maritta: Maybe I start with the latter. I mean, there are so many anecdotes. [laughter]

Elisa: Sure.

Maritta: On how, you know, I'd start with some anecdote, but then turn to the bigger picture, just how important it is to have an anthropologist in the field. So here is the situation in southern Mexico, where there was in Yucatan, a well 120 meters deep, and women – literally you could just pass one bucket down on a big cord 120 meters down, there would be some water and they would pull it up. And so of course these women very much wanted a better water supply. But when we asked the men in the same village, in a stone’s throw distance from the same well, and you know – what was really in their minds one of the problems of the village – they said, well, they really lacked a soccer field. So, the role of the anthropologist, and I would say the female anthropologist, was absolutely brought home to me. We had a big laugh, with these women hauling the buckets, 120 meters deep, and the men not reacting to it, but wanting their soccer field.
Elisa: It's quite something.

Maritta: Now, you asked about the international community. I think that it's so important not to have all these parallel systems, but to somehow always tie a knot somewhere to get a joint product. The World Bank, the IDB, the Asian Development [Bank], the Global Environment Facility – I'm still very much enthused with the Global Environment Facility. Maybe its governance is too complex, but at least it was one such knot, which was tied, in my days, to bring together the forces of different institutions. I think in that case it was the World Bank unit and UNDP for a new product. In this case it was to really do something about biodiversity conservation on Earth, and also climate. And I think we need more of these product-oriented collaborative initiatives.

Very much hope that something like this comes together, be it for the Amazon or the Congo basin. The key places on Earth where biodiversity, irreplaceable biodiversity, and irreplaceable climate functions, are just in the process of getting lost, and very tired kind of promises are made that by 2030, and by whenever afterwards. Definitely, when the current governments are no more in charge, something real will be done. So I think, as leaders, as spearheads, the multilateral institutions have today, just as they had in, you know, 30-40 years ago, they have a pivotal role in intellectual leadership. To go into these new fields and to say, let's engineer solutions and not just be observers. So, I don't have that much wisdom, because I'm not so close to the everyday work of the World Bank these days, obviously, 20 years after I have left.

Elisa: Absolutely. And a word on the pandemic, Maritta. Reflections ...

Maritta: Yeah, I mean the pandemic for me is just emblematic for the growing number of challenges we face as a global community. Not as nations, but as a global community. This one brings it home particularly fast, because a disease and virus spreads and adapts very quickly. But you know, it's the same problem we talk about when we talk about climate and climate change, and what we each of us must do to avoid it. And when we talk about biodiversity, which is such an abstract name for something hugely complex.

I give you one last example. In one hectare of Amazonian High Forest, you have more tree species, a greater number of tree species, than in all of Europe. So when we talk about destroying and burning these systems, it's a global issue, and it's just another pandemic of destruction. So I think COVID in a sense, is a lesson to all of us. That we cannot go it alone and we have to take into account the others in other countries and other places and other circumstances. And yes, to do so, you probably need also a
lot of social science expertise and ethics. I think that is something that also permeated our initiatives at the time and inspired some of the dedication the social science community showed.

**Elisa:** And on these wonderful words, on the value of social sciences in the development work, we can close, and it was wonderful to chat with you, Maritta. Thank you for sharing your insights with us today.

**Maritta:** Thank you very much, and all the best.

**Elisa:** And to you, our listeners, thank you for joining us. We hope you enjoyed this episode. Please join us again as we continue to explore moments in development history. Goodbye!