

Patrick Sharma
Proposal for the Conference
"Claiming the World: Universalisms as Doctrine and in Action"

"From a Global War on Poverty to a Global War on the Poor: The Politics of Development at
Robert McNamara's World Bank"

I would like to present a paper examining the politics of "development" at the World Bank during the 1970s. Development had long been acknowledged as one of the most powerful universal discourses of the twentieth century, yet our knowledge of the ways in which development has varied over time and in different contexts remains limited. My paper investigates (1) the ways in which Robert McNamara, the president of the Bank from 1968 to 1981, altered the Bank's conception of development to focus on the alleviation of what he termed global "absolute poverty" and (2) the contested, unanticipated, and perverse results of the Bank's war on world poverty. In so doing I examine the production of universalist claims at one historical site (McNamara's World Bank) and their consumption in others (the governments of developing states). My paper highlights the key results from my dissertation research on McNamara's presidency of the Bank. Drawing on a wide range of sources, including previously untapped materials from the Bank and the U.S. government, I examine how McNamara oversaw an unprecedented expansion of the organization's borrowing and lending operations and in the process transformed the Bank into the world's preeminent development institution. I then look at how changes in the international economy and in dominant conceptions of the development process caused the Bank to increase the scale and scope of its interventions in the affairs of developing countries. I conclude by showing how these processes culminated in 1979 with the creation of structural adjustment programs, in which Bank loans were conditioned on neoliberal economic reforms in borrowing countries. Structural adjustment programs accelerated global economic integration and helped to stabilize the international financial system, but they also increased rates of poverty and income inequality in recipient countries.