

# Interview with Bill Carmichael

**When Bill Carmichael joined the Ford Foundation in 1968, Ford was an active supporter of several aspects of human rights work and civil society development in the US, but outside the US things were different. It was Carmichael who pioneered these areas of work in developing countries. How did it all begin, Caroline Hartnell asked him. In the mid-1950s, when development primarily meant economic development, Ford was working closely with governments, helping them to build their capacity. When and why did the change to supporting human rights work and fostering civil society occur?**

In the 1950s and early 1960s, says Bill Carmichael, only a handful of American foundations were substantially engaged in development assistance in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The Rockefeller Foundation was certainly a pioneer, with major initiatives in agriculture (which played a key role in producing the 'Green Revolution'), health and higher education. The Carnegie Corporation funded research on development issues (including Walter Rostow's influential book on *The Stages of Economic Growth*<sup>1</sup>), and a handful of other smaller foundations, including Rockefeller Brothers Fund, were making grants in a few developing countries.

When Carmichael joined the Ford staff in 1968, development assistance, he explains, was conceptualized primarily in economic terms, and 'the name of the game was to facilitate both public and private sector investment as levers for accelerating economic growth'.

For development assistance providers, he says, 'an important corollary of this heavy focus on getting

public sector investment right was working with national governments of a wide variety of political stripes'. In Ford's early work in Asia, this meant major engagements in building professional capacities and promoting policy-oriented research in planning ministries in India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and several other countries, often with Ford-hired 'project specialists' occupying ministry posts. Ford staff did not get involved in assessing the political characteristics of their 'host governments', although in some instances, including Burma and Pakistan, the Foundation's activities were terminated because of insufficient progress in meeting their goals.

## **Working in military-ruled Brazil**

In 1968, when Bill Carmichael became Ford's Representative in military-ruled Brazil, the Foundation was similarly engaged with the research arm of the planning ministry, as it was in Chile, Colombia, Venezuela and other Latin American countries. It was also supporting graduate training and research programmes in economics and business and public administration in several Brazilian universities. Ford was also engaged in a 'law and

development' initiative that was heavily focused on facilitating domestic and foreign private investment as key engines for economic growth, rather than on the 'rule of law' and the role of the courts in promoting human rights and citizens' roles in political decision-making.

Shortly after he took up his post in Brazil, the military government of the time took what he calls 'a sharp turn to the right', most dramatically on 1 April 1969, when it forcibly 'retired' scores of Brazil's most distinguished scholars from their posts in federal universities. Some had to flee the country, he recalls. The next day a delegation of three professors from the Federal University of São Paulo, including



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## **Bill Carmichael's career at the Ford Foundation**

- 1968–71** Representative in Brazil
- 1971–76** Head of Latin American Program
- 1976–81** Head of Middle East and Africa Program
- 1981–89** Vice President for Developing Country Programs

Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who had been removed from his university post, came to Ford's office to enquire whether the Foundation could help them set up an independent research organization to explore policy issues and examine options for the eventual restoration of democratic rule in Brazil.

Carmichael responded encouragingly and requested the approval of the Foundation's New York office for a grant. 'Much to my dismay,' he remembers, 'the request was initially turned down on the grounds that it could evoke a hostile response from Brazilian authorities and perhaps even result in the Foundation being requested to leave the country.' But Carmichael persisted, and at the next officers' meeting the grant was approved. In due course the new 'think-tank', the Brazilian Center for Analysis and Policy (CEBRAP), was established. CEBRAP, he notes, continues its work some 40 years later and is widely regarded as having made important contributions to Brazil's redemocratization, while Cardoso went on to serve for two terms (1995–2003) as president of Brazil.

Why was the grant approved the second time around? First, Carmichael thinks that he was able to argue convincingly that he had done enough checking with people in or near government to be reasonably confident that the grant would not fatally compromise Ford's ability to continue its work in Brazil. Second, he believes that there was 'growing sentiment in the Foundation's senior leadership in New York that we ought to be concerned about the nature of the governments in countries in which we were heavily engaged'. But the Brazilian Government was clearly not entirely happy. Some months later, he recalls, he was asked to meet with a rather embarrassed senior staff member of the US Consulate in Rio de Janeiro, 'who reported that Brazilian Government officials, while expressing their appreciation for the Foundation's work in economics and agriculture, had expressed concern over our support for research in sociology (which they appeared to conflate with "socialism") and similar fields.'

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### **A gradual change of emphasis**

In the early 1970s, under Carmichael's leadership from the Foundation's New York Office, Ford's Latin American programme wound down its direct support for work in government agencies. As democratically elected governments were succeeded by harshly authoritarian regimes in many parts of the region, it funded an increasing array of 'think-tanks' and other civil society organizations. In most countries the shift was gradual: 'We tested the waters, but we became increasingly sure that, even under severely rights-abusing regimes, we could support activities that could perhaps hasten the return of democratic government, or in any event produce important dividends upon the return of democratic rule.'

In Chile, in the wake of the military coup of 11 September 1973, Carmichael notes, the change in approach was more abrupt. Funding was quickly made available for the creation of several new think-tanks for policy-oriented researchers who found it impossible to continue their work in government-funded universities. As evidence of the value and practical consequences of those 'investments', Carmichael observes that when the Pinochet regime was replaced with the election of Patricio Aylwin as Chile's president in 1990, three ministers and several other senior officials of Aylwin's government were drawn from the staff of those Ford-funded organizations.

In Latin America, as the dark days of military rule extended into the late 1970s and 1980s, Ford also made a number of perhaps bolder grants for more activist, human rights-related activities by civil society organizations – some but not all of which enjoyed the protective sponsorship of church or international agencies. It is worth remembering, Carmichael notes, that when the first such grants were approved, very few American foundations were engaged in supporting human rights activism in overseas settings. 'Ford is by no means alone now,' says Carmichael, 'but it was certainly an important pioneer in that field, particularly in Latin America. Initially, we assisted such work in a very low-key way. Some Foundation staff in other developing regions, where close partnerships with government agencies still characterized much of our work, questioned the wisdom, or viability, of support for human rights undertakings.' In 1976 or 1977, however, after an internal staff review, the board's approval was obtained for a special appropriation

for international human rights work. Initial support was then provided for the organization that evolved into Human Rights Watch, and the stage was set for the eventual development of a major initiative in that field.

### From Latin America to Africa

In 1976, McGeorge Bundy, the Foundation's president, asked Carmichael to assume responsibility for Ford's programmes in Africa and the Middle East. 'With very little prior experience in those two unusually challenging regions, I accepted the assignment with some misgivings,' he notes. 'But I was particularly intrigued at the prospect of testing how transferable the Latin American experience of assisting the development of civil society human rights initiatives would be in (then) minority-ruled South Africa, where I would assume direct grantmaking responsibilities from New York (rather than assigning them to field office staff).'

Soon after taking up the new post, therefore, and in the immediate aftermath of the Soweto riots that began in mid-June 1976, he travelled to South Africa. There he met a wide range of leaders of relevant university-based and civil society organizations and asked for their advice on how Ford could most effectively contribute to the alleviation of rights abuses in the near term and to building a strong base for a well-governed and just post-apartheid South Africa. 'On the basis of the advice that I received in that first and several subsequent visits to South Africa, I concluded that the field of law was a particularly promising arena for Foundation investments, and that two institutions in that field merited immediate attention.' The first of these was the Centre for Applied Legal Studies (CALS) of the University of Witwatersrand, which was engaged in research and litigation, with particular emphasis on issues relating to labour rights and freedom of expression. The second was a then nascent civil society organization, the Legal Resources Centre (LRC), which had a broader array of rights-related concerns and plans for 'high impact' litigation.

In the late 1970s, therefore, in collaboration with the Carnegie Corporation and the Rockefeller Foundation, Ford made the first of a long string of grants to each of those institutions. 'With the benefit of hindsight, I am fully persuaded that the impact of that support, both in the last 15 years of the apartheid era and in the post-apartheid period (ushered in by the election of Nelson Mandela as



ABE DULBERG/FORD FOUNDATION

Rights pioneer William 'Bill' Carmichael around 1982.

president in 1994 and the adoption of a new and exceedingly rights-supportive constitution in 1996), has vastly exceeded my very high expectations.'

During the waning years of the apartheid period the staff of both institutions engaged in litigation, based on carefully conducted research, 'which effectively demonstrated that, even under very difficult circumstances, law can be an effective instrument for securing (rather than restricting) rights'. In more recent years, both institutions have also made 'critically important contributions' to assuring the rule of law and protecting and expanding human rights in the 'new' South Africa – not least by training many of those who would later assume key posts in the judicial system. Arthur Chaskelson, founder and first director of the Legal Resources Centre, was appointed by President Mandela in June 1994 to serve as the first president of South Africa's new Constitutional Court (the apex of South Africa's judicial structure). Many other former staff members of LRC, CALS and other Ford grantees in the law and rights field have served as judges of the Constitutional Court and in other senior positions since the advent of majority rule.

During the last 15 years of apartheid rule, Ford also supported a considerable number of community-based and national civil society organizations that provided much needed services for particularly disadvantaged South Africans. These also served, in several instances, as training grounds for black South Africans who subsequently assumed important posts in government at national, provincial or municipal levels. 'In so doing they have helped address one of the aims of a new, or newly labelled, field of activity that featured prominently in a new Foundation-wide programme structure that was introduced in 1981.' ▷

### Enter the term ‘governance’

In 1981, Carmichael was appointed vice president with responsibilities for overseeing Ford’s Developing Country Programs globally. Working in partnership with Susan Berresford, the newly appointed vice president in charge of Ford’s United States Programs, he developed a new Foundation-wide programme structure with four major units. One of those units was intended to embrace Ford’s work in support of human rights and a related set of activities, undertaken primarily by civil society organizations both in the US and in some overseas settings, that were aimed at making governments more responsive to the needs and wishes of their citizens.

‘The term “governance” was not then in general use in describing these initiatives,’ he recalls. ‘I think it came to my mind from the writings of early 19th century moral philosophers, and it struck me as a particularly apt term for activities very different from the “state-building” initiatives that Ford had long supported under the rubric “development planning and management”.’ Accordingly, the new programme unit was labelled ‘human rights and governance’.

In 1981 that new label, Carmichael argues, was a good fit with a growing array of Ford activities – particularly in Latin America and South Africa, where the Foundation was assisting a number of ‘think-tanks’ and more activist organizations working to curb the abuses of authoritarian regimes. But in parts of Asia, where Ford was still working closely with government ministries in the Marcos-led Philippines and Suharto-led Indonesia well into the 1980s, ‘I suspect that it may have struck a rather discordant note. In some instances,’ he notes, ‘old habits and old perceptions of the Foundation’s role were not easily changed.’

Carmichael recalls a visit to the Philippines in February 1986 soon after the ‘People Power Revolution’ had toppled the Marcos regime and Corazon Aquino had become president. Upon arriving in Manila, he found that prominent religious leaders and the leaders of some of the

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Philippines’ most accomplished and widely respected civil society organizations were initially unwilling to meet with someone from Ford ‘because they regarded Ford as having been much too closely involved with the Marcos government. It was only after learning of some of the Foundation’s work in Chile, and elsewhere in Latin America, that they were willing to consider the possibility of Foundation support for the work of their organizations on human rights and governance.’

### Work at the community level

It has become almost a truism to say that strengthening civil society organizations is an important way of fostering democracy and better governance, and it is a view that Carmichael subscribes to. But he points out that, with very few exceptions, the organizations that Ford was supporting in Latin America and South Africa were not community-based or community-governed.

‘There’s another type of civil society organization,’ he quickly adds, ‘that should be carefully examined when we seek to promote better governance, combat pervasive corruption, or nurture effective peace-building and conflict resolution efforts – those that are firmly rooted at the community level.’ When he was at Ford, he notes, the Foundation did very little with community-based organizations in its developing country programmes. But having worked since leaving Ford some 19 years ago with Ashoka and other highly creative organizations assisting development at the community level, he is ‘increasingly persuaded that much of the most innovative work in the field of governance is being undertaken by organizations that are firmly rooted in the communities they seek to serve’.

While Transparency International focuses primarily on high-level corruption, several Ashoka Fellows have developed creative initiatives to cope with a broad array of governance issues at the community level. He cites as examples a Fellow in Java fighting corruption by mobilizing citizens to refuse to pay bribes for the documents required to get their children into schools and another in Nigeria developing simpler and less costly ways of resolving disputes that would otherwise clog the dockets of municipal courts. ‘I’m increasingly convinced that tackling issues like corruption and ethnic conflict at the community level is a critically important strategy for changing attitudes towards

and expectations from governments among the population at large.’

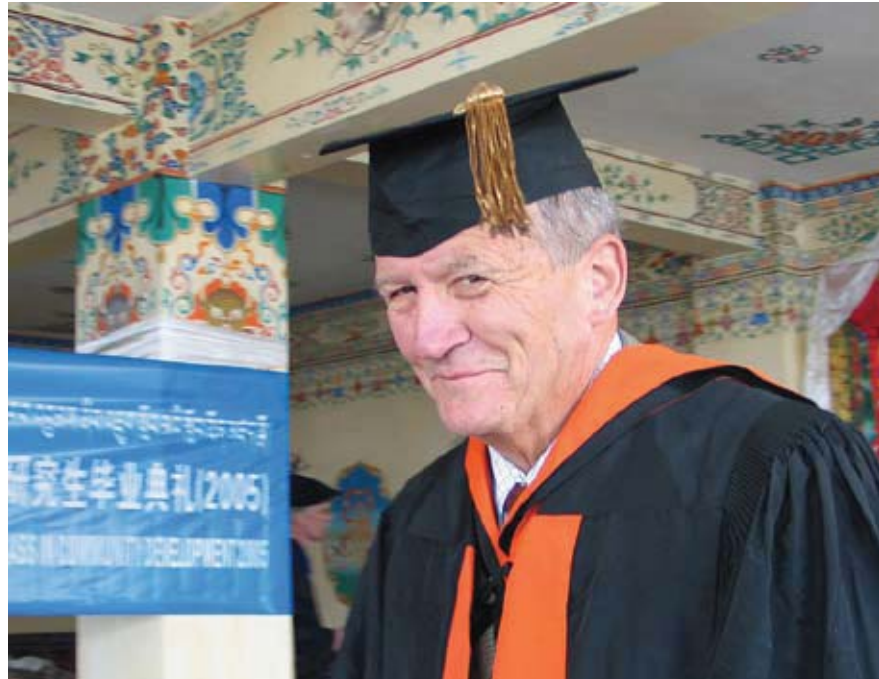
Several of these initiatives have already achieved a significant national impact, he says, but others have not yet achieved the wide recognition and replication that they deserve. In his view, there is an important, not yet adequately addressed, need for fresh attempts to assist the ‘scaling up’ and geographic spread of particularly promising community-level governance initiatives.

### What about scaling up?

He acknowledges, however, that the problem with too many highly creative community-based programmes is that their impact is confined to the communities or the immediate areas in which they are located. But he also maintains that there are carefully devised and well-tested strategies for avoiding that trap. He cites as an example a community-managed mosque-based school initiative for girls that was launched with the counsel and modest assistance of Future Generations (a West Virginia-based civil society organization on the board of which Carmichael currently serves) in a few communities in Ghazni province in Afghanistan and very quickly spread to some 600 villages in Ghazni and neighbouring provinces. ‘There are well-tested spread strategies that work,’ he argues, ‘for assuring that the impact of well-conceived community-based initiatives is not confined to the immediate areas in which they are initially based.’ He cites a study currently under way under the aegis of Future Generations that is examining five conflict prevention/resolution initiatives – in Afghanistan, Burundi, Guyana, Nepal and Somaliland – and attempting to distil the strategies they have employed to attain a major impact at a national scale.

### The hard nuts

Are there places where Carmichael thinks Ford’s governance and human rights initiatives may have run up against a wall? He quickly identifies two possibilities. ‘During my last two years at Ford, I was involved with the (then) Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the Gorbachev era of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. During that period, I chaired a study group that made a series of visits to the Soviet Union and to three countries (Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary) in Eastern Europe to assess whether the Foundation could play a useful role in assisting a growing array of civil society organizations that



Bill Carmichael in Tibet attending the graduation ceremony for those who have acquired the Future Generations master’s degree in applied community change and conservation.

were working to promote democratic governance, greater adherence to human rights norms, environmental protection, and related causes. The group concluded that Ford could indeed make a significant contribution by helping to fund the activities of local groups working on those issues.’ In his view, that assessment has been vindicated by subsequent developments in the three Eastern European countries. But at this point, on the basis of two recent visits to Russia, he acknowledges that ‘it is, at best, an open question whether outside assistance for civil society organizations working on rights and governance issues in Putin- and Medevyev-led Russia can play a positive role’.

Another country where such work must still be very difficult, he notes, is China, where a recent job posting in *The Economist* indicated, to his surprise, that Ford is recruiting a new staff member with responsibilities for programme development in the ‘human rights’ field. On the basis of two brief exposures to China in recent years, Carmichael acknowledges that the possibilities for such work are now decidedly better than they were in the wake of the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, when he retired from Ford. ‘I will be watching with great interest for reports on the activities that the new Ford program officer develops.’ @

<sup>1</sup> W W Rostow (1960) *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.