

John Heath

“Inherently Incompatible”? Hirschman's Thinking on Projects from the Perspective of the McNamara Years at the World Bank (1968-1981)

When Robert McNamara became President in 1968, Albert Hirschman was no longer collaborating with the World Bank. His observations on World Bank projects had been dismissed by the staff as 'operationally useless.' Duncan Ballantine, Director of the Education Department, said that Hirschman had attempted to marry "two inherently incompatible points of view – that of the decision maker and that of the academician or seeker of truth." Using the evidence from the World Bank Group Oral History Archives—including 60 recent interviews with staff active in the Bank during the McNamara years—the panelist will ask, if indeed, Hirschman's emphasis on the role of uncertainty in projects, his skepticism about cost-benefit analysis and his skepticism about 'pseudo-comprehensive programming' found little or no echo in the approach that the Bank's staff took to their work in the 1970s.