



Our Friends at the Bank. First Run/Icarus Films.

Reviewed by Steve Ladd

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A NEW FILM ON THE WORLD BANK AND AFRICA

Our Friends at the Bank, a 90 minute film by Peter Chappell, looks at the relationship between the Government of Uganda and the World Bank over a period of eighteen months, filming with unprecedented access events at the highest levels of both. Michael Holman, African Editor of the *Financial Times* called it “a triumph, full of insights and shrewd observations.” Winner of the 1998 Library Prize at the Cinema du Reel in Paris, the film is available from First Run/Icarus Films in New York (<http://www.frif.com>) along with nearly sixty other films on Africa. The economic development of many countries greatly depends on the World Bank. Often criticized and blamed for politically unpopular policies, and confronted with numerous setbacks, the Bank is experiencing a difficult time with regard to which strategies to adopt, particularly in Africa. Uganda, a country that emerged from the dictatorship of Idi Amin and years of civil war with relatively high rates of economic growth, is one of its “model cases.” High-level teams set up by the Bank’s President, James Wolfenson, and by Uganda’s President Yoweri Museweri, confront

each other. The stakes are enormous. The Bank defends, as does its sister organization, the International Money Fund, an ultra-liberal economic and financing philosophy which poorly matches the priorities, and above all, the ferocious desire for independence, of the Ugandans. While Uganda feels a need to increase military spending to fight a violent insurgent movement, the Bank answers to donor countries and asks for details and explanations. In economic development policy the government favors investment in “hard infrastructure” such as roads, while the Bank argues for prioritizing education. The film also shows how the IMF can weigh in as a third voice, in bilateral discussions with the World Bank in Washington, or directly with the Government on various issues. Finally, and contentiously, *Our Friends at the Bank* shows how accepting aid from these world agencies involves implementing the larger economic philosophy of free trade, and enduring its attendant, often reluctant, often painful privatizations. But do the Ugandans have any choice, faced with enormous debt weighing heavily upon them, and the realities of the global economic system?

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