

Advisory

Concerns about NGO grouping planning to meet World Bank President end October regarding future of CSO/Bank relations

We are writing to inform you about a recently initiated process involving a select group of NGOs and the World Bank that threatens to undermine the impact of previous and ongoing work by civil-society organizations worldwide. The initiative, if continued, would give the Bank credibility for its relations with civil society at a moment when it is refusing to implement the findings of major initiatives in which CSOs have recently engaged it.

Fifteen civil-society groups, organised with World Bank officials as the Joint Facilitation Committee (JFC), have a meeting set with the Bank President Jim Wolfensohn, three Bank managing directors and other senior Bank staff on 28 October. They will discuss World Bank/civil-society relations and steps to improve them. They will also plan the future of their own process – notably whether the JFC should undertake a brief examination of the procedures and framework for Bank/CSO interaction or whether it should expand its remit and timeline to tackle controversial policy issues. The initiative claims to be working "to establish transparent, accountable and democratic mechanisms for further engagement". These are laudable aims, and we recognise the good work that many of the NGOs represented on it have done, but we feel the Committee has started very badly in trying to implement them, as very few people have heard about their work started in November last year. This note aims to provide information about this currently obscure process to the many civil-society groups who might be interested.

In essence, the JFC is an attempt to revive what was previously called the NGO/World Bank Working Group, established in the early 1980s. This group -- disbanded about two years ago - - was often criticised for being poorly linked up to networks most active in challenging the Bank and for not providing sufficient NGO independence.

Key concerns

- a) Over the past several years, CSOs across the South and North have challenged and engaged the Bank in a number of major initiatives¹ that address critical matters of concern to NGOs and local organizations and populations worldwide. In these endeavors, the Bank has sought to minimize the examination of key issues and has refused to follow up on the findings and recommendations as agreed. A number of these organizations have urged JFC members, including CIVICUS, the coordinator of its initiative, to consult formally those with who have previously engaged the Bank, as well as with others who would be affected, so as to learn from their experience and to determine, in an open manner, what sort of tactics have been and would be most effective in shifting the Bank. To date, there has been little or no meaningful contact by the JFC with these groups.
- b) Thousands of organizations around the world have invested years in processes with the Bank on the promise that their outcomes would produce meaningful changes in key Bank policymaking and operations that affect their constituencies. For the most part, the Bank has produced rhetoric and reports but little action. The JFC agenda and process ignore the extensive efforts of these groups and their current efforts to hold the Bank accountable for its failure to follow up on its commitments. No future engagement with the Bank makes sense, especially one devoted to establishing "best practices" in its relations with CSOs, until the Bank's refusal to implement the results of previous engagements is addressed.

¹ These include thousands of Bank projects and national level policy interventions and tens of regional or international processes, including the NGO World Bank Working Group itself, the World Commission on Dams, the Extractive Industries Review, the Structural Adjustment Participatory Review Initiative, WWF-World Bank Forest Alliance, as well as processes such as the global debt campaign, consultations on major World Bank reports, etc.

- c) The Joint Facilitation Committee is producing a paper setting out its views on WB/CSO relations. Outlines and drafts of this work have not been shared with colleagues in other groups for input or agreement despite the complexity and contested nature of the issues.
- d) The NGOs on the JFC have received a paper from the World Bank setting out its views on WB/CSO relations and making recommendations for the future. This has also not been shared with groups beyond the JFC that have an interest, involvement and expertise in these matters, depriving the community of an opportunity to challenge and correct any mischaracterizations of previous CSO engagements.
- e) It is understood that one of the issues raised by the Bank paper is potential procurement contracts for development NGOs and that this has attracted the interest of some JFC groups. This poses potential conflicts of interest for groups on this committee. One of the reasons the NGO/World Bank Working Group was considered by some to have dubious legitimacy was because it was funded by the World Bank, thereby compromising its independence. Some JFC members are suggesting that the Bank be a funder of the JFC's program, as well. Such an arrangement would contrast with independently funded joint initiatives that have produced findings highly critical of the Bank.
- f) Some groups on the JFC are understood to be arguing that it should go beyond its limited 18-month remit to look at WB/CSO procedures and create a 3-year work programme examining major substantive issues such as SAPs/PRSPs, governance and privatisation. A number of these issues, however, have already been examined in SAPRI (in a highly participatory process) and in other CSO joint initiatives with the Bank, the results of which the Bank has largely ignored.

What is the JFC?

The Joint Facilitation Committee is coordinated by CIVICUS, the global alliance for citizen participation. A statement on its website indicates that "the JFC, an outgrowth of the former NGO/World Bank Working Group, is composed of 15 regional and international civil-society networks and staff and senior managers from the World Bank. During its 18-month tenure, the JFC seeks 1) to produce a guiding framework for World Bank-civil society engagement; and 2) to establish transparent, accountable and democratic mechanisms for further engagement." The 18 months started in November 2002.²

Participating groups

The fifteen groups involved in this collaboration are: ActionAid, Amnesty International, Association for Women's Rights in Development, Caribbean Policy Development Center, CIVICUS, Europe and Central Asia region NGO Network, ICFTU, InterAction, Oxfam International, Transparency International, Worldwide Initiatives for Grantmaker Support (WINGS), World Council of Churches, World Conference on Religion and Peace, World Wildlife Fund (WWF), World YWCA. It is not clear how these organisations were selected. What is clear is that a number of NGO networks that have challenged the Bank, not only on substantive issues but also on its deportment in previous engagements, have been excluded from this grouping.

A tale of two studies

CIVICUS, in conjunction with several other civil-society groups on the JFC, is preparing the study assessing civil-society interactions with the World Bank. It claims to be reviewing a number of the different processes where the Bank has consulted civil society, at the international level as well as in-country, but key participants in major consultations have yet to

² CIVICUS page on Joint Facilitation Committee:
http://www.civicus.org/new/PG_world_bank-CSO_engagement.asp?c=FD8912

be interviewed at this late date in the process. The report that the Bank is simultaneously producing will provide its own perspectives on relations with civil society. The two reports will be discussed in late October at a meeting of civil-society groups and high-level Bank staff in Washington, DC.

The Bretton Woods Project and a small number of other groups were contacted at an early stage of report conceptualisation. The Development GAP and others expressed their concerns to CIVICUS and other JFC members and were promised transparency and follow-up. No such follow-up took place, however, no input was solicited, and the drafts that have since been prepared have not been available. It is not clear on what processes the report is focused or what assessment or recommendations it includes.

Opening the process

To find out more about this grouping and its views and plans on World Bank/civil society interaction you might contact people you know in any of the organisations listed above. Or you can contact Karen Birdsall (karen@civicus.org) at CIVICUS, which is leading the initiative.

If you are interested in sharing your views on the JFC and the initiative that it is planning, as well as on how we as a community might best address them, we would be interested in hearing your opinions. Please write us at shellinger@developmentgap.org and awilks@brettonwoodsproject.org. Should you prefer to express your views directly to the members of the JFC, we would appreciate your sending us a copy of your correspondence so that we can fully and accurately reflect the perspectives of our community.

We see these as important steps in opening a process that remains closed to public input and scrutiny. It is not known if CIVICUS is developing any mailing list to keep people informed about this work, but we are keen to do so. If you would like occasional updates on this process, please e-mail to csobank@brettonwoodsproject.org and we will put you on a list.

We are circulating this information because we believe it is of broad interest to a wide range of civil-society groups that have concerns about the World Bank and that have a right to be informed, we believe, about a process that is being conducted in good part in their names. Please feel free to share this information with your colleagues.

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