

Update: Joint Facilitation Committee Moving Forward with Agenda to Establish Guidelines for World Bank/CSO Relations

Thank you for all your many responses to the advisory that we sent out last week on the JFC World Bank/NGO initiative, as well as for those sent directly to the members of the JFC. Due to the networking that is taking place in the broader CSO community, many others are also learning for the first time about this non-transparent and problematic venture. We note the many expressions of concern from those who had been in the dark about the JFC, as well as the reflections on the issue that are now taking place within some of the JFC organizations. We will continue to discuss with colleagues how to prevent the JFC from misrepresenting and undermining the work of others. There are small signs that the JFC is responding to some of the concerns raised in our earlier note, but our assessment is that this is too little, too late.

Here is a brief update on the JFC.

1. CIVICUS, the coordinator of the JFC initiative, disseminated a public letter in response to the advisory that ignored the principal issues raised; i.e., the very legitimacy and effectiveness of the initiative and the call for broad-based consultations and participation before such a venture is defined. The JFC's responses to critiques have to date done little to alter the overall strategic approach and agenda already determined without broad consultation. While it is trying to play down expectations ahead of its meeting next week, the JFC still implies in its new work plan that now or in the future it will be able to act on behalf of the majority of CSOs interested in the World Bank. And its proposed work areas - PRSPs, trade liberalization, privatization and infrastructure (including hydrocarbon projects) - are certainly ones that concern thousands of groups worldwide.

2. While some NGO members of the JFC are rethinking their involvement, most appear prepared to go forward with the meeting planned with World Bank leadership on 28 October to determine a course of joint action. They are doing so despite the fact that:

- * The process to date has, for all intents and purposes, been and remains closed. As one example, the Bank paper on Bank/CSO relations, circulated to the JFC groups in June as a basis for next Tuesday's meeting, is still unavailable to the broader community. The counterpart NGO paper on the same topic, which the JFC groups were preparing, has apparently been shelved for now.

- * The position that the JFC NGOs will take into Tuesday's meeting and that is reflected in the JFC draft work plan is not drawn from any broad-based participation and input of civil society in the South and North, especially those with extensive past or current experience in challenging and/or engaging the Bank, despite the fact that the JFC proposes to provide guidelines for the future of Bank/CSO relations.

3. There is still no clarity as to how the JFC NGOs were selected for what in essence is a reinvention of the NGO/World Bank Working Group set-up of some 20 years ago, a vehicle that was disbanded in 2001 following major concerns about its appropriateness and workability.

This raises questions about the role that the Bank may have played in the case of the JFC in engaging NGOs that would not hold it accountable for past transgressions with CSOs, as well as questions about whose interests are being served by the initiative.

Next week, the JFC NGOs will propose to the Bank a joint work programme to define "best practices" in Bank/CSO relations. For such a venture to have credibility, NGOs must, to the maximum extent possible, live up in their own community to the standards of consultation, participation and consensus building that we urge on official institutions. Until that is done and until the JFC NGOs join with the thousands of groups that are demanding that the Bank honor its existing commitments, they will lack the legitimacy to claim representation of the views of the broader CSO community.

We aim to find out as much as we can about next week's meeting and will prepare and disseminate another bulletin on this matter in about a week's time. In the meantime, please feel free to pass this update on to your colleagues and to contact us with your perspectives.

Best regards,

Steve Hellinger
The Development GAP
shellinger@developmentgap.org

Alex Wilks
Bretton Woods Project
awilks@brettonwoodsproject.org