

For Immediate Release

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WORLD BANK CRITICS DENOUNCE CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Activist organizations that monitor the activities of the international financial institutions today released a statement signed by over 60 civil society groups from 25 countries denouncing a “civil society forum” organized by the World Bank and scheduled for April 21-22 in Washington.

“The large number and broad range of organizations endorsing this statement indicate the serious concern in civil society about the World Bank’s efforts to rewrite history to persuade people that the Bank is committed to working constructively and meaningfully with citizens’ groups,” said Doug Hellinger, Executive Director of the The Development GAP, which coordinated a global civil society network that engaged current Bank president James Wolfensohn in a ten-country investigation of the impact of the Bank’s economic adjustment policies.

“This publicly funded institution has undertaken three major participatory exercises with civil society over the past decade and has walked away from all three in the end, declining to act on any of their major findings and recommendations. Furthermore, its mandated Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, ostensibly designed to include citizens in national development planning, have likewise failed to provide an avenue for civil society input on the all-important macroeconomic programs that the Bank and IMF establish as the parameters for these national plans.”

The statement asserts that “the prospect of helping to burnish the image of the World Bank at this moment assumes even greater importance in light of the U.S. government’s success in installing [Paul] Wolfowitz to serve as the Bank’s next president... We believe the Forum risks

being used as a sign that civil society is open to collaborating with the Bank as it enters the Wolfowitz era.”

“The approval of Wolfowitz as World Bank president could be the final nail in the coffin of the Bank’s legitimacy,” said Virginia Setshedi of South Africa’s Anti-Privatisation Forum. “At a time like this we need to treat very cautiously any event sponsored by the Bank that claims to include critical voices.”

The signers’ concerns about the image of World Bank openness that will be presented to the public extends to the portrayal of Wolfensohn, who is due to step down May 31 after ten years. “Wolfensohn will attend part of the meeting and is likely to take an unearned bow for very limited and dubious achievements,” said Njoki Njoroge Njehu, director of the 50 Years Is Enough Network.. “He has been shown repeatedly that the Bank’s economic policies are destructive and unsustainable, yet he has made few changes in core policies over a long period of time. In some ways, the Bank is actually going backwards, and its use of rhetoric and phony poverty plans to cover its tracks needs to be highlighted, not celebrated, particularly as Wolfowitz takes over the Bank.”

The statement, included with this release, is being widely circulated among civil society groups working on the Bank. In signing on, Lidy Nacpil of Jubilee South and the Freedom from Debt Coalition in the Philippines stated, “We must make clear that until the World Bank takes civil society and its concerns related to economic and environmental justice seriously, we will not provide platforms where it can claim otherwise. And we are very far from that point.”