

Major Latin Economies Left Behind As SAP Review Is Readied for Launch

by Tony Avirgan

 The Structural Adjustment Participatory Review Initiative, SAPRI, will be launched on 14 July (Bastille Day) in a public ceremony involving World Bank President James Wolfensohn and representatives of civil-society organizations from around the world.

SAPRI, born of a dialogue between the then newly arrived Wolfensohn and the staunchest critics of the Bank, will involve an assessment of structural adjustment programs (SAPs) through a series of national public fora and participatory field investigations. It is currently supported by a worldwide network of more than 500 civil-society organizations and is being implemented in eight countries by national citizens' coalitions.

These coalitions are bringing together non-governmental organizations, labor unions, farmers' associations, women's groups, chambers of commerce, manufacturers' associations, churches and every other type of group that feels its members have been profoundly affected by adjustment policies imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Most of these groups have been struggling separately against SAPs; SAPRI marks the first time they have been united on the national and global level.

In the eight countries that have so far been incorporated into SAPRI – Ghana, Mali, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Ecuador, El Salvador, Bangladesh and Hungary – citizens' organizations have expressed a desire to organize and engage in the program, and the government has agreed

to participate. In the case of Hungary, the government has just decided to join the SAPRI exercise following discussions between and among civil-society organizations and various government ministries. The governments of Mexico and the Philippines, however, have determined not to be party to the Initiative, thereby denying World Bank involvement, as well.

The SAPRI Civil Society Network (SAPRI-N) Steering Committee has expressed its displeasure to the World Bank over the fact that the institution has been unsuccessful in engaging these or other large emerging market economies in the Initiative, despite the fact that they have received billions of dollars in adjustment-related lending from the Bank and are used as models for other countries to emulate.

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What is more disturbing is that the Bank has refused even to solicit government cooperation in other countries, including Argentina, that, like Mexico, have implemented an economic program that has had a dramatic impact on most of its population.

In each of the aforementioned "excluded" countries, as well as Brazil, civil-society organizations are considering mov-

ing ahead with a SAPRI-like exercise, while extending an invitation to their respective governments and the Bank to join the process.

In the "official" SAPRI countries, local organizing is proceeding apace, taking into account local conditions. In Uganda, for instance, the newly formed NGO Forum, an umbrella group of some 600 organizations, has taken on SAPRI. In keeping with the SAPRI Standard Operating Procedures, the Forum was required to reach out to organizations beyond its normal scope, and successful solicitations to join the process were made to labor unions and business associations. As in other countries, this marked the first time that NGOs and unions have worked closely together, and both parties are enthusiastic about the possibilities.

Zimbabwean SAPRI groups have been particularly imaginative in their efforts to build their coalition. Because newspapers do not reach many remote rural areas of the country, arrangements have been made with a national radio network to broadcast a weekly show on SAPRI throughout the life of the exercise.

The civil-society organizations involved in SAPRI are not naive, however, about the possibilities of the exercise resulting in a fundamental change in the World Bank's economic policies. In fact, it is not lost on anyone that, while the Bank uses SAPRI to demonstrate that it is doing something on the adjustment issue with its critics and civil society generally, it is considering *tightening* the adjustment noose around the necks of borrower governments.

If SAPRI does achieve its goal of creating greater flexibility for governments to respond to the expressed knowledge and priorities of their own people – and significant change in the reform agenda does emerge from the exercise – it will be an important victory. But, as SAPRI progresses, participating groups are seeing that its greatest value may prove to be the breaking down of barriers that have traditionally divided civil society and the building, on the national and international level, of large, powerful coalitions demanding popular participation in the making of just economic policies. ■

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