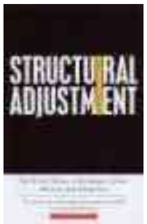
SAPRI Report Exposé Is Compulsary Reading, Says Review

The following review appeared in the Journal of the Inter-American Foundation, Grassroots Development*, Volume 28, Number 1, 2007.*



Structural Adjustment: The SAPRI Report
By The Structural Adjustment Participatory Review International Network
Palgrave Macmillan: NewYork, 2004
Intermón Oxfam: Barcelona, 2005
Available in English and Spanish

Structural adjustment—the term has been a panacea for some and a curse for others. Political leaders and development experts have praised it and condemned it, but few have actually measured its impact on all sectors of a country's economy. The Structural Adjustment Participatory Review International Network (SAPRIN), a coalition of civil society organizations from nine countries on four continents, set out to do just that. The total effort was coordinated by The Development GAP of Washington, D.C., under the leadership of Doug and Steve Hellinger.

The initiative began with the World Bank's endorsement and participation. "What I am looking for—and inviting your help in—is a different way of doing business in the future," bank president James Wolfensohn wrote to SAPRIN in 1996 when the group was still incipient. But the cooperative spirit would not hold for the duration of the study. The Bank officially withdrew before it was completed and would not comment on SAPRIN's final report.

For anyone in the development profession, this book is compulsory reading. Contributing researchers examined documents and statistics, surveyed local stakeholders and conducted participatory reviews whereby affected individuals from various social sectors share their experiences. The results were compiled into country reports that were then condensed, synthesized and published as the report tellingly titled Structural Adjustment: The Policy Roots of Economic Crisis, Poverty and Inequality. Distilling the information gathered from members of 3,500 grassroots organizations, it measures how structural adjustment policies impact all levels of society, but especially the people most affected—urban workers, farmers, small-business people, indigenous groups, women and the young. Country by country, the report exposes the disparity between stated objectives to generate savings and foreign exchange, by opening markets and reducing the state's role in the economy, and the practical impact on ordinary citizens.

The findings are not surprising. What catches attention is their connection to many political and economic issues that are the focus of debate in developed countries. The migration of undocumented workers, the professional brain-drain, the re-appearance of diseases once thought to have been eradicated and the destruction of the environment have a detrimental impact in both the North and the South. Rather than being correctable by structural adjustment policies, the report points out, these debilitating circumstances are the direct results of implementing such policies.

To the economic purist, the report's conclusions are not supported by rigorous statistical analysis and rely too much on qualitative surveys, anecdotal evaluations and individual perceptions. The authors respond that volumes of statistical data are available in government archives and on file with the World Bank. The purpose of their book, they contend, is to present the impact of structural adjustment on those who are overlooked when results are gathered.

Will these findings influence World Bank and IMF decision-makers and government officials of countries negotiating for financial assistance during an economic crisis? In a final chapter, the authors observe, "The Bank's unwillingness to engage in a [follow-up] participatory and public policy-making forum [in Ecuador]...with built-in accountability is a telling commentary on the institution's continued refusal to entertain new departures in national policy, even with major political change and shifts in economic thinking taking place across South America." While not an answer to the question, the comment fails to inspire optimism.—*Wilbur Wright, IAF representative for Peru*