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CIVIL SOCIETY POLICY FORUM



How Effective is the World Bank’s Civil Society Engagement Strategy? ¹

Friday, April 24, 2009

This session, sponsored by the World Bank’s Global Civil Society Team, was organized with the aim of providing an overview of the Bank’s current review process to update its civil society engagement policies and practices. The review process has sought the views of Bank staff, civil society interlocutors, and others on the evolving nature of civil society, on the effectiveness of the Bank’s civil society engagement strategy, and ways to improve these relations. This process has been underway since February 2008 and has involved consultation meetings, individual interviews, and web-based consultations. This session reported on the consultation efforts to date, input received, draft recommendations, and asked for input from participants.

Edith Grace Sempala (World Bank Director of International Affairs) opened the session by emphasizing the importance of CSO policy advocacy and operational collaboration to the World Bank’s work. Emphasizing that poverty eradication is a problem to which no single sector or institution has a solution, she iterated that working together, the World Bank and civil society organizations could make a difference, and asked participants to “help us communicate better with you,” so that the World Bank and CSOs could “find a better way of becoming better partners.”

Jeff Thindwa (Senior Social Scientist, Global Civil Society Team) made a presentation (see attached) on the review process. He characterized it as a quick audit of the Bank’s performance since the 2005 ‘Issues and Options’ paper, as well as an exercise to identify constraints as well as opportunities to scale up. He noted that it was timely because of continued changes in global civil society, the Governance and Anticorruption Strategy’s mandate to engage civil society, and Bank management’s desire to scale up engagement. He outlined the major lessons and issues that surfaced in the review including observations that CSO – Bank engagement is increasingly “issue driven” rather than “institution driven,” the fact that CSO advocacy has shifted from a “do-no-harm” approach to a “do-good” approach. Both targeted engagement of specific constituencies via designated teams (e.g. faith-based, indigenous peoples, youth), and the use of multi-constituency spaces (e.g. global dialogues on the food and financial crisis) can help increase effectiveness of Bank-civil society engagement.

¹ This summary note was prepared by Mamata Pokharel of the World Bank’s Civil Society Team. If you have any comments or questions on the note please send an email to civilsociety@worldbank.org.

CSO respondents noted that Stakeholder consultations have improved notably, but concerns remain in such areas as internal coordination, incentives, and quality control. The quality of Bank-CSO policy dialogue has also improved (e.g. on the food crisis), but needs better follow up and coordination, as well as decentralization to the country level. Another theme was the Bank's comparative advantage at the country level in bringing civil society to the table with government, and a recommendation to exploit it. CSOs also want the Bank to be much more systematic about information disclosure at the country level, and issues around a "rights-based approach" to development also surfaced.

The review process generated specific recommendations for scaling up Bank – civil society engagement geared to improving Bank processes and development effectiveness. They include:

- undertake critical research on the role of civil society in development, and help to improve their enabling environment;
- improve consultation policies and practices;
- establish a CSO-based Presidential advisory panel as well as "thematic platforms" for Bank-CSO engagement on development themes;
- scale up mechanisms to finance CSO development efforts;
- pilot programmatic partnerships with CSO networks;
- scale up capacity building and technical support to Bank staff and CSOs;
- improve monitoring and evaluation of Bank-civil society engagement;
- strengthen the internal coordination role of the Civil Society Team.

John Garrison then asked meeting participants to contribute their ideas on what adjustments the Bank can make to improve its relations with civil society. Issues brought up by CSOs included the fact that, at present, Bank staff do not have an incentive to engage CSOs as this takes a lot of time but does not feature in their performance evaluation. Other issues included the observation that the strategy does not seem to make an effort to engage people with disabilities or young people. Developing country participants noted the small number of Southern CSO participants at the Spring and Annual meetings and encouraged the Bank to do more to ensure these voices are represented.

Participants also agreed that civil society participation was vibrant at the global level but this was not getting translated to the country level, where Bank staff are not often easily accessible. Several participants mentioned the difficulties CSOs continue to experience when trying to access Bank funds, particularly at the country level, as most trust funds are geared solely to governments. Several participants commended the Bank for undertaking this review and hoped that it would further improve Bank – civil society relations.

Edith Grace brought the meeting to a close by thanking participants for their valuable comments and encouraging them to send in further comments on the paper. She informed that a final draft of the paper will be submitted for management review shortly, after which external consultations will be held on it, most likely beginning in June.