

Consultations with Civil Society Organizations

General Guidelines for World Bank Staff



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Since the early 1990s much progress has been made in consulting with civil society organizations (CSOs) in Bank projects and policy work. Such consultations have generally been recognized to have improved the quality of policymaking, positively influenced the direction of country programs, strengthened national ownership of key reforms, and promoted public-sector transparency and accountability. CSOs can supply essential “local knowledge” in the policy process and give voice to the opinions and experiences of the poor. These contributions have been further recognized in the Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF) and the Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRS) that place partnerships between governments, civil society, and business at the center of development planning. CSOs are also playing an increasingly important role in influencing Bank strategy and policy, and efforts are underway to incorporate CSOs into global policy processes.

However, civil society consultation is a complex process that the Bank and client governments must handle sensitively. Poorly planned consultations can lead to “consultation fatigue” and disappointment on all sides, but with a modest investment of time and resources these problems can be avoided. The NGO and Civil Society Unit has prepared these civil society consultation guidelines to provide assistance for World Bank staff. These guidelines are in response to the requests from task managers and others for more guidance and support in facilitating consultations with CSOs on projects, policy, and investment lending. Although non-mandatory, the guidelines reflect the advice and good practices distilled from experience, and a Civil Society Consultation Sourcebook¹ is being prepared, expanding the guidelines with additional materials, tools, and techniques.

These guidelines were drawn up by the NGO and Civil Society Unit, based on an earlier paper by John Clark. Revisions were made by Michael Edwards, and suggestions were also incorporated from William Reuben, Katherine Bain, Gloria Davis, and Tony Bebbington, from members of the Civil Society Thematic Team, and the NGO Working Group on the World Bank. Final revisions were made by Paula Lytle.

1. Additional guidance on engaging civil society can be found in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Sourcebook which has been prepared for governments.

The role played by Bank staff in these consultations will vary from one situation to another. In some instances, the Bank may need to act as a facilitator, convening the relevant actors, assisting governments and CSOs in the consultation process, and ensuring that relevant input from CSOs is given adequate attention. In others, it may be appropriate for the Bank to participate in the dialogue as the interlocutor or alongside other stakeholders. In all cases, the ideal is for the Bank to remain in the background and support a healthy dialogue among governments, business, and civil society.

The key to effective civil society consultation lies in:

- giving CSOs ownership by involving representatives in the design of the consultation process
- being clear from the outset what is and is not under consideration, to avoid unrealistic expectations
- demonstrating respect for those consulted through careful follow-up and feedback
- using appropriate selection procedures to ensure that all the relevant interests are represented
- tailoring types of interactions to the knowledge and capability of different groups

Consultation Objectives

The primary objective of consultations is to improve the quality of decisions by: capturing the experience of specialized nongovernmental agencies, tapping the knowledge of CSOs that work at the community level, giving voice to the poor by consulting with CSOs whose membership comprises poor people, and giving sustainability for proposed reforms beyond any one government administration.

Secondary objectives of consultative approaches are: to appreciate the variation of needs of different population groups (e.g., gender, ethnic, or geographical variations); to set the ground for participatory approaches in the ensuing design and implementation of interventions; and to assist governments in increasing transparency, public understanding, and citizen involvement in development decisionmaking.

The Bank's former General Counsel has explained that it is appropriate for the Bank: (a) to advocate to member governments that they use participatory approaches in the selection, design, implementation, and evaluation of development programs, on the grounds that this enhances development effectiveness; and (b) to advise governments to allow and foster a strong civil society that can participate in public affairs.²

Definitions, Classifications, and Selection Criteria

None of the many definitions of the term "civil society" commands universal assent. However, what is important about the civil society debate is not that we agree who is "in" and who is "out" in some abstract sense, but that we agree on a working definition—and classification—that helps us make appropriate decisions about whom to involve in different tasks. At its simplest, civil society is the arena in which people come together to pursue the interests they hold in common—not for profit or the exercise of political power, but because they care enough about something to take collective action. In this sense, all organizations and associations between family and state are part of civil society. Religious and professional organizations, labor unions, the media, grassroots associations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) of different kinds, and many others are all part of civil society.³ Because civil society is a very broad arena it contains a huge array of different interests, types of associations, and expressions of values, some of which will conflict with others.

Against this background, civil society organizations could be classified in many ways—by sector, focus, origins, scale, level of formality, values, or theoretical perspectives. As with definitions, there is no universally accepted schema, and the details of each typology should always be adapted to reflect the needs of particular tasks. In consultations over a Country Assistance Strategy (CAS) or other policy discussions, it is particularly important to recognize that CSOs differ in the degree to which they provide the following five functions:

2. "Prohibition of Political Activities in the Bank's Work," legal opinion to the Bank's Board of Executive Directors, July 12, 1995.

3. "NGOs and Civil Society: Definitions and Classification," Note from the NGO Unit to CODE, 1996; "The Bank's Relations with NGOs: Issues and Directions," NGO Unit 1998; James Wolfensohn, "A Proposal for a New World Bank Development Strategy and a Postscript on International Financial Architecture," January 1, 1999.

- *representation* (organizations that aggregate citizen voice)
- *technical expertise* (organizations that provide information and advice, and lobby on particular issues)
- *capacity-building* (organizations that provide support to other CSOs, including funding)
- *service-delivery* (organizations that implement development projects or provide services)
- *social functions* (organizations that foster collective recreational activities)

Many CSOs serve more than one of these functions. Even so, it is vital to specify what sort of involvement is being considered so that functions and organizations can be matched appropriately. Once this decision has been made, a small number of CSOs will normally need to be selected to take part in the consultation. This is a difficult and sensitive task.

Function of CSOs	Examples of CSOs in this category
Representation	Membership organizations, for example, labor unions, women’s associations NGO federations and networks Churches and faith-based organizations
Technical Expertise	Organizations of indigenous people Professional and business associations Advocacy NGOs Think-tanks and research groups News media groups
Capacity-Building	Foundations (local and international) NGO support organizations Training organizations
Service-Delivery	Implementing NGOs (local and international) Credit and mutual aid societies Informal, grassroots, and community-based associations
Social Functions	Mosque or prayer groups Sports clubs Cultural circles Choral societies

Usually, the process of selection is best carried out by CSOs themselves, for example, via an umbrella or apex body (such as an NGO federation) or

a national steering group. However, it is important to monitor who is left out when self-selection occurs, and to take appropriate action (for example, separate consultations for indigenous people's groups). Where representative groups do not exist, the Bank may need to develop capacity to engage in consultation.

The Bank can reduce the dangers of bias by: (a) using the advice of staff who are most familiar with civil society in the country (including resident mission specialists); (b) listening to the advice of key informants in civil society; (c) ensuring that participants represent the full range of groups and interests that exist (by gender, ethnic origin, region, and social class); and (d) using objective selection criteria, including the organization's track record and credibility among its peers. If the organization claims to represent the poor it is important to establish that they are genuinely close to poor people's experiences and views, and that they are accountable to those who are being represented.

Potential Problems and How to Overcome Them

Problems or disappointments over consultation tend to fall into one of four categories:

- The policy environment within the country may not be conducive to the participation of civil society; it may be highly polarized or characterized by an atmosphere of mutual mistrust.
- The organizers may plan poorly or make only token efforts.
- CSOs may have unrealistic expectations.
- Documents or knowledge shared for the consultation may be publicized without permission, breaking confidence.

Additional challenges include:

- Conflicts and antagonisms that are manifested during the consultation process between governments and CSOs or among CSOs.
- Poor participation by a diversity of groups because of lack of financial capacity.
- Lack of trust among stakeholders.

- Lack of consensus or unity among CSOs, which affects their ability to engage constructively in dialogue as equal partners.

These problems can be mitigated or avoided by careful planning, using the following principles:

- **Clarify scope and objectives at the beginning.** The scope and purpose of the consultation must be made clear at the outset; otherwise CSO expectations will be too high, and participants will become cynical. As stated in the 1998 Board paper on NGOs, “The principle is to conduct open-minded consultations, not to enter into negotiations” between parties. In other words, spell out whether:
 - everyone’s views will be incorporated
 - participants will have a chance to comment on future drafts or at other occasions
 - the final product will be shared with the participants
- **Prepare to listen and be influenced.** Consultations can be and should be powerful and serious exercises; they do not always lead to consensus. It is critical that they be “open-minded,” balanced, and well-facilitated. Otherwise the Bank will be accused of window-dressing, and CSO leaders and Bank management will question whether the time and effort they invest in advising the Bank is well-spent.
- **Aim for full government ownership.** Where consultations concern country policy issues, they can only be effective if the government is fully engaged in the process.
- **Don’t oversell!** If a single meeting is held, don’t imply in subsequent statements that “civil society was consulted” or that a “participatory process was used.” Consultations provide input to decisionmaking, but do not guarantee influence. An ongoing process of consultation can build civil society capacity for participation,⁴ but this should not be confused with shared control over outcomes.

4. The Bank defines “participation” as “a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives, decisions, and resources which affect them.”

What can be done if the policy environment is not conducive to civil society involvement?

In cases where civil society consultation is mistrusted or opposed, the Bank must be sensitive, but can still use its influence (especially alongside other donors) to encourage improvements in the policy environment via considered discussions with government on the benefits of broader participation. In addition, the Bank can consult with selected civil society leaders on the grounds that this helps us to understand the local situation and the range of local opinion, and thus to arrive at a more informed decision. It may also be possible to engage responsible CSOs as consultants to an adjustment or research team.

Planning the Consultation

When planning a consultation, the following points should be borne in mind:

- **Ensure adequate government awareness of and commitment to the process**, and clarify the extent of government involvement. Care should be taken to ensure that the consultations supplement, and do not duplicate or undermine, existing mechanisms for deliberation at the national level.
- **Ensure that adequate resources and time are allocated for the consultation process**, including follow-up. This includes ensuring that staff responsible for planning have made provisions for adequate time in their work-plans; that the necessary physical presence, local skills, and knowledge exist (in particular, the Civil Society Specialists in resident missions); and that the resources required, including skilled external facilitators where needed, have been identified in advance. The budget should include adequate provision for travel and out-of-pocket expenses for CSO participants. Remember that the pace and timing of civil society involvement may differ from that of government and the private sector.
- **Ensure that adequate information is provided in advance of the consultations**, and in a language and style that is appropriate for the stakeholders concerned. This can mean simplification of texts as well as translation into local languages. If this is regarded as too sensitive, a summary note can be prepared or the consultation should start with a

verbal briefing. Staff should be as transparent as possible and provide people with enough information to participate in an informed manner, without jeopardizing negotiations with the government.

Consultations around adjustment operations

Adjustment lending forms an increasingly important part of the Bank's portfolio, and presents special challenges in organizing civil society involvement. The time available for consultation is often tightly constrained, and there may be more restrictions on the disclosure of information. However, it is still possible to involve CSOs, especially if there are preexisting umbrella or apex bodies that can be brought into the consultations quickly; representatives of groups with specific expertise and interest who might perceive themselves to be winners or losers in the process; and prior agreement with government on levels of information disclosure.

The Bank has already involved CSOs in adjustment operations in the following ways: preparing summaries of information to be disclosed to the public after signing an agreement on confidentiality; and discussing objectives, strategies, rationale, social impact, and mitigation measures, without disclosing actual documents.

Organizing and Running Consultation Events

When organizing and running consultation events, organizers should:

- **Give adequate warning to participants**, and only change the times of meetings if unavoidable. An impression of tokenism is conveyed when meetings are organized or changed at a few days' notice.
- **Plan suitable venues**. This may mean holding a series of consultations in different locations if it is important to get a diversity of opinions from throughout the country. It also means choosing venues that are physically accessible to participants (thinking through issues of security clearance and comfort level of participants). Always go beyond the capital city.
- **Use a facilitator**. Meetings where opinions are deeply and passionately divided are usually much more productive when an outside, professional facilitator is used, whom all regard as neutral.
- **Talk to the poor**. Complement the consultations with some direct discussions with the poor through focus groups and participatory research.

- Where possible, go beyond dialogue to focus on future actions; try to ensure that the dialogue identifies areas for future action, either jointly or independently. Make sure that commitments are summarized at the end of the meeting.

Civil society consultations around the Philippines CAS: an example of good practice

With more than 75,000 NGOs in the Philippines, careful selection proved crucial to the success of consultations with civil society over the CAS. These consultations were carried out in conjunction with an informal NGO advisory group and facilitated by an independent, respected local NGO called “Co-Train Multiversity.” Meetings were held in four regions of the country, plus Manila, and regular feedback on both process and outputs was provided to participants so that the CAS could be valued as a “living document.” NGO comments were synthesized by the facilitators and presented to the government by the Bank, and the government’s reactions were then fed back to those who had contributed. Bank staff and many NGOs in the Philippines speak highly of the process and the difference it has made to the quality of the CAS and to the commitment of the government to implement its recommendations.

Feedback and Follow-up

It is critical to provide full and candid feedback after a consultation meeting, or at the end of the overall process. At a minimum this feedback should convey:

- A written summary of what the Bank heard during the consultation (inviting corrections and omissions). This should be sent to participants shortly after the consultation, and they should be given time to consider it before being asked to comment.
- A list of points the Bank or government accepts and those it rejects—giving relevant reasons.
- An account of any future steps the Bank is planning to take.
- Regular progress reports, which help to recognize the time and experience CSOs have contributed.

Tips for effective consultations

- Plan well and make sure adequate time and resources are available.
- Work in partnership with the government or keep the government fully apprised of the process.
- Give CSO umbrella organizations a clear role in designing the process and in CSO selection.
- Make sure the ground rules are clear and acceptable in advance, that CSO expectations are not inflated, and that CSO views are considered seriously.
- Ensure an appropriate diversity of CSOs.
- Use resident mission Civil Society Specialists and other sources of local knowledge.
- Make sure adequate information is available in advance, in the relevant language and style.
- “Receive as well as transmit.” listen carefully and note CSO experience and opinions.
- Use a professional facilitator.
- Focus on future actions where possible.
- Send participants a note of the meetings shortly afterwards, inviting corrections and omissions.
- Give further feedback on which points have been accepted and which have not—and why.
- Follow up after the process concludes, especially if it is possible to offer opportunities for collaboration.
- Maximize transparency: make available as much documentation as possible.
- Encourage “trialogue”—engage governments to the fullest extent possible and encourage a positive spirit of government–civil society partnership.