

Dubai 2003: Which Road leads to regional and global prosperity? (Are we on the wrong one?)

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Every three years the World Bank Group and International Monetary IMF (IMF) hold their otherwise Washington D.C.- based annual meetings in an international city. Dubai, United Arab Emirates was the host city for the 2003 meetings, highlighting the growing importance of a region (referred to as MENA¹[1] in the Bank) paradoxically home to both fortune and desperation. The contrast of oil-rich countries set against a landscape of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian crisis and the war in Iraq made for an fascinating backdrop for meetings which brought together representatives from every corner of the globe.

Dubai 2003 convened an estimated 15,000 government delegates, media, private banking and Civil Society Organization (CSO) representatives from approximately 185 countries. To be more exact, there were approximately 100 CSO representatives from 30 countries, made possible by a grant from the Government of Norway. Despite their support, there was a considerably less number of attendees compared to previous Annual meetings.

The theme of the Program of Seminars was "*The Road to Regional and Global Prosperity-Challenges and Opportunities*". From a civic perspective, it seems the challenges continue to prevail over opportunities. Key topics of discussion which underline this impression were:

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)- Bank officials stated limited progress on implementation due to insufficient funding allocated by countries. Demands for development outweigh by the lack of resources committed to date.

World Development Report 2004: Making Services Work for Poor People-The report was launched, highlighting the role of private sector participation, and that key services are failing poor people and making development out of reach.

Doha and Cancun Talks- The discussions centered around lack of progress in reaching agreements on trade reform and developing countries'™ need for transitional support for temporary negative impact of trade liberalization.

Parallel to the Program of Seminars were civil society session strands focused on thematic topics such as Children, Youth, Trade, Debt, Poverty Reduction, HIV/AIDS, Environment and Conditionality. The "Town Hall Meeting" was a key forum which provided CSOs with an opportunity to raise questions and concerns regarding Bank and IMF policies and practices.

The meeting²[2] was facilitated by Mr. Mustafa Barghouthi, President- Palestinian Medical Relief organization and convened CSO representatives with Mr. James Wolfensohn, President -World Bank, Mr. Horst Kohler, Managing Director-IMF, Chairman of the Development Committee Minister Trevor Manuel (South Africa) and Chairman of the International Monetary and Financial Committee Chancellor Gordon Brown (UK).

A majority of the comments were from CSOs in the MENA region on issues such as:

§ Institutional support for conflict-ridden territories such as Palestine;

§ Plans to address needs of the .5 million displaced Iraqis now living in Iran;

§ Leverage (or lack thereof) of the Bank in promoting social development in the non-borrowing Gulf states.

Addressing each query specifically, Bank/IMF representatives noted that a significant amount of time was dedicated to discussing economic plans for Palestine and the issue of voice and representation of poor countries in the governance structures of the Bank and IMF.

A common concern of CSOs from all regions was the accreditation process € which, as per Bank policy, requires respective National Directors€™ approval for CSOs to attend Annual meetings (which in fact applies to all visitors; but the €non€™ in non-governmental organization creates a unique irony for CSO attendance decisions).

This was a symptomatic display of a deeper issue: The paradox of the Bank€™s acknowledgement of CSOs as a crucial link in the multi-stakeholder process of development *versus* CSOs ongoing struggles with insufficient frameworks for civil society participation in their respective countries.

CSOs highlighted the need to address civil society development strategies as a pre-condition for societal and economic development. According to the Bank/IMF, there is a dependence on multi-lateral institutions to resolve sovereign issues which should be addressed directly by CSOs to their governments. The question remains: Can the Bank leverage conditionalities on client governments to promote civil society, and if so, how?

While Wolfensohn did acknowledge the accreditation concern and agreed to follow through for a €more progressive set of rules and regulations€, this may not directly address the core issue. Perhaps it will flag the increasing need for a paradigm shift regarding respective governments€™ enablement of frameworks for civic participation, and the role of the Bank and IMF in promoting this.

Although the paradox remains, there are a variety of platforms which continue to provide opportunities for CSO dialogue and monitoring of Bank policies and practice, such as:

Joint Facilitation Committee- Global-level group of CSO representatives to define parameters of dialogue (Secretariat at CIVICUS www.civicus.org);

ECA NGO Network³[3]- Regional-level CSO network for policy and practice information sharing and monitoring;

Mediterranean Development Forum (MDF)- Think-tank network in the Med/Arab-Med region focusing on policy and development challenges;

Members of the Parliament Network on the World Bank ⁴[4] (PNoWB)- Global network of over 400 parliamentarians from 70 countries, recently

⁴[1] *Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region countries include: Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, West Bank and Gaza, Tunisia, Yemen.

⁴[2] Transcripts of this session are available on the World Bank web site

⁴[3] ECA (Europe and Central Asia) region includes 28 countries: Former Soviet Union and Turkey. For more information please see www.ecangowg.org

⁴[4] For more information please see www.pnowb.org

launched *Parliamentarians Implementation Watch* to promote and monitor that actions are taken and put countries on track to meet the MDGs.

Although the level of impact of these forums may be debatable vis- -vis challenges stated above, they are an important vehicle for CSOs to provide inputs on specific thematic issues. Whereas the Bank and IMF are not able to allocate significant amounts of funding to CSOs directly for enablement of civil society, perhaps private foundations may consider supporting strategies to strengthen enabling frameworks, which will create an effective space for CSOs to promote sound policies and practices.

