

ADB Consultations – Sydney, Australia, 3 May 2004

Brief Notes

Purposes

The Australian consultation, for one full day, covered three issues:

1. Consultation on the ADB's draft Pacific Strategy 2005-2009 (3½ hours)
2. Consultation on the ADB's Public Communications Policy (scheduled 3½ hours, ran for about 4)
3. A briefing on the ADB's New Accountability Mechanism (1 hour)

Part 1 – Pacific Strategy

The morning session was devoted to a consultation on the ADB's draft Pacific strategy for 2005-2009. About 60 people attended this session, mostly NGOs but also aid contractors (private sector) and Australian government people. The session was run by Bill Costello from the ADB's Pacific Department.

Costello provided a detailed briefing on ADB work in the Pacific, and the draft strategy. He also provided some feedback on the Suva consultations which had taken place a few days earlier, and on a recent ADB study on ADB-NGO relations in the Pacific.

Participants were divided into five or six breakout groups, with a mix of participants. Each group addressed two questions:

1. do we agree with the situational analysis of the draft strategy, that the key to better development in the Pacific is in improving policies and institutions?
2. How can we support Pacific governments to address this issue?
In responding to this each group looked at one specific issue raised in the paper: either A. *increasing opportunities to earn cash income*; B. *improving access to social services*; or C. *creating a better development process*.

The groups then reported back to the plenary. A range of issues were raised including the importance and difficulty of dealing sensitively with the property rights issue in the Pacific, the need to ensure a participatory development process, and the need for more and better coordinated financing for development to complement any policy focused on institutions and policies.

ADB noted that the policy would be re-drafted mid-year following all consultations, then cleared through PIC Governments and the ADB Board. ADB hoped the final policy would be published by the end of 2004.

Part 2 – Public Communications Policy (PCP)

About 30 people participated in the PCP session, which was run by Bart Edes and Cyndi Malvicini from the ADB's Office of External Relations (OER). Other participants consisted of:

- 10-12 private sector (aid contractors including universities),
- 6 Australian government (Treasury, AusAID and a couple of state government reps), and
- about 12 NGO people, including one each from PNG and Samoan NGOs. (This was by coincidence rather than ADB planning; both happened to be in Sydney at the time and were told by other NGOs about the consultations.)

Most participants had read the draft PCP at least briefly, maybe half had read it carefully. Several NGO participants mentioned to me that they had read the BIC briefing papers (which I circulated beforehand) and found them very useful.

The process was similar to Jakarta and that planned for Hanoi, but allotted only half the time. ADB staff had told me beforehand that they thought we could get through the session faster in Australia than in developing countries, due to no need for translations etc. Nevertheless, the time allotted was not enough – we went about half an hour overtime (total time about 4 hours) and this impacted on the time available for feedback from the small groups, who had very detailed comments to share.

As an introduction exercise we were asked to rate the PCP from one to 10 – the responses varied from 2 to 10, but there were lots of 3 and 4 especially from NGOs! The ADB noted that we were more critical than Jakarta.

Following a presentation from Bart Edes on the PCP, we were divided into small groups – one group of private sector, one group government and two groups of NGOs. Each group was asked to focus on the same set of questions being used for all consultations (strengths – weaknesses – gaps – needs of affected communities – models for good practice). We had about 45 minutes to discuss and prepare our comments, then each group fed back to the plenary.

Considering that we didn't get to have a pre-consultation NGO briefing, the quality of the feedback to ADB from NGOs was pretty high and quite consistent. The two NGO groups provided very detailed comments covering all the key points in the BIC and other NGO analyses, as well as some critical observations of our own. There was a focus in our comments on the disclosure needs of affected communities from the Australian NGOs who work with them. Also, we noted that the substance of the document did not adequately reflect the stated commitment to a "presumption of disclosure", and that this would really require a big effort to achieve a major cultural change within the Bank. Without clear and adequate procedures to achieve this, the policy would not result in much change. A strong theme was the confusion between a communications policy aimed at achieving better PR for the Bank, and a disclosure policy to facilitate affected peoples' and stakeholders' **rights** to information.

Interestingly, the Australian government reps were also somewhat critical. They welcomed the ADB initiative to change the policy, but noted that the PCP needed to focus more on the link between information disclosure and community participation. Communication needs to be a means to an end (participatory development for better poverty reduction) not a goal in itself. The project-by-project communications plans mentioned in the analysis should be an essential, not optional, part of the policy. The government representatives also said the cost implications of the policy for all stakeholders needed to be spelled out.

The private sector attendees were more supportive, giving the policy "qualified approval" (most rated it 7 or 8). They noted it needed a structure for monitoring and accountability for its implementation. They also wanted more project cycle information for tender processes to "make the playing field more level" for contractors. Business did express a fear that the policy may make disclosure too expensive and time-consuming for the Bank.

The ADB people (Bart and Cyndi) were fairly open to our comment and took detailed notes, although they got a bit defensive in the face of detailed and articulate criticism, particularly from the NGOs. In a conversation with me later, ADB staff commented that it was apparent we had all been worded up by BIC. I said yes we were in contact with BIC and others but that doesn't change the validity of the points we and BIC were making!

Part 3 – Accountability Mechanism

By this time it was 4pm, people were very tired and the energy was low, so there was less engagement / dialogue. I think also many participants didn't know much about these issues. But this suited the ADB OK as this part was intended purely to be an information briefing.

ADB staff (Karin ? from SPF) outlined the accountability mechanism, with its two-pronged approach: an attempt to find a consensus resolution, with the concurrent option of lodging a formal complaint for compliance review. There were some questions of clarification on the mechanism but no debate.

Overall comments / conclusions / recommendations

- From the Australian perspective the consultation was worth having – participation was high in both numbers and quality, and the ADB heard some clear messages which also resonate with what they are hearing elsewhere. Of course in the Australian context, problems with participation in the consultations don't arise in the way they may in other places.
- But as stated above, it remains to be seen how the meeting will be recorded and how much impact those comments will have in improving the draft policies, especially the PCP. The ball remains very much in the ADB's court.
- There was not enough time for full discussion and feedback on the issues, but realistically there probably never would be. Thus I think it is essential that NGOs first be coordinated as much as possible beforehand, but also that they follow up with written comments to the ADB afterward, to ensure all issues are put on record.
- Detailed recording of the meeting was left to the ADB as participants are busy participating (and are divided into small groups), and ADB took the feedback notes written up by the small groups. If human resources allow, I would **recommend** that one NGO person in each small group be a parallel note-taker so that NGOs can have their own detailed version of the meeting notes.

Prepared by Shennia Spillane, ACFID
May 2004