

Some Notes from the Consultation on PCP in Bishkek 9 July 2004

Prep-session: On 8 July we had the prep-session for those 10 NGOs that the ADB was so reluctant to invite but then yielded to the pressure. The prep-session was very helpful because the NGOs already had some experience in dealing with other IFIs and they have to cope with access to information routinely in their everyday work. It seemed lots of our colleagues had one or two stories when obstructed access to information in some of the ADB projects turned out to be a major factor of frustration for affected communities as well as potential beneficiaries, or potential ADB contractors. We discussed all important aspects of the Draft PCP.

Participants: The consultation was attended by 40-45 participants, mostly, NGOs, very few government representative (no key persons) and a very strange set of business representatives (most of us never heard about those small consultancies), one or two journalists and a couple of very young researchers. 3 groups represented affected communities from the three regions of Kyrgyzstan (they were invited to our prep-session on 8 July to learn in more detail about ADB structures, project cycles, policies, besides PCP, etc.) One third of the NGO participants praised ADB and its operations in the country already during the introduction; they also assured the ADB staff that their close cooperation with the Bank was much appreciated. Later, as soon as those NGOs understood that there would be no talk about grants or NGO-Bank cooperation, many people left after lunch.

Session: The consultation routinely started with a welcoming speech from the deputy resident chief. It was followed by the introduction of the consultation and then workshop objectives. Robert Salomon from OER presented the Introduction of the PCP. This was similar to his presentations at the earlier consultations. What caught our attention is the fact that ADB decided to rely heavily on Internet and its resident mission in providing documents to the public. Then Cindy offered to put clarification questions. A representative of rural NGOs immediately raised the issue of access to Internet – since the Bank decided to rely on this tool in their new information policy. She said there are no Internet providers in rural areas and frequent blackouts. Robert Salomon suggested that partner NGOs could help in information dissemination. There were other questions about specific documents and possibilities for NGOs to intervene. Environmentalists wanted to know about pre-project studies and reports, what was new in a new policy. Human rights and anticorruption groups wanted to know why the Bank is so cautious about disclosing information about practices that generated corruption. ADB staff responded very vaguely, always warning that there would be discussions in small groups. There was one direct question that demanded a direct response: when the ADB plans to open PIC in Bishkek. But there was no direct answer, unfortunately. There was a question about the negative connotation of the phrase ‘public communications’. When translated into local languages, it means the same as ‘public relations’ or PR. This sends a wrong signal to the society, while ‘information’ in almost all world languages means the same thing. Rob Salomon, while speaking privately, agreed to this and told they at the ADB are thinking about this.

Small Groups: Cindy proposed that participants split into 5 small groups. One tiny group was government experts, another group (also small) included researchers, business and

the media. Three other groups included only NGOs. We decided that those who could offer some expertise regarding the Draft PCP should not be in one and the same group. So we went to work with colleagues who did not attend the prep-session. It worked well. We were able to help the rest of the group to understand some of the weakness and lack of the PCP. We had productive group discussions with the purpose of improving the document and suggesting some new ideas. We were free to appoint facilitators and rapporteurs. Since we worked on those issues in the agenda already on 8 July during the prep-session, we were able to finish this work early. Only one NGO group had lengthy discussions because most of NGO representatives confessed frankly they did not understand terminology or ideology of the new PCP. Colleagues that attended the prep-session had to clarify these things. After lunch many pro-Bank NGOs left, while we continued with group reporting, it took about 2,5 hours approximately. Many people present noted afterwards that the quality, content and actuality of the NGO feedback to ADB was quite adequate, sometimes brilliant. When ADB staff asked to refer to particular paragraphs of the PCP document (as they were taking notes simultaneously into their lap-tops), NGOs did it flawlessly. Which shows that interested groups read the document with attention. Such an important gap as the absence of the 'prior informed consent' concept in the document was pointed out. NGOs linked it to the overall weakness in implementation mechanisms. One group stated that while good intentions and declarations of good will were numerous in the Draft PCP, they could see a lot of difficulties and obstacles for interested public to receive documents in the right time for the public interventions. A lot of attention was paid to a pre-project phase. NGOs want to know at the earliest time such things as who initiates projects – the Bank or the Kyrgyz government, how we can have results of initial assessment, etc. We called it among ourselves as a pre-preproject phase. Further on, NGOs listed types of information they want to have at their disposal, and the list was very long. We pointed out that in the introductory part of the document we would like the ADB to stress the access to information as an important tool to alleviate poverty. We deeply believe that if people have access to key resources (information, justice, power, land, water, etc.) they will not need loans or aid programmes, they can build stable and prosperous societies themselves. It is the lack of access to resources that generates poverty. I must add that we were not asked to give any ratings of the document. Fortunately, as this exercise seems very artificial. NGO groups decided they did not want to mention 'confidential documents' in order not to play the role of the ADB.

Non-NGO Reports: the mixed business-academia-media group surprised everyone in the room – they said that they need a separate PCP (sic!). They were not able to explain in clear words why they were feeling that way. NGOs repeatedly asked to clarify but the group was insisting that they would need some specific information (other than that NGO needs) and different ways of obtaining it. They again were not able to support that claim. I can offer my own explanations. First, the set of NGOs the local ADB usually invites to their meetings are really not interested in the project related information, hence this assumption that NGOs should be given only very narrow and specific information. Second, the title of the new information policy, 'PCP' created this confusion, and the translation into Russian added to this confusion. Because the word 'public' when translated into Russian actually means 'public organizations', which is very close to 'NGOs'. This non-NGO group was 'lost in translation' and interpreted PCP as 'alien', not what was meant for them. The government group prepared a Power Point presentation of Strong Points of PCP, the list was very long. Actually, they reproduced some key points from the Salomon's presentation: unification of two former policies, no-disclosure commitments, strengthening ties with host governments and NGOs, etc. They

also mentioned weak points: the information governments are seeking desperately while dealing with IFIs was not for disclosure.

Wrapping Up: Though we were progressing rather well, even ahead of schedule, the organizers deprived us of concluding remarks and decided to switch fast to the presentation of the Accountability Mechanism. Rolf Zelius did it in ten minutes. As I said, many people left, others were very tired. It is not a very bright idea to combine two mechanisms. ADB promised to circulate the notes of the consultation to all participants.

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