
60 YEARS OF THE WORLD BANK AND THE INTERNATIONAL MONETARY FUND

*Civil Society Strategy Meeting
Summary Report*

Prepared by the co-organizers of the Penang Conference January 2004

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Civil Society Strategy Meeting on the World Bank and IMF Summary Report

I. Introduction¹

The International Monetary Fund and World Bank, along with the World Trade Organization, are the most powerful institutions promoting economic globalisation in the world today. Free trade, a liberal investment regime, and a minimal role for the state in economic development have been clear objectives of IMF and World Bank adjustment and investment operations over the last twenty years. Policy conditionality imposed through these operations have undermined national sovereignty and contributed to the growing economic inequalities between and within countries. Moreover, accompanying macroeconomic policies have led to significant economic and social dislocation resulting in widespread unemployment, reduction in primary education and health expenditures, environmental degradation, removal of social protection mechanisms, and increasing violence.

Consequently, popular protests against the IMF and World Bank policy conditionality and projects have dramatically increased in size and global spread. This groundswell of public opinion has severely compromised the legitimacy of the Bretton Woods Institutions (BWIs). In response to this criticism, the BWIs have often, controversially, expanded their mandates to cover all aspects of economic development policy – to ensure that the principles of economic globalization are protected and advanced. As 2004 marks the 60th anniversary of the World Bank and IMF and the 9th anniversary of the WTO, the role of these institutions has emerged as one

of the most politically charged items on the agenda of civil society and nation states.

II. The Penang Process

Social movements, NGOs, and other forms of civil society have been resisting market capitalism as the ultimate *modus operandi* of economic development. Although united in reclaiming political space in both the South and North and in curbing the increasing power of large corporations in shaping development policy, civil society has not been as effective in advancing a coordinated agenda and strategy. This has limited the strength of the movement. The importance of creating a space in which civil society organizations could come together to discuss and debate the appropriate role of the IMF and World Bank and develop an overarching strategy in which to operate should not be underestimated. The Civil Society Strategy Meeting, which took place in Penang, Malaysia, is one small but important step in this process.

Sixty representatives of civil society organizations and peoples' movements from twenty countries gathered together for four days in Penang during January 2004. The goal of the conference was to strengthen global and local efforts in the resistance against the unjust policies and practices of the BWIs through the exchange of analyses, experiences, strategies and alternatives.

Whereas smaller, informal meetings were held between 2001-2003 in Zurich, Amsterdam, and Washington DC, Penang was designed to reflect a more representative balance between regions, issues, and types of social organization. Accordingly, the meeting highlighted the rich and exciting diversity of civil society initiatives on

¹ The report is prepared by the co-organizers of the Penang conference and does not necessarily represent or reflect views of all the participants.

reforming the international financial institutions, but it also drew attention to the need and challenge of constructing alliances between different constituencies and communities. This summary report attempts to distil some of the common themes and messages that emerged from the productive and vibrant discussions in Penang.

III. Framework and Key Themes

The fundamental critique of the BWIs, emerging in the Penang conference, centers on the legitimacy of the development model advanced by these global institutions. The neoliberal policies aimed at increasing growth and the conditionality imposed to do so are strongly contested. First, the BWIs' strategy on poverty reduction, or even economic growth for that matter, is flawed. The policy conditionality and investment projects supported by the World Bank and IMF have provided mixed results at best. The unwillingness of these institutions to learn, adapt, and support small-scale, people-oriented approaches reflects an institutional bias in incentive structures which promote the interests of creditor nations over the poor. Second, although growth is important, it is only one of many goals necessary to reduce poverty in a sustainable and equitable manner. Empowerment of marginalized peoples, protection of economic, social, and cultural rights, environmental sustainability, equity, human security, dignity, etc., are also all indispensable to development.

This underlying critique of the BWIs poses challenges on how civil society can and should engage with these global institutions. Despite the rhetoric of more openness and receptivity, recent engagements with these institutions over the past twenty years have been problematic. During the conference, several important cross-cutting messages emerged from the exchange of experiences and an objective assessment of successes and failures in civil society dialogue with the BWIs. The following paragraphs illustrate four of these key lessons:

- ***A more selective and nuanced approach to engagement.*** The engagement versus disengagement debate was a central and recurring theme throughout the strategy meeting. The discussions were rooted in a review of experiences around debt sustainability and country strategies (e.g. HIPC/PRSPs); structural adjustment (e.g. SAPRIN); safeguard policies (e.g. resettlement, forestry, indigenous peoples, etc.); sector strategies (e.g. World Commission on Dams, Extractive Industry Review); and of course a wide range of controversial investment projects. There appeared to be *increasing disenchantment* with both the impact and process of direct engagement with the IMF and World Bank. The importance of providing alternative technical advice to governments and civil society representatives in developing and transition countries was considered a high priority – so they would not be beholden to the IFIs for their sole source of advice and finance. Third World Network, in particular, emphasized that the best way to reduce the power of the BWIs was for countries to disengage and/or not accept orthodox policy prescriptions. Recent experiences of Malaysia and Thailand during the East Asia financial crisis and of Argentina today were cited. This is especially relevant given the potentially receptive political climate in several influential developing countries (e.g. Brazil, India, Thailand, perhaps even Indonesia, Argentina) and their interest in redefining relationships with donor institutions. Separately, it was also recognized that many civil society groups engage with the World Bank on a broad range of issues but the impact of long, protracted engagements that are not linked with external campaigns or mechanisms (e.g. human rights, debt, etc.) was questioned.
- ***Importance of reclaiming political space.*** Conference participants recognized the pervasive influence of IFIs in national political spaces – not only amongst finance officials and the executive branch but

increasingly with parliamentarians and legislative bodies. Often, elites in the domestic political space (in particular unelected finance officials) are perceived as oriented towards global economic institutions and transnational corporations at the expense of citizens and their civil organizations. Meeting participants asserted the need to reclaim national and sub-national governments from the control of the BWIs. Making available alternative technical advice to government officials and the involvement of elected officials (who are more directly accountable to citizens) in overseeing relationships with the BWIs are two approaches through which civil society can begin reasserting democratic control.

- ***Clear objective(s) for BWI reform initiatives.*** Conference participants discussed the extent to which the lack of a clear and coherent vision on the preferred role and functions of the BWIs has inhibited campaign progress. An objective assessment of reform initiatives over the past 15 years leads one to conclude that the effectiveness of BWI campaign efforts has been limited. The BWIs, especially the World Bank, are constantly expanding the scope of their work, at times actively spurred on by NGO campaigning. As one speaker noted, ‘Who would have thought 10 years ago that the World Bank would become the Environment Bank?’ The conference called for greater clarity in campaigns so that they are not inadvertently encouraging ‘mission creep’. Another speaker described this process as ‘adding heads to a hydra’. The slogan of ‘shrink or sink’, borrowed from the WTO campaign, resonated well with participants as a shared perspective that reflected the objective and desire to reduce the power and reach of the BWIs.
- ***Stronger NGO accountability to grassroots social and political movements.*** The issue of NGO accountability was introduced in several conference sessions. Discussions focused on the ongoing debate

on the accountability of NGOs; the accountability challenges inherent in North-South NGO relationships; and the challenges of representation and accountability in civil society engagement with the BWIs (e.g. Joint Facilitation Committee). Several participants (including Focus on the Global South) persuasively argued that NGOs (either in the North or South) are a particular form of social organization that often need to be more fully rooted or embedded in locally-based social and political movements. Currently, the growing disconnect between NGOs at the international and national levels and local movements at the grassroots level is cause for concern. NGOs can and should do more to amplify the voices of people affected on-the-ground by BWI operations. Stronger representation from movements will be encouraged in future civil society meetings on the BWIs.

IV. IFI Operations

The cross-cutting lessons for civil society presented above emerge from a candid assessment of BWI policy and project operations. During the Penang meeting, participants exchanged perspectives and analyses on the role of international financial institutions in multiple arenas. From these discussions, a more informed critique of the role of the IMF and World Bank emerged, as did lessons for constructing a positive role for civil society in the future. Brief summaries of these discussions organized by topic follow:

Debt and Financial Crisis / Regulations

The debt discussion involved an overview and state of play on the debt problem; the role of IFIs and its implications; the current status of debt initiatives and debt management mechanisms; an overview and discussion of different solutions proposed by civil society; as well as the role of projects in creating debt, particularly illegitimate and

odious debt. On financial crises and responses, the discussion looked at the recent spate of financial crises facing developing countries from Asia to Latin America which underscored the absence of an international financial system to ensure financial stability. In effect, it was recognized that countries are faced with an ‘international financial non-system’. The discussion focused on proposals made to regulate and mitigate the excess of this non-system such as introducing the Tobin tax, to curb hedge-fund like operations and deepening regional financial cooperation etc. Nonetheless, what has to be done by countries at the national level is significant in preserving domestic financial stability, given the lack of momentum of international initiatives. In this regard, the discussion focused on some experiences of developing countries, in particular Malaysia’s response to the Asian financial crisis of capital controls.

Adjustment and Conditionality (including Country-Level Strategies)

The conference discussed the various instruments of the institutions: (a) policies – macroeconomic, budget, sector, and environmental and social safeguards; (b) investment projects; and (c) technical assistance. Technical assistance, it was argued, has become a tool for ‘knowledge domination’ where alternative knowledge systems are suppressed. The conference also addressed the recent rhetoric on country ownership as another mechanism of control used by BWIs. It was clear that the BWIs exerted enormous influence through the signals they send on the economic health of developing countries – which is at odds with their commitment to promoting country ownership. And where country ownership is solicited, the opinions of unelected civil servants is privileged. This is the political economy in which IFI policy and project conditionality is designed and implemented.

Privatization

Privatization remains a core prescription in the policy content of structural and sectoral adjustment operations and in the formulation of country strategies. The privatization of basic services – water, health care, etc. has been especially controversial. The (often) guaranteed return on investment for private firms was juxtaposed with the access, quality, and affordability of basic services for low-income and other marginalized populations. The inherent biases and orientation of IFI operations reveals the ‘corporatization’ of the IFIs – a blind response to powerful business voices at the expense of people that the IFIs claim to serve. The conference also focused on how to strengthen local resistances to indiscriminate privatization. Understanding who the winners and losers of privatization are and greater clarity on what civil society ultimately would like to see is required. Some meeting participants argued that a new perspective on the respective roles of public, private, and community in basic services needs to be articulated.

Infrastructure Projects

The World Bank has recently returned to an outdated high-risk, high-reward strategy for infrastructure development. Conference participants noted that this notable shift in priorities is championed by both borrowing and donor governments and the institution itself. At the same time, the safeguard framework at the World Bank and IFC is undergoing a major overhaul. Therefore, the implications of increased investment in large infrastructure on the environmental, social, and cultural rights of local communities and on the debt levels of borrowing countries is particularly worrisome. Challenging the argument that large infrastructure increases economic growth and reduces poverty remains a high priority for civil society as does redefining the type of infrastructure that may well serve the interests of low-income and other disadvantaged groups in the South.

Governance

Conference participants concluded that the governance structure of global institutions remains glaringly anachronistic; the Boards of the BWIs reflect the balance of power in the mid-20th century when many developing countries were still colonies. Even the recent UN Monterrey Financing for Developing conference highlighted the undemocratic nature of the BWIs and called for an enhanced voice of developing countries in their Boards, despite strong opposition from some donor governments. Participants did recognize that an increased voice of Southern governments may not ensure that the interests of Southern citizens are promoted (e.g. concern for environmental and social safeguards may initially worsen). Concurrent efforts to strengthen public accountability of borrowing country representatives on the Boards of the BWIs are therefore essential.

V. Moving Forward

After the exchange of ideas and analyses during the first three days, conference participants met in smaller working groups to develop common agendas and action plans for the future. Groups were organized according to key topics identified in earlier sessions. The main outcomes of the groups are summarized below:

- ***Increasing external accountability:*** Increasing the accountability of the BWIs through external instruments (as opposed to internal measures such as the World Bank Inspection Panel) was a recurring theme during the conference. Using existing international human rights instruments to condition IFI activities was identified as a particularly important tool. Other important avenues to increase external accountability included (i) adherence to evolving international standards on environmental and social impacts, access to information, etc.; (ii) parliamentary oversight on IFI operations

in the country and on the country's representative to the BWIs; (iii) use of court systems and exploration of possible legal liability for damages resulting from IFI operations; (iv) coherence of IFI activities with overarching UN goals and compliance with relevant UN treaties.

- ***Rethinking the role of the IMF:*** Conference participants identified the need for a more strategic approach to rethinking the role of the IMF. In order to support stronger analysis and advocacy, several important tasks were recommended including (i) country case studies on the role of the IMF, especially in countries which have withdrawn from the PRGF; (ii) periodic action alerts on the IMF; and (iii) information guidebooks on economic and other technical IMF terms and on how to access relevant information from the IMF. Ultimately, providing alternative sources of expert information on macroeconomic stabilization, debt, etc. was determined to be essential. Moreover, strategically selecting a small subset of countries on which in-depth analysis can provide such support to public officials and civil society would be a logical and compelling next step.
- ***Developing a collective vision (e.g. Shrink or Sink):*** This working group explored the need to develop and adopt an overarching vision and strategy for civil society groups focused on the BWIs – in part to counter the 'mission creep' syndrome. Elements of a just international economic and financial system include citizen sovereignty over domestic policy decisions and open, transparent, and equitable governance structures of global institutions. Potential demands there were discussed include canceling 100% of multilateral debt for low income countries; canceling all illegitimate debt; terminating public support for MIGA, IFC, and ICSID; extracting IDA from the World Bank (IBRD); and ending PRGFs and PRSPs as they are currently designed.
- ***Exposing policy conditionality:*** Policy conditionality remains at the core of BWI

operations in most countries. Activities identified to expose and overcome the problems posed by conditionality include (i) developing a parliamentary statement critiquing the role of policy conditionality and (ii) organizing a conference in the South to bring together and exchange positive experiences in challenging IFI policy conditionality. The need for civil society to reconcile some of its internal inconsistencies on conditionality also requires further dialogue.

- **Reforming trade and investment:** A final thematic area discussed at Penang was on reforming trade and investment. Issues identified for further analysis include: (i) the respective and synergistic roles of the IMF, World Bank, and WTO on the trade agenda; (ii) (in)coherence between trade and notions of human development; (iii) the potentially strategic role of UNCTAD XI; (iv) investment climate surveys as the topic of the World Bank's World Development Report in 2005; and (v) the renewed emphasis on large-scale, privately-financed infrastructure.
- **Communications Infrastructure and Collaboration:** Conference participants recognized that mechanisms for stronger communication and collaboration between different civic groups are especially important. Several potential forums to improve the exchange of information were considered but a clear preference was given to strengthening www.if-watchnet.org which links over 60 civil society organizations around the world working on IFI reform issues. List-serves and e-newsletters will be catalogued and made more accessible through IFI Watchnet. Development of a password-protected shared area for strategic collaboration is near completion. Joint advocacy tools are also planned. In addition, www.babels.org was identified as a possible low-cost source for translations.
- **Collaboration around the 60th BWI Anniversary:** The year 2004 marks the 60th

anniversary of the BWIs. Conference participants expressed interest in coordinating activities and events in general and specifically around the anniversary and upcoming presidential selection process at the World Bank. A detailed calendar of events was developed. Moreover, an international week of action during the BWI Spring Meetings will also be organized. Finally, the presidential selection process may be used to raise more fundamental questions on transparency and accountability at these global institutions. It was agreed that this campaign should not be focused on specific candidates – as this approach may endorse a modest reform agenda – and should instead expose more systemic and deep-rooted global governance problems.

VI. Building on Penang

The Penang conference was considered especially valuable in (re)establishing relationships between different civil society organizations working on IFI reform issues and in exchanging analyses and perspectives in developing a strong, shared critique on the role of global financial institutions. Two process issues to be considered for subsequent meetings include (i) *composition*: the degree of representation between different formations of civil society (e.g. grassroots movements or membership-based organizations versus NGOs) and (ii) *strategy*: stronger coordination on an overarching message and on specific activities and events between different participating groups.

Given the success of the conference, it was agreed to meet again to continue and deepen the conversations which began in Penang. Participants of the Penang conference are listed in Annex 1. Rede Brasil and Third World Network (Africa) have agreed to join the current co-organizers for next year's event. Accra, Ghana has been selected as the location for the next conference to be held tentatively in February 2005.

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Civil Society Strategy Meeting on the World Bank and IMF

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