Sign-on Letter for Wolfowitz's First Day as President of World Bank

June 1, 2005

Dear Mr. Wolfowitz:

As you know, civil society organizations around the world reacted to your nomination and confirmation as president of the World Bank Group with alarm. Now, on the occasion of your formal accession to the office, we write you to make clear what we perceive as the major challenges facing the World Bank and the governments that control it. We are writing in the hope that you will address these issues in a satisfactory way.

The process that led to your appointment demonstrates the first challenge: of democracy and accountability. The 60-year-old unwritten agreement allowing only the president of the United States to choose the head of the World Bank Group is archaic and out of step with standard norms of democratic practice. The World Bank may be multilateral in name, but in practice it has become a tool for imposing a development and economic model that serves the interests of a few governments and corporations while rendering borrowing countries, the majority of its members, all but powerless to shift the Bank, or themselves, away from that model, or even to explore alternatives.

We anticipate that in the next five years the World Bank will set up a committee to examine its voting structure and presidential selection process, and that it may even make reasonable-sounding suggestions. But, given past experiences with such processes at the World Bank, we expect little real change. The secretive and undemocratic day-to-day decision-making processes at the international financial institutions weaken the credibility of the IMF and World Bank even as they profess transparency and accountability, and demand those qualities of borrowing countries.

We anticipate that early in your presidency you will announce your intention to engage in consultation and dialogue with civil society. But given the record of the World Bank over the last 10 years, it is likely that millions of dollars in public funds will be spent on processes, reports, and recommendations that will ultimately be ignored by the World Bank, as was the case with, among others, the World Commission on Dams, the Structural Adjustment Participatory Review Initiative (SAPRI), and the Extractive Industries Review (EIR). The Bank largely disavowed the results of these processes which made explicit recommendations to improve bank procedures, and to make it more transparent and democratic. The Bank’s recent controversial Joint Facilitation Committee neither improved relations with civil society nor made the Bank more responsive to its demands. Instead, it ignored the “voice of the peoples” affected by Bank policies and practices.

We anticipate that the World Bank will continue to devote millions of dollars to its public relations efforts. These efforts have deftly distanced the bank from its most unpopular policies and programs while maintaining the status quo. Over the past decade, the Bank has manipulated the meaning of terms like "poverty reduction," its new name for structural adjustment programs; "good governance," its new rationale for imposing conditions on borrowing governments; and "debt relief", its deceitful euphemism for insuring that governments continue to maintain their place on the borrow-repay-reschedule debt treadmill.

The World Bank’s public relations staff now faces the challenge of convincing people that the new president is independent of the Bush Administration and its controversial policies. We fear that "democracy" will be among the new buzz-words at the Bank, and the basis for a new set of...
conditionalities, particularly in the Middle East. We fear it will be used not to help create space for people to choose their own economic systems and development models, but as a cover to impose rules prioritizing foreign investment and market liberalization above all else, and to disempower and discredit governments that choose to prioritize the priorities of their citizens over corporate interests.

Nowhere will the public relations staff be more challenged than in dealing with the World Bank's role in Iraq. We anticipate a renewed politicization of the Bank, in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East, in order to increase corporate access to oil and other resources and assets as well as markets and cheap labor. You will be asked to recuse yourself from the World Bank/UN investigation into the U.S. government's distribution of Iraqi development funds to Halliburton, a contract with which you were personally involved; we hope you will do so. Ethical questions on that issue could well be compounded by the World Bank’s determination that Iraq's food subsidies should be eliminated -- in a country where acute malnutrition rates for children have nearly doubled since the invasion of April 2003. You could confound your critics by immediately announcing that the Bank will withdraw its conclusions about Iraqi subsidies.

We anticipate that you will talk about the need for more debt relief in the poorest countries, and perhaps even publicly advocate that President Bush co-operate with other wealthy countries to offer more relief. We believe that such calls would be greatly strengthened if you were to employ the logic you used in advocating for France, Russia, and Germany to cancel the debts they claim of Iraq -- namely that loans contracted by undemocratic regimes which worked to the detriment of the population should be annulled. Many of our organizations have used the same logic with regard to the equally odious debts contracted by the apartheid regime in South Africa, Mobutu in Zaire, Marcos in the Philippines, the military junta in Argentina, and many more. We have never received a sympathetic hearing from the World Bank.

You have announced that you will travel to Africa shortly after taking office. We anticipate that while there you will meet with presidents and prime ministers, and declare the urgency of helping the continent. We fear that access to Africa's oil will take precedence over poverty eradication and sustainable development and that, once again, there will be no material improvement in Africa's outlook resulting from World Bank programs during your tenure. Despite an endless series of Bank anti-poverty initiatives in the region during the last 30 years, African per capita incomes are below their 1975 level. Only by demonstrating respect for the people of Africa, their knowledge and their own particular national priorities will you gain credibility on that continent.

We note that at this historical moment, Latin American countries are disavowing and resisting the imposition of the so-called Washington Consensus, and many Asian nations are increasing their financial independence so as to free themselves from the dictates of the IMF and the Bank. Whatever stand you ultimately take on these issues, we commit ourselves to monitoring the performance of the World Bank, examining its rhetoric and exposing its deceptions and manipulations. We will invite others to do the same -- governments; NGOs; and the media which have too often paid more attention to words than actions and evidence. The stakes for the Bank are high: its reputation is at an all-time low and its policies continue to be a major source of poverty, violence and injustice. It is in your hands to start the process of reversing this persistent trend. The world is watching.
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