

“Research Bank on the World Bank”

1st - 2nd April 2005

With the recent departure of Jim Wolfensohn as President, the World Bank Group is at critical point in its policy development. A group of fifty people met in Budapest over the first weekend of April, the day after the nomination of the Paul Wolfowitz as new President, to reflect on the past operations, policies and programmes alongside future directions of the World Bank.

This was a unique event. Participants were advanced doctoral students writing their dissertations focused on aspects of World Bank activity. Indeed, the workshop was designed to provide a networking opportunity to meet other doctoral students and post-docs working in this field. They were joined by a few senior academics as well as staff from the World Bank to provide feed-back on their research.

Most debate took place in the three plenary sessions. In the first plenary, Jean-Jacques Dethier from the World Bank provided an overview of internal research, concentrating on the role of the Development Economics Research Group under the Chief Economist. He pointed out that although World Bank usually stays for long periods on the same research topic, sometimes research may lead to new lines of World Bank business. In addition research within the World Bank has influenced policy and what is even more important, it creates tools that others can use. Although the World Bank has monitored and gradually improved with the help of research its policy implementation, it still has difficulties recognizing the errors made in the past.

Jean-Christophe Bas from the Paris office of the Bank opened the second plenary session and outlined the shift towards openness and inclusiveness which emerged during Wolfensohn's presidency. There is a strong recognition within the World Bank that development policies and programs require comprehensive provision and not only shareholders, but stakeholders involvement. The latter among others include the research community represented by scholars from different backgrounds, with different research agenda, and from all three sectors of economic activity. Jean-Christophe Bas stressed that research is crucially important for the World Bank, and that having researchers in the World Bank and outside of it working on the same issues will benefit the World Bank policies and their implementation. Nevertheless, this process of shifting the paradigm is at the very beginning and needs more support and recognition within the World Bank.

The plenary continued with lively discussion of the World Bank's research culture, especially the dominance of the economics discipline in defining development problems and setting policy agendas. Alice Sindzingre from CNRS/SOAS – someone who has a foot in academia, and a foot in the Bank when working on the World Development Report – outlined the conflicting pressures on bank researchers to meet academic standards while also being relevant to the needs of staff in operations. In her view, research often did not make a difference 'on the ground' in developing countries.

This session also canvassed the ethics of research engagement with the World Bank and the extent to which conflicts of interest might arise researching the Bank and at

the same time receiving some support from the Bank. The Budapest participants were fiercely independent in asserting their caution of potential constraints on their academic independence; regardless of whether such pressures come from international organisations, within academia or from civil society.

The discussion also touched upon practical examples of doing the research on the World Bank. Participants also shared their experience having difficulties retrieving certain documents from World Bank archives and the ways to overcome these challenges of their research.

The closing plenary considered future activities and possibilities for improved research access and dialogue between researchers and Bank staff. Participants acknowledged that not all the research on the World Bank is targeted at the World Bank, but cooperation with the World Bank and consultations for it are a must for future research and development.

The question whether contact between researchers should be transformed into a network was raised by several participants. There are already networks that embrace this particular focus on the World Bank, while a new formal network creation needs separate funding and staff. It was agreed that other alternatives should be considered. As a result, the idea of summer school with more professionals from the World Bank was suggested from researchers' side as a follow up and continuation of this unique project. Thus, if the interest does not fade and participants succeed establishing a working group to realize the plan, in 2006 the Central European University, Budapest may open its doors once again to host the summer school on the World Bank.

At the same time there was a mutual agreement that participation of researchers from developing countries and strengthening the research in the developing countries has to be encouraged and promoted. External Affairs of the World Bank has invited participants to join the Researchers Alliance for Development, and one simple but effective idea is to establish a basic database of doctoral dissertations on the World Bank.

Plans are in place to develop an edited volume from in the CSGR Routledge Globalisation series. 30 papers were presented and can be found on the CPS website at: http://www.ceu.hu/cps/eve/eve_wbank_program.htm

The conference was a joint initiative of the Center for the Study of Globalisation and Regionalisation at the University of Warwick, the Center for Policy Studies at Central European University and the European Vice Presidency of the World Bank. It was organised by Diane Stone, Marie Curie Chair at CEU.

Diane Stone
Marie Curie Chair &
Head of Public Policy,
Center for Policy Studies
Central European University