

The World Bank's World Development Reports are written and marketed giving the impression that they convey broadly held views and contain objective research. Many civil society organisations, however, feel that they are selective and biased and that the Bank sees them largely as a tool for self-promotion and self-justification. As a result the Reports are unbalanced and lack independent analysis, especially of the Bank's own actions. This is worrying, given the cost of the Report and the wide distribution it achieves. US\$3 million was spent on producing the 1997 World Development Report (WDR97) – not including the cost of promoting it. Only about one sixth of this outlay is likely to be recovered from sales, because around half of the 150,000 copies printed are distributed free. As a result, the WDR is one of the few international reference works which are regularly received by African universities and similar organisations. Earlier this year Brendan Martin, an author and consultant working with trade unions, characterised the WDR as 'a highly leveraged intervention in the policy market, which overlooks and crowds out other publications in the field'.

### **Engaging in Consultation**

Responding to criticism that World Development Reports portray only a limited range of perspectives, WDR teams have, for the last few years, consulted interested non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and others on a draft of each Report about two months before the final copy is sent to the printers. Many NGOs have submitted detailed critiques and suggestions, for example Save the Children Fund on WDR93 on health and WDR96 on the transitional economies; they were disappointed that their points were not satisfactorily taken up. One explanation is that by this stage the Bank staff wanted to defend their text rather than discuss changes. The 1997 Report team decided to start consulting outsiders from the very start of their research. As soon as it had been constituted, the team travelled to 40 countries between June and August 1996, speaking to government officials, researchers, businesspeople, NGOs and trade unions. Following this, it established an Internet chatline and held meetings with the World Bank/NGO Committee and other bodies, culminating in a final round of consultation in April 1997. Whilst the Bank team claim that points expressed

# The Process of Preparing World Development Reports

*A Critique*

**Alex Wilks**

IDS Bulletin Vol 29 No 2 1998

at these meetings influenced their views, which were fed into the Report, civil society organisations, evaluating this experience feel it was not satisfactory. They feel that the haphazard and unsatisfactory efforts at consulting civil society groups contrast markedly with the formal survey of 3,700 companies carried out in 69 countries on behalf of WDR; and that WDR97, like others before it, fails to outline alternative views on the issues under discussion.

These civil society organisations felt that the WDR team staff should have:

- clarified the role of the Report and the capabilities of the team, so that people would know what to expect from the consultation and whether/how their comments would be used;
- circulated interim drafts of the Report for comments, and not leave a hiatus between June 1996 and late March 1997.

### **Formal Peer Review or Contracting Out**

To move beyond unsatisfactory *ad hoc* consultations, the Bank could institute formal anonymous peer reviews of the draft WDR's evidence and findings. This would be useful because people consulted outside the World Bank are currently at a disadvantage compared to Bank staff, who get many opportunities to comment on the Report. This imbalance weakens the WDR's analysis of fields where the Bank is a major actor and contributes to the suspicion that the WDR is more about raising the Bank's profile and promoting its perspectives, than it is about research. Also, the Report includes many charts and graphs summarising complex statistics which are often used in newspapers and for teaching. Peer reviewers could check their validity

and correct misleading impressions. This year, in the absence of such peer reviews, UK political scientists and economists have only been able to examine the 1997 WDR's methodology and internal consistency at seminars held after publication.

The clearest way for the World Bank to make its flagship publication more neutral and balanced, however, would be to contract out all or part of its production. With such a large budget there should be no trouble attracting suitable institutes and individuals interested in bidding for the brief. The successful team – which should ideally be interdisciplinary and international – would be mandated to conduct a literature survey, then hold discussions with relevant officials, civil society organisations and others to produce a draft Report which can then be circulated for discussion. Some people might object to this proposal because they value the WDR as a window on Bank staffs' views on key issues. A section of the Report could cover this, however, if WDR writers are given access to Bank files and are able to survey Bank staff.

The above proposals are in line with the Bank's statements on the benefits of competition and partnership-building, and would enable the World Development Report to gain much wider respect. Opening up research so that people with various views feel confident that their contributions will be dealt with fairly, and carefully separating research from World Bank self-promotion, is particularly important now that President Wolfensohn wants the Bank to do more to provide 'leadership in the field of development knowledge'. If these proposals are not adopted, then many civil society groups will continue to feel that the Bank is resistant to funding and publishing critical examination and instead wants to use its patronage and publicity machinery to dominate international research.