



WORLD BANK "EVOLUTION" AND THE NEED FOR SYSTEMIC ACCOUNTABILITY

80 YEARS SINCE THE BRETTON WOODS CONFERENCE

World Bank "evolution" and the need for systemic accountability:
80 years since the Bretton Woods Conference

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“The lessons from [the World Bank’s] past experience are well known, yet they are generally ignored in the design of new operations...[I]nstitutional amnesia is the corollary of institutional optimism.”¹

The World Bank² is one of the largest multilateral development banks in the world. Its professed mission is to end poverty and promote shared prosperity in developing countries. Since the 1980s, the policy norms promoted by the World Bank, along with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), have been characterised by privatisation, liberalisation, and deregulation.³ These were dubbed the Washington Consensus, as policy norms aligned with the economic model of the United States (US). In the process, governments in the Global South were increasingly prescribed the role of creating enabling conditions and policies for the private sector, especially multinational enterprises and finance capital.⁴

In December 2022, almost 75 years after its loan to Chile, its first to a Southern country,⁵ the World Bank Group (WBG) released an Evolution Roadmap in a bid to reform itself.⁶ The Roadmap aims to adapt the institution to the world’s overlapping crises. By the October 2023 Annual Meetings in Marrakesh, Morocco, the Bank had tabled and agreed to pursue the next steps after a series of internal talks and consultations.

The year 2024 will mark 80 years since the Bretton Woods Conference of July 1944, also known as the UN Monetary and Financial Conference, which birthed the World Bank and

the IMF. Across the decades, the World Bank’s major policy and thematic shifts have had their own histories. Notable evolutions and reforms within the Bank occurred amid geopolitical dynamics, especially in line with US priorities in response to economic crises. Similarly, 2024 is another moment for World Bank reform or evolution: a process that could be traced to the Bank’s response to the multiple crises since 2021.

Anticipated in 2024 is the release of the operational guide for World Bank evolution through the formal launch of the new “World Bank playbook,” along with a scorecard (indicators for its outcomes). In its Spring Meetings in April 2024, discussions on budget needs for the Bank’s evolved work are expected to take place.⁷

This policy brief critiques World Bank evolution through three issues facing its reform: 1) the long-standing bias of the Bank for private capital and finance; 2) a denial of the history of World Bank harms; and 3) the influence of dominant powers within the Bank to pursue geopolitical and economic interests. The paper ends with a discussion on the World Bank’s role in supporting a system that generates inequalities, and the need to highlight its culpability.

I. Contextualising evolution: Carving a role for the World Bank amid crises

The World Bank's mandate and economic role have expanded throughout its history. Its beginnings were as a Bank for the reconstruction of Europe after World War II, then as a loan financier for infrastructure projects in the "Third World." It later expanded roles akin to a development agency and policy advisor concerned with poverty, and even later to areas of environment and governance (see Table 1).⁸ This expansion cannot be divorced from political

context. For example, the World Bank's growing role in the Third World coincided with (1) the term of Robert McNamara as the President of the World Bank, after his stint as US Defense Secretary during the US-Vietnam War; and (2) the World Bank's self-assigned role as a hub of development knowledge (see Table 1). These occurred amid (3) the rise of national liberation movements in the Global South.

Table 1. World Bank evolution alongside crises and historical turmoil⁹

Period	Context	Key policy and institutional moments	World Bank role for the era
Post-WWII	Reconstruction after WWII and amid the Cold War	IBRD founding (1944); IFC founding (1956)	Banker for infrastructure
1960s up to 1970s	Decolonisation of Third World, national liberation movements Third World states lead UN discourse on "New International Economic Order" (1970-1979)	IDA founding (1960) Foreign aid to the Global South Anti-poverty objectives Support for "green revolution" in agricultural countries World Bank Presidency of ex-US Defense Secretary McNamara	Global development agency; knowledge hub
Late 1970s to 1980s	Third World debt and energy crisis; crisis of the "market-interventionist"/welfare state in global North Fall of Berlin Wall (1989)	Structural adjustment programmes; neoliberalism Environmental and social impact assessments instituted (1989) MIGA founding (1988)	Global development agency; knowledge hub

Period	Context	Key policy and institutional moments	World Bank role for the era
1990s	<p>End of Cold War (1991)</p> <p>Rise of private capital flows</p> <p>Asian Financial Crisis (1998)</p> <p>Anti-globalisation movements (Seattle 1998)</p>	<p>Focus on “good governance” along with previous market-oriented reforms (e.g., in former Soviet countries)</p> <p>Growth of “green” mandate – promotion of National Environmental Action Plans (NEAP)</p> <p>Poverty Reduction Strategy Plans</p> <p>Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative</p>	Global development agency; knowledge hub; good governance promoter
2000s to 2010s	<p>Anti-globalisation movements (thousands at April 2000 Washington D.C. protests)</p> <p>2008 recession, global financial crisis, and aftermath of-slow economic recovery</p> <p>China and Russia as geopolitical competitors of the US</p> <p>Sustainable development goals (2015 onwards)</p>	<p>Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative (2005)</p> <p>Cascade approach established (2017) towards “billions to trillions” in development finance</p> <p>Promotion of PPPs, infrastructure as an asset class</p>	Global development agency; knowledge hub; good governance promoter; advocate for a “de-risking” state
2020s	<p>Pandemic and multiple crises (climate, debt, etc.), rising inequalities and “social unrest”</p> <p>China and Russia as geopolitical competitors of the US</p>	<p>GRID, World Bank “evolution” elevates climate discourse into Bank mission and vision, underpinned by Cascade approach</p>	Global development agency; knowledge hub; good governance promoter; advocate for a “de-risking” state; a “bigger and better bank”

The expansion of the World Bank's mandate also expanded its influence especially in the Global South. Social movements in these countries have questioned the World Bank's, along with the IMF's, economic role across the decades. It is crucial to note that the World Bank's has been long dominated by the US, with the latter's agenda woven into many Southern countries' histories of colonialism and neocolonialism.¹⁰ The Bank and the Fund played roles aligned with US foreign policy's "containment" of rivals during the Cold War. Amid crises in the late 1970s, policies of neoliberal globalisation oriented big business expansion into new markets in the Global South.¹¹ Along the way, social movements opposed the WBG for sinking countries in debt, imposing conditions on said loans, shaping economies to the benefit of big business, and even backing military dictatorships.¹²

The geopolitical factors behind World Bank priorities continued after the Cold War. During the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s and amid China's capitalist restoration, the World Bank celebrated the global transitions from "[economic] plan[ning] to market[s]."¹³ In line with US foreign policy interest to discredit any perceived element of socialism, the Bank perpetuated the perception that economic planning belongs to a bygone era. It has influenced states to prioritise policies that allow market actors to profit and prosper.

The 2008 crisis exposed this policy model. The US banking crises and recession rippled towards Europe. Debt of the Global South mounted as early as the mid-2010s, signalling the start of another debt crisis.¹⁴ Growing inequalities were increasingly acknowledged in the time of neoliberal globalisation and unregulated financial markets. This neoliberal model compromised people's rights and further concentrated capital—a monopoly

capitalism of greater corporate profits and market power.¹⁵

With the discredited neoliberal model came new ways of involving profit-oriented actors, from the World Bank-promoted Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs), to blended finance. In 2017, the Bank unveiled its "Cascade approach," which put all private finance options first and relegated public sector financing as a last resort for development.¹⁶ Private finance—with the ambition of tapping trillions in financial markets—was touted as sources for a broad range of initiatives, from infrastructure projects in the Global South to climate action. Some called this the corporatisation of development,^[17] or the "Wall Street Consensus."¹⁸

The present: World Bank Evolution as a repackaging of old approaches

The ongoing crises that accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic have further exposed the decades-old neoliberal model. The pandemic has laid bare the harmful effects of structural adjustment programs, privatised social services, unregulated private creditors, loan conditionalities, flexibilised and insecure labour, and corporate monopolies.¹⁹ Amid crises, more and more people expressed their discontent.²⁰ The Bank, amid research claims that social unrest repels investors,²¹ has turned to the language of sustainability and inclusion. It has increasingly intervened in areas such as climate, gender, and crisis response – linking these discourses with the Bank's profit-oriented logic (see Box 1).

The years 2022 and 2023 became another moment of adaptation for the World Bank. The context is that of increasing US competition with rival powers: with Russia in Ukraine, China over trade routes like the Asia-Pacific. The impetus for

World Bank evolution came from the G20's push for reforms²² to increase WBG lending, as well as the US' push for the WBG to reassert its economic role in the international system. The Bank, running on the US Treasury's call for a "new Bretton Woods,"²³ needed to re-legitimise its mandate in an era of multiple crises. This effort also required a "new" face. When then-WB President David

Malpass attracted controversy in late 2022 for his evasive comments on climate science,²⁴ he was replaced by the US-nominated Ajay Banga. Banga came from Mastercard, Citigroup, and the International Chamber of Commerce and was involved in initiatives for "climate-aligned" private finance.²⁵

Box 1. Repurposing profit-oriented approaches from "Green, Resilient, and Inclusive Development" to Evolution

In 2021, the World Bank released a strategy document dubbed "Green, Resilient, and Inclusive Development" (GRID). The GRID document acknowledged rising inequalities and ecological concerns. The paper claimed the need for a "range of social and labor market policies...to compensate losers, safeguard the vulnerable, and deliver a just transition to a green economy."²⁶ In mid-2022, the Bank released a crisis-response document after GRID, entitled "Navigating Multiple Crises, Staying the Course on Long-Term Development," as it made an additional USD 170 billion available for crisis response.²⁷ This mid-2022 framework, built on GRID, was oriented toward addressing food insecurity, protecting people and jobs, strengthening the Global South's resilience to economic shocks, and making policies and investments to rebuild better.

Both the GRID paper and the "Navigating Multiple Crises" document enabled World Bank policy discourse to speak about the overlapping crises in the economy, food, debt, ecology, and climate, among others. However, the objective of crisis response was grafted onto the Bank's private capital-first logic in its claimed solutions, policy advice, and operations. This policy logic, the Cascade approach, or Maximising Finance for Development,²⁸ is incorporated in both documents. GRID claims that "reforms to remove constraints" on private investment are "essential prerequisites for a fiscally responsible path to recovery."²⁹ The crisis response document echoed the same, with private investment considered "vital for sustainable job creation and [as] necessary ingredients to reach development goals."³⁰

In this way, the World Bank transposed a pre-pandemic approach, once criticised as having failed, into the worsening global context without having to revisit policy assumptions. Externally, it projected a new image without revisiting its track record. These two documents were followed by the 2023 "World Bank evolution" that scaled up these policy discourses into a process of self-redesign. The evolution document discussed and approved in the October 2023 Annual Meetings of the IMF-World Bank in Marrakesh, Morocco, elevated the terms of the GRID. It aims for "impactful development that is inclusive of everyone, resilient to shocks, and sustainable," while retaining the long-standing approach that puts private capital first (see Section III on World Bank evolution).

The reform of multilateral development banks (MDBs) was also discussed in parallel spaces and initiatives. The Bridgetown Initiative, led by Barbados Prime Minister Mia Mottley, sought debt relief as well as increased WBG and investor funding for climate response. The initiative has retained the assumption that private capital unlocks sustainable development and that public finance is inadequate. Elsewhere, the Summit for a New Global Financial Pact³¹ held in mid-2023,

promoted by France's President Emmanuel Macron, raised World Bank reform and evolution as a key example of MDB reform. During the Summit, the World Bank, now under Ajay Banga's leadership, also launched its Private Sector Investment Lab. It is a pool of big business CEOs seeking to "reimagine new partnerships" towards accomplishing the unfulfilled objective of mobilising trillions in private finance for development.³²

II. World Bank "evolution" today: Inertia and impunity

Overall, World Bank evolution claims to change three fundamental components: the WBG mission or goals; the operational model or how they work; and their financing model or how they use the money from their member countries. Such is the structure of both the early 2023 Evolution Roadmap and the October 2023 Annual Meetings document, "Ending Poverty on a Livable Planet."³³

By October 2023, the Bank's vision and mission had been amended with two major shifts. They elevated climate and ecological concerns and

expressed greater attention to ongoing crises as global challenges. Its vision became "a world free of poverty on a livable planet;" its mission turned to "end[ing] extreme poverty and boost shared prosperity on a livable planet." Today's multiple crises were framed as challenges that have to be addressed to make the new vision-mission a reality. Eight challenges were identified (see Box 2). The overall ambition is a "bigger and better Bank," a transformation for "urgent action and new solutions" for today's extraordinary times.³⁴

Box 2. The eight global challenges identified in World Bank evolution³⁵

1. Climate change mitigation and adaptation
2. Fragility and conflict
3. Pandemic prevention and preparedness
4. Energy access
5. Food and nutrition security
6. Water security and access
7. Enabling digitalisation
8. Protecting biodiversity and nature

The adjusted WBG vision and mission are framed to be more inclusive and responsive to ongoing crises. However, the Bank's "Ending Poverty on a

Livable Planet" document from October 2023 reveals a more nuanced picture. The new, lofty vision and mission could only go so far until they

faced the Bank's prevailing policy assumptions. World Bank evolution faces the following inherent limits, to be elaborated on the succeeding subsections:³⁶ 1) the inertia on, or the Bank's strong tendency to keep unchanged, the bias for private capital and finance, and 2) the impunity from the denial of the World Bank's complicity in ongoing crises and in supporting the dominant economic system.

1. Inertia: No evolution beyond private capital dogma

The World Bank claims to pursue ending poverty while being more responsive to other global crises. However, it still subscribes to the assumption that private capital and finance are key to advancing development and prosperity. This is despite the ways that these private actors have perpetuated the current crises faced by people in the Global South (see below). The Bank's tendency on such assumptions around private finance could be described as inertia, a strong tendency to keep this approach unchanged, unless perhaps another external force acts on it to shift this course.

The Bank continues to advocate for further mobilisation of private capital, such as co-financing, and ways to reduce risks for investors ("enabling private capital") such as improving business climates. Enabling private capital, in simpler terms, could come in the form of country reforms or loan

conditionalities for more investment and Public-Private Partnership policies, developing capital markets (e.g., stock markets) and financial sectors, or IFC's advice and financing to create new markets, among others.³⁷

The early 2023 Evolution Roadmap explicitly embeds the WBG's Cascade approach, long criticised for relying on private capital when responding to development problems while putting public investment as a last resort.^{38 39} This is retained implicitly in the October 2023 "Ending Poverty on a Livable Planet" document, which ensures that "private sector finance and solutions are pursued whenever possible as first-best options, and using scarce public sector resources only when necessary and justified" [emphasis added].⁴⁰ The public sector is mentioned as secondary to the role ascribed to capital. "Enabling and Mobilizing Private Capital" remains a distinct part of the World Bank's new proposed playbook of reforms in its operations. Evolution also continues to endorse blended finance,⁴¹ criticised for using public money such as aid to attract profit-seeking investors.⁴² The World Bank's vision and mission are incoherent with their retention of old policy tenets. Simply refashioning the same policies (see Box 1 above) suggests that the road to evolution stops at a dead end: the profit motive.

Box 3. Realities contradict World Bank's narrative on turning "billions to trillions"

Previously, the World Bank justified its bias for private finance through saying that scarce public money could be used to mobilise trillions of dollars, including investors' capital. They called this turning "billions to trillions" in 2015. These buzzwords underpinned the Bank's Cascade approach. In practice, the trillions did not appear.⁴³ Nine years later, there is still little evidence to suggest that big private finance and capital are able to address economic and development concerns in the Global South. Evidence rather suggests that they worsened crises and inequalities.

For instance, unregulated private finance drove the 2008 crisis that triggered a global recession, a point acknowledged by the UN Conference on Trade and Development.⁴⁴ Private creditors who flocked to Southern markets after 2008, according to the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs,⁴⁵ are also responsible for the debt that burdens countries today. Corporate and private sectors have invested in large-scale extraction of fossil fuels and natural resources, with major global banks and financial companies having major interests in fossil fuel businesses that worsen climate impacts in the Global South.⁴⁶ Financial markets continued to be volatile even during the first quarter of 2023, as the World Bank continued to argue for reliance on private finance.⁴⁷ In contrast to development rhetoric, by 2023, two-thirds of all new wealth since 2020 went to the richest one per cent, including shareholders and investors behind the biggest corporations.⁴⁸

In contrast, trillions have been documented as historical outflows of wealth from the Global South. One longitudinal study quantified the loss of at least USD 152 trillion of wealth and resources from the Global South in a history of low wages and cheap exports – a persistent process of siphoning that has accelerated since the World Bank and IMF introduced structural adjustment conditionalities.⁴⁹

The World Bank's vision-mission is anchored on keeping the dominance of private capital through stating agreeable goals to legitimise problematic strategies and policies.

2. Impunity: World Bank evolution proceeds from glossing over a history of harms

World Bank evolution aims to be in sync with climate concerns and sustainable development. The Bank's evolution has expanded, at an operational and financial level, its mandate into various global challenges. But World Bank evolution documents fail to acknowledge or assess its active role, through its policies and programmes, in shaping situations of crises.

Social movements have long rejected World Bank and IMF interventions, especially in the Global South. These interventions ranged from privatisation, cuts to social service budgets, and public-private partnerships that left people unprotected from the pandemic and rising cost of living.⁵⁰ World Bank-backed projects were criticised for resource grabs and displacing peasant and Indigenous communities. The World Bank's development model integrated Southern countries into the world economy as sources of cheap resources and labour, undermining unionised labour, and hard-won rights along the way.⁵¹ The World Bank's roles still shape the burdens of the multiple crises felt by people today (see Table 2).

Table 2. Some aspects of today's multiple crises and examples of World Bank's roles

Climate and energy	<p>Financed USD 15 billion worth of fossil fuel projects since 2015⁵²</p> <p>Promoted and gave project loans for false climate solutions such as mega-dams⁵³</p>
Hunger and land concentration	<p>Funded at least 14 large land deals spanning at least 900,000 hectares across the Global South from 2006 to 2016⁵⁴</p> <p>Promoted and supported market-assisted land reform that commodified land, indebted the "beneficiaries," and undermined peasant struggles⁵⁵</p>
Conflict	<p>Financed repressive regimes in the Global South, from the Cold War to, until it was called out,⁵⁶ the junta in Myanmar</p> <p>Supported⁵⁷ Financial Action Task Force's push for norms in "countering the financing of terrorism," now used for repression⁵⁸</p> <p>Financed and supported mega-dams and coal projects, via Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) that took away Indigenous and peasant lands⁵⁹</p>
Pandemic	<p>Promoted privatisation and PPPs in healthcare that eroded access to public health services⁶⁰</p>
Debt	<p>Explicitly refused to cancel debt burdens despite the pandemic,⁶¹ as countries spent more on repaying debts than on health and welfare</p>

Long-documented evidence of negative impacts, from civil society alone, are conveniently absent in official evolution documents. The Bank remains exempt from any institutional, financial, or operational consequences from the track record of harms from its policies and operations. The World Bank's denial of its responsibility for crises deliberately erases the necessary context that should provide the basis for policy shifts and reforms after decades of neoliberal policies. Without accounting for the effects and impacts of decades-long privatisation, de-regulation, and liberalisation, the World Bank forecloses any potential shifts away from these policies.

The World Bank's erasure of its own responsibility for crises means that impunity serves as the basis of

its evolution. The World Bank has, in the past, evaded even a formal adoption of international human rights standards, resisting the advocacy even by UN Special Rapporteurs.⁶² In practice, the Bank is within the UN system as a "specialised agency,"⁶³ but has not formally and explicitly adopted the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

By refusing to acknowledge a track record of harm, evolution reinforces and re-establishes the legitimacy of the World Bank. The World Bank is then able to align with the goals of the dominant financial and geopolitical interests in the institution, those of the United States (see Section I on the context of World Bank reform). Today, the legitimacy of a US-led institution enables the

declining superpower to reinforce its influence on the world stage amid its competition with China and Russia. World Bank evolution is, in a sense, an adaptation. It serves to maintain World Bank legitimacy in a changing world, with stakes intertwined with US goals of slowing its strategic decline, or the weakening of their dominance, while still further expanding economic and political influence around the world.

By foreclosing policy changes and denying harm, the World Bank is able to frame policy discourse in terms of transforming itself and expanding its role. This is in contrast to wider conversations brought by social movements⁶⁴ and critical academics⁶⁵ for decades: of transforming economic systems currently dominated by capital, scrutinising the World Bank's role in them, and holding the Bank accountable.

III.

Systemic accountability: Accountability for supporting a harmful system

For social movements and civil society today, addressing peoples' needs remains a key objective. The question is whether the track record of the World Bank is fit for this goal. Decades of resistance and contestation by social movements have demanded the accountability of the IMF and the World Bank, including demands to shut them down.^{66 67} These institutions, however, face official immunities that prevent wider discussion of human rights violations and a holistic assessment of their decades-long neoliberal model.

The World Bank is immune from external accountability – with few exceptions. For instance, in 2015, the World Bank Group's private sector arm, the International Finance Corporation (IFC), was sued in Washington D.C. courts. Farming and fisherfolk communities sued the IFC for funding a harmful coal plant in Gujarat, India. The IFC claimed “absolute immunity” as an international organisation, similar to immunity by foreign governments.⁶⁸ At the peak of the case, the US Supreme Court rejected the IFC's claim of

immunity. But this was overturned in 2020 by district courts, who dismissed the case, on the claim that the harms were due to the IFC's implementing partner from the private sector, leaving the IFC immune.⁶⁹

Internal accountability mechanisms exist in the Bank through its Inspection Panel and Dispute Resolution Service.⁷⁰ These are mostly on a project basis and, by definition, test the Bank's fulfillment of environmental and social standards it imposes on itself. These processes also require formal grievances to be raised by affected communities, a condition limited by shrinking democratic spaces. For example, civil society and affected communities have engaged these mechanisms amid cases and fears of reprisals.⁷¹

An Independent Evaluation Group (IEG) also exists to “evaluate the development effectiveness of the World Bank.”⁷² As a monitoring and evaluation entity, the IEG's work is “to assess the performance of the institution's policies, projects, and processes

(accountability) and to learn what works in what context (learning).⁷³ The IEG's work as an evaluator is about improving the World Bank's operations. Debating the World Bank's overall mandate, the economic assumptions behind its policies, or considerations on people's rights, are outside its purview. It conducts evaluations of World Bank programmes and policies, then reports the findings and recommendations to the Board of Executive Directors, composed of World Bank member governments' representatives.

Therefore, external accountability is limited by legalised immunity and questions of jurisdiction; internal accountability is limited by the mechanisms' orientation and scope. In the context of the gravity of today's multiple crises, and the impunity of the World Bank based on its track record, a more substantive definition of accountability as culpability for previous action and inaction could be informed by history, political economy, people's rights and social justice.

In the context of World Bank impunity and the inertia of its so-called evolution, social movements, civil society, could continue to further advance critical conversations:

1. The World Bank's evolved mandate is illegitimate and points to the necessity of systemic accountability for peoples in the Global South

Social movements have in various ways asserted the realities of World Bank harms, as well as the need for justice, reparations, and non-recurrence of rights violations. Reparations could mean steps to acknowledge, compensate, and correct harms; non-recurrence could mean taking steps to halt and prevent violations of economic rights. Demands for accountability have taken the form of calling to end IFI projects, loan programmes, country operations; compensation from the IFIs for damages it caused to the people; or for Northern governments to stop

financing IFIs' harm to people and planet. The demand for accountability has also taken the form of calling for the closure of these institutions as a solution.

The revitalisation of the World Bank's development mandate, through its evolution process, stands on self-ascribed claims that ignore long-standing evidence from civil society and social movements. From a perspective of historical and continuing harm, its current mandate is illegitimate. It is founded on avoiding discussions of accountability for economies that violate economic, social, and cultural rights, including the right to self-determination and development.

Advancing the argument for external accountability should, firstly, account for the track record of the World Bank in reinforcing the dominant economic system, with its policies contributing to the concentration of wealth, productive resources, and means of production into fewer hands. In this sense, secondly, external accountability should be based on the perspective of social movements that have been resisting and calling to disentangle from the external influence of conditionalities and the monopoly capitalist economic model. This could be called a systemic accountability – accountability for supporting systems of economic and social harm. At the same time, the accountability of the World Bank could be connected to discussions of neo-colonial power, violations of economic sovereignty, and the role of these institutions in the international financial architecture.

2. The World Bank, given its track record, should not expand its role and mandate further

The analysis of this paper suggests that World Bank "reform" is instrumental to its survival as an institution that supports the under- and maldevelopment of the Global South, under the current world economic system. That is, the World Bank's expanded mandate and role, and a denial of

its history of impacts, serves the creation of new markets for “climate-aligned” investors and big private sector, and the foreign policy objectives of powerful states. World Bank operations, despite claiming to change, remain founded on the profit motive. All these undermine prospects of democratising economies.

Approaching 80 years of the Bretton Woods Conference is an opportune moment to continue assessing and analysing its record as a supposed development bank, including the ways its expanded role continues to shape our current world of multiple crises. Social movements, civil society, and their allies could continue to analyse the track record of World Bank interventions based on its new mandate (e.g., “green” conditionalities, infrastructure, financing) from an on-ground perspective, towards asserting the need for people’s sovereignty in countries. These, then, could form a basis for interrogating the expansion of the World Bank into climate, gender, and sustainability through new loans, projects, or policy advice in countries. This includes the possibility of demanding to reduce or reject deeper policy influence.

3. Reducing and rejecting World Bank influence creates possibilities for people’s rights, sovereignty, and economic transformation

Asserting the World Bank’s systemic accountability, from ending projects, loans, to reparations, and even calls to close the World Bank, aims to reduce or reject IFI influence. Reducing such economic influence means opening up spaces for more democratic choices founded on people’s sovereignty. Disentangling from World Bank policy influence is a way to remove the neoliberal obstacles to working peoples’ rights, and reduce wealth inequalities under monopoly capitalism. Reversing existing World Bank prescriptions could support long-running demands on protecting social services, reversing labour flexibilisation, breaking from export-dependence, stopping socially and

ecologically harmful projects, and cancelling debts that have not benefited the people.

Expanding prospects for people’s sovereignty opens up possibilities to transform economies and societies. Ending IFI prescriptions and conditionalities is a step towards democratising development planning to align to people’s needs. Democratic ownership over development paths can increase domestic production for needed food and commodities; support economic, social, and cultural rights; and enable other economic and ecological shifts. In the Global South, sustainable industrialisation, to reclaim and rebuild domestic production for domestic needs, and genuine agrarian reform, to break up land concentration, could be crucial elements in this regard. The former involves peoples’ sovereignty over strategic sectors of an economy to advance a democratically-planned process of revitalising domestic industries and reinvestment, in a manner that does not necessarily reproduce the Global North’s ecologically harmful patterns of industrialisation. The latter includes redistributing a key resource—land—to advance rural economies sustainably.

At the global level, the conversations on reigning in World Bank policy influence could be explored in light of the Fourth UN Financing for Development Conference in 2025. This requires efforts to affirm that international financial architecture should be a matter for discussion of, at the very least, member-states and the international community, especially the global South and its peoples. That is, the international financial architecture should be democratised beyond the purview of Northern-dominated IFIs.

At stake in holding the World Bank accountable are people’s economic, social, and cultural rights, their right to development, and the right to their resources. This includes the people’s right to lead the directions of their economies, and recover their future by constructing new economic relations for people’s needs and genuine sustainability.

Endnotes

¹ From a draft internal report: World Bank Quality Assurance Group. 1997. "Portfolio Investment Program: Reviews of Sector Portfolios and Lending Instruments - A synthesis", 22 April.

² In this paper, "World Bank" is used as a shorthand for the World Bank Group, unless stated otherwise. The World Bank Group is made up of five institutions: the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the International Development Association, the International Finance Corporation, the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency, and the International Court for the Settlement of Investment Disputes.

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