



SIXTH ITEM ON THE AGENDA

Report of the International Symposium to Strengthen Workers' Participation in the United Nations System and Impact on Bretton Woods Institutions
(Geneva, 24-28 September 2001)

1. The International Symposium to Strengthen Workers' Participation in the United Nations System and Impact on Bretton Woods Institutions was held in Geneva from 24 to 28 September 2001. The meeting was attended by representatives from 27 national trade union centres, nominated following consultations with the Workers' Group of the Governing Body. Also attending were a number of observers from other trade union organizations.
2. The Agenda of the meeting, as approved by the Governing Body at its 280th Session (March 2001), was the following:
 - The impact of globalization and the need for a social dimension to international policies on trade and finance.
 - A review of the mandates, evolution, role and policies of the Bretton Woods institutions, the WTO and UNCTAD.
 - The impact of Bretton Woods and United Nations economic policies at global, regional and national level.
 - Analysis and assessment of trade union strategies to impact on United Nations and Bretton Woods policymaking.
 - Strategic measures and action plans for consideration by trade unions to enhance their capacity to participate in social dialogue within the UN system and with the Bretton Woods institutions and also with the individual governments which make up these institutions in order to secure the promotion of the observance of international labour standards by the United Nations and Bretton Woods institutions.
3. The symposium was supported by a background document entitled "Trade unions and the global economy: An unfinished story", which provided a balanced overview of the impact of globalization and stressed the need for a social dimension to underpin international

policies on trade, finance and development. The evolution of the global economy, the changing role of the international financial institutions and the WTO, and the impact of their policies and programmes were reviewed. An analysis was also made of trade union strategies to impact the policies and programmes of these institutions over the last 50 years.

4. The discussions examined the policies of Bretton Woods institutions on poverty reduction and debt relief, macroeconomic policy, financial market regulation, social security and privatization. The World Bank and the IMF have both agreed that poverty reduction is their overarching goal and all countries must now undertake a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) in order to obtain debt relief and concessional loans. The PRSP should flow from a public process seeking out the views and advice of all elements of civil society and trade unions in particular. A new enhanced heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC) initiative is also mandated with reducing the debt burden of the world's poorest countries.
5. Trade unions believe that long-standing IFI stabilization policies of international financial institutions (IFIs) often force countries to adopt fiscal constraints, cut social spending like education and health, and privatize important government services. Women suffer disproportionately from these policies: they assume a greater burden of care in the home in response to government cuts in health and social services; they have less time for paid work outside the home but are in greater need of the financial income; their poverty rates increase as governments contract and privatize, and they are likely to face more hurdles in the private sector because they often lack access to land, credit, services, skills, knowledge, training and access to markets. Girl children assume greater responsibility in the home and have less time for their studies – hurting future education and work possibilities.
6. While trade unions believe that PRSPs focus on poverty reduction and country ownership is a step in the right direction, the consultation process associated with most PRSPs remains perfunctory and in most cases fiscal restraint continues to limit government resources available for social programmes. In addition, very few countries have met the strict eligibility criteria for additional debt relief and therefore very few have escaped their crippling debt burden. Participants also provided numerous examples of IMF or World Bank interventions that served to stifle or impede core labour standards, such as collective bargaining. The meeting underscored the importance of ensuring that the programmes and policies of both institutions promote core labour standards. A social dimension to globalization must be grounded in core labour standards and the ILO should assume a more prominent role.
7. The symposium highlighted the difficulty faced by significant numbers of trade unions in both developing expertise in these fields and in accessing the policy-making process. Participants recognized the need to develop and extend trade union capacity to ensure that union officials successfully countered IFI arguments. Suggestions were made to secure greater resources for social and economic policy work, to strengthen existing areas of expertise and to develop networks to achieve better north-south solidarity.
8. Both the background documents and the report of the meeting can be obtained from the secretariat of the Bureau of Workers' Activities.

Geneva, 11 February 2002.