

World Bank to Release Board Minutes, Make Other Modest Reforms

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The World Bank Board of Executive Directors on March 8 [approved the release of its minutes](#), but pulled back substantially from several other disclosure reforms that have been under discussion for months.

By joining the Inter-American Development Bank in releasing board minutes, the World Bank may help foster a trend among international financial institutions. Whatever the symbolic value of the gesture, however, the information value of the document may be limited.

The minutes are quite spare: listing those attending, the presenter and "broad" subject of any briefings, titles of papers discussed, a summary of the agreements and decisions reached, and the names of executive directors abstaining or objecting. Transcripts and summaries are not to be released; nor will board committee minutes or their reports to the Board, known as green sheets. Also, the proposed policy on minutes will exempt "executive sessions," and permit deletion of material "too sensitive for public distribution."

In a June 2004 memo, the Bank staff noted, "In fact, given the limited information in minutes, it would be appropriate to ask what additional value their disclosure would provide." The answer, the staff continued "may be somewhat tautological." Disclosure, the report concluded, will remove their "mystique."

Release of the minutes had been widely expected, but apparently remained a matter of nervousness internally. The final agreement, notes a Feb. 10 staff paper, is premised on "the understanding that the content of the Board minutes would not change from its present form." The [board decision was made March 8](#) and covers a variety of other topics.

Reforms in Two Other Areas Scaled Back

Ten months of deliberation and three formal Board meetings took their toll on two other disclosure recommendations endorsed last year by outgoing Bank President James Wolfensohn.

First, the board ultimately whittled back on a proposed experiment with the release of "draft" materials -- crucial staff recommendations -- in advance of board meetings. But the door has opened a crack.

Second, although taking steps that likely will make the release of Country Assistance Strategies almost universal after their approval, the board made sure that any sensitive material will be kept secret.

Although these were the most discussed changes, there will be 17 disclosure policy changes made as a result of the board decision. Operational Policy and Strategy Papers will now be routinely released, without requiring a board vote to do so.

Other documents to be newly available will include: the staff manual, the staff compensation paper, the International Development Association Mid-Term reviews, the Trust Funds Annual Report, procurement plans, IMF-World Bank Relations Annexes, Country Reengagement Notes, the bank's administrative budget, and documents related to grant programs funded by the Development Grant Facility.

CAS Release, and a Loophole

Although some Country Assistance Strategies have been disclosed since August 1998, the policy has always contained restrictions and caveats. In January 1999, the Bank adopted a policy of basically insisting on the release of CASs from the poorer borrowing countries, leading to complaints of inequitable treatment.

The new policy aims to end the differentiation between IDA and International Bank for Reconstruction and Development borrowers and calls for routine disclosure of all CASs. However, any confidential or sensitive material would be placed for safekeeping in another document, a Memorandum of the President (MOP). Under Bank archives policy the MOP could be released in five years.

A similar MOP provision applies to confidential information in the context of Program Documents, and a footnote in a June staff report on disclosure policy suggests that exemptions are infrequent. Research on the exemption rate in two-and-one-half years ending in early 2002 showed that exemptions were made from the released CAS documents in 8 out of 84 cases.

Scope of Pilot Project Scaled Back

The board also set the parameters for a "pilot project" in which staff "draft" documents are to be released to the public when they are sent to the board, in advance of a meeting.

Now far less ambitious than originally proposed, the pilot project will now be restricted to the release of "operational policy reviews" that have been subject to an external consultation process, usually a few high profile efforts every year. An example would be the new adjustment lending policy.

Even so, the inclusion of each operational policy review in the pilot project will "not be automatic," and will be subject to board approval on an individual basis.

Moreover, the experiment will apply only to the staff proposals in advance of the "informal" board session on the topic, usually a key meeting, but not the final one. The next version of an operational policy revision will not be released in advance of the next decision-making board meeting, or meetings, "in order to facilitate a free and candid Board deliberative process."

The pilot project is to be reassessed after the first two experiences of simultaneous disclosure.

The pilot is significantly scaled back from the original proposal. The staff, with Wolfensohn's support had proposed experimenting with simultaneous disclosure of the final staff memos about proposed projects. The Project Appraisal Document was one of those originally proposed for inclusion in the pilot project. A PAD summarizes the Bank staff's opinion about a proposed project and advises on any conditions.

Also to be part of the pilot program originally were drafts of the Country Assistance Strategies (CAS). They are no longer included. Also proposed for the pilot program were the Program Documents for poverty reduction support credits. An October staff document noted that "after careful consideration of the Executive Directors' views on this matter," the pilot project is reduced in scope.

Nevertheless, the experiment is the Bank's first such trial of simultaneously releasing to the public the staff materials sent to the board.

The African Development Bank in 2004 has [**determined that draft Country Strategy Papers will be released to in-country target audiences**](#), as part of the consultation process, to enhance information for CSP consultation. Such drafts will however exclude confidential information as agreed with the government.

Additional information on the disclosure practices of the IFIs is available at available on the [**IFI Transparency Resource**](#), a database prepared by the Bank Information Center and *freedominfo.org*.

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