

Aren't They Loud Enough?

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Around four thousand people rally against the Asian Development Bank during its 39th Annual Governors' Meeting in May 2006 in Hyderabad. They uttered "We can survive without ADB."

Most people joined the rally to safeguard the safeguards. The civil society demanded "No to Displacement," "Respect Indigenous Rights," "Stop Destructive Development," "ADB Quit India," "ADB Out of Water and Power," "Make ADB Accountable to the People," "Our lives and resources are more important to us than your dams. Stop taking them away from us," "Better off without the ADB," "ADB, compensate KJDRP affected people in Bangladesh," "Junk ADB to stop degradation and metabolism of nature and society," and "ADB Hands off our water, our health, our forest, our livelihood, our environment."

The civil society even rephrased the ADB into "Anti-democratic Destructive Burden." Meanwhile, Greenpeace demanded: "ADB Quit Coal" and said "Climate change! Party is over." The affected people of Mae Moh coal power plant in Thailand offered a bowl of coal to the ADB president during his meeting with the civil society to signify their protest.

Peoples' Forum against ADB, which was the biggest gathering on ADB in recent times, gathered in Hyderabad. It was almost in the same scale as the Peoples' Forum held in Chiang Mai in year 2000. This was certainly another milestone on ADB's democratization process.

The parallel events organized by the civil society included mass meetings on Displacement, Reclaiming Democracy-Forum for People's Representatives, Militarisation, and a documentary film festival (which was suspended by the Hyderabad Police). Bank Information Centre organized an event entitled "Only Victims." Jubilee South and NGO Forum on ADB organized a round-table discussion on water and power privatizations. Some of these events had over thousand participants coming from all over India and other ADB-member countries. Unlike in Chiang Mai, Peoples' Forum decided not to invite ADB officials to the parallel events.

The ADB provided a room (very noisy and miles away from ADB officials and governors) for NGO sessions. Launching of the Water Review panel report (under the theme "ADB's Water Policy: Is the Glass Half Empty or Half Full?" as entitled by the NGO Centre) and a session on Accountability were well represented by the civil society. The only meeting held inside the official venue in Hyderabad was the meeting with the president. Unlike in previous occasions, the ADB president was heavily guarded by the police when he met with the civil society.

While the civil society was interested on "safeguarding the safeguards," the ADB Board was interested about the discussion on the regional integration. According to ADB president Kuroda, his dream is a region linked by economic cooperation. "Imagine an Asia-wide economic community, a community of nations where borders are fully open to trade and investment and that offers competitive, complementary markets for the benefit of all its members as well as the rest of the World. If we can envision this, I know we can achieve it," he said. Discussion inside the board rooms was mostly on this agenda. According to Isagani Serano, United States and Europe were not happy about this new agenda, and defending it under same poverty rhetoric.

Hyderabad is the most isolated ADB AGM in recent times. The ADB and the Andhra Pradesh government made everything possible to keep people away from ADB officials. The uniformed and civil police harassments while entering the ADB official site was experienced for the first time. They only let people's events to be conducted miles away from the official venue. Police were inside the room when the ADB president met with the civil society, and recorded names of the people who spoke and who were the official accredited invitees of the ADB. Police even suspended the documentary film festival organized by the civil society and roamed around the events of the CSOs held in NISIET and Indira Priyadarshani Hall. Does this mean that the ADB is further moving away from the civil society?

Does ADB really care about the people's opposition to ADB interventions in the member countries both at the project and policy levels? ADB NGO Centre wrote "while the 'Peoples' Forum' was being held, representatives of 80-100 civil society organizations were participating in ADB's Annual Meeting to discuss collaboration with ADB to promote sustainable development, as well as ways to improve the performance of ADB-assisted activities." So in other words the ADB has its own discourse with the civil society even if some people opposed the ADB agenda, its approach and refrain from dialoguing. Can the ADB justify a meeting with several dozens of NGOs as the "so called" consultation with the civil society? According to the ADB, there are a number of civil society organizations collaborating with the ADB to address poverty at the grassroots level in India and elsewhere, and many beneficiaries of ADB-financed projects that are improving the lives of disadvantaged, marginalized, and poor communities. Does this mean the ADB is going to ignore the demands made by the thousands of opponents?

ADB's claim that "ADB projects help improve the life" was always questioned by civil society and by the affected people in a number of cases. Southern Transport Development project-Sri Lanka, Chasma Right Bank Irrigation canal project-Pakistan, Mae Moh coal plant-Thailand, and Khulna-Jessore Tidal River Management Project-Bangladesh are some recent examples. These projects questioned ADB's accountability and development effectiveness as well.

ADB's poverty alleviation agenda or its regional integration approach does not move the ADB away from infrastructure development that requires social and environmental safeguards. Doubling ADB investment in the energy and water sectors will also lead to similar projects. Regional power bases such as China and India have always been against strong safeguards. Therefore, weakening safeguards will also be a strong agenda in ADB's regional integration approach.

This means that civil society's demands made during the Hyderabad annual meeting are not very distant from what is necessary today. Whether some people benefit from ADB projects or some civil society organizations collaborate with ADB projects is not a reason to discredit these demands. It is a question of how the ADB understand them.