

CONCEPT NOTE

People's Tribunal on World Bank @ 80

Background

In October 2024, the World Bank Group and IMF institutions will celebrate their 80th anniversary. Established post-World War II for reconstruction and development, these multilateral agencies quickly transformed into tools for neo-colonial exploitation after Asian, African, and South American countries gained independence from colonial rule.

Popularly known as the Bretton Woods Institutions, the World Bank and IMF have controlled economies through lending and structural adjustment programs designed to open markets for imperial powers and restrict the independent pursuit of socialist/welfare economies. The fight against poverty and deprivation in these countries often took the form of anti-World Bank/IMF protests worldwide.

While the World Bank has undergone cosmetic changes and rhetoric shifts, its neoliberal economic agenda and undemocratic governance structure remain at its core. The institution has never had a non-US head since its inception, and its voting rights, based on dollar power, give the US and its allies veto power, disregarding the principle of "one country, one vote."

The World Bank Group has evolved into a facilitator and gatekeeper, controlling private investments through its country rankings and deciding how and where investments shift globally. Economic crises in countries become opportunities for wealthy nations to push loans with conditions, promoting regressive tax laws, privatisation of public services, and wage freezes. The Bank despite its claims its pro-climate stance continues to subsidise the fossil fuel industry and fund fossil fuel projects.

The economic policies promoted by the World Bank and its sponsors have exacerbated global inequality, with the richest 1% owning around 50% of world wealth, while 40% of the world's population holds less than 1%. This inequality manifests in education, health services, energy consumption, and more. Income inequality is high or increasing in 60% of low- and middle-income countries receiving grants or loans from the IMF and World Bank. World Bank-supported policies have increased income and wealth inequality, transferring resources from communities to corporations.

The impact extends beyond the economic domain, including the privatisation of sectors like education and health services and the deregulation of environmental and labour laws, opening up forests and oceans for commercial exploitation. In India, World Bank policies have resulted in investments in hydroelectric projects and thermal power plants, leading to displacement, destruction of livelihoods, and environmental degradation. The privatisation of water, energy, and infrastructure remains a key unfinished agenda item.

Proposal

In response to the 80th anniversary of the Bretton Woods Institutions, countries across Asia, Africa and Latin America are planning events and campaigns to challenge the neo-liberal policy framework through public discussion, debate and other mass actions. Globally, various groups have planned protests against World Bank and IMF policies and projects, and an International People's Tribunal is being planned with regional tribunals in various continents, starting with a public launch and a first session in the Philippines on October 26.

India has been at the forefront of struggles against dam projects like Sardar Sarovar and has challenged the World Bank Group's immunity for its investments in the case of Tata Power plant in Mundra. Massive protests have occurred against the privatisation of banks, water, urban development projects, electricity services and various projects across the country, questioning displacement and environmental destruction.

Given India's historical resistance to the intervention of the World Bank and other international financial institutions, it is important that people's movements and organisations use this opportunity to jointly organise an India centric Tribunal. This tribunal would serve as a platform to critique the past and present policies of the World Bank and other IFIs, document their impacts, propose alternatives, and celebrate the resistance to their interventions. This Tribunal also contribute to the International People's Tribunal.

Objectives

1. Highlight the role of the World Bank and other IFIs in India, raising awareness and highlighting their interventions and impacts.
2. Review and critically assess the policies and frameworks of the World Bank and IFIs, with a focus on their evolving role over the past two decades.
3. Document the impacts of past and ongoing interventions by the World Bank and IFIs.
4. Build solidarities across movements to strengthen collective efforts in addressing these issues.

About the People's Tribunal

Where: Kolkata, India

When: 7 & 8 December 2024

Duration: 2 days [an additional half-day would be used to converse among the CSOs (attendees of the Tribunal) from different parts of the country to discuss the way ahead].

Focus

The People's Tribunal will examine the interventions and policies of the World Bank Group and their impact on India, with a focus on the following areas:

1. Cross-sectoral impact of World Bank and other IFI-funded projects in India.
2. The influence of World Bank policies and frameworks on India's economic and political sovereignty, and development.
3. Accountability and Governance Issues in IFI-Funded Projects

Structure

1. **Organisers:** The People's Tribunal in India will be jointly organised by people's movements and organisations under the aegis of the Working Group on International Financial Institutions (WGonIFIs) with a focus on key thematic areas related to the impact of international financial institutions (IFIs) like the World Bank.
2. **Tribunal Structure:**
 - **Jury:** The People's Tribunal will feature a three-member jury composed of distinguished individuals from various sectors. They will hear testimonies from affected communities and civil society organisations regarding the impact of World Bank funding on people and the environment.
 - **Witnesses:** Individuals or groups who will provide evidence and data about the effects of World Bank projects.
 - **Prosecutors:** Individuals who will present and build the case against the World Bank's interventions.
3. **Testimonies presented to the jury will include:**
 - Individuals and communities impacted by World Bank-funded projects,
 - Civil society organisations and subject experts/researchers/academics
 - World Bank representatives will also be invited to defend their position, should they choose to participate.

Tribunal Process

1. The People's Tribunal will take place over a period of two days and each session would focus on specific thematic areas.
2. A panel, acting as the jury, will be formed, and evidence will be presented to this panel through testimonies from affected communities, experts on the issue, activists, and representatives of IFIs.
3. Over the course of the two days, witnesses will share their experiences and insights, to provide a comprehensive view of the issue at hand.
4. Once all evidence and testimonies have been submitted, the jury will deliberate and prepare a detailed report within a specified timeline. The jury will issue its verdict based on the testimonies and arguments from affected people and civil society groups. This report will outline the jury's findings, conclusions, and any recommendations for addressing the issues raised during the tribunal.