

## 100. Seven Building Stones

Closing Remarks from the Chair

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Internal Encounter within the WCC in anticipation of IMF and World Bank  
Consultation with WCC, Washington 28-29 October 2003

<http://www.oikoumene.org/?id=2588> and

[Survey: IMF view of the consultation](#)

The Internal Encounter of 11-12 September 2003 on the policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) was an encounter of churches, regional and national councils of churches and ecumenical agencies, with many inspiring inputs and bearing rich fruits. The objective of the Internal Encounter was, no doubt, far-reaching, namely *“to elaborate a common vision and coherent strategies within the ecumenical community to address the policies implemented by international financial institutions (IFIs)...and to promote ecumenical responses to these policies from the perspective of people in poverty and the marginalised.”*

We all knew from the beginning that such a sweeping goal could not be achieved within two days. But what we have done together in this meeting can certainly be seen as the beginning of the development of such a common and coherent ecumenical vision.

Seven constructive building stones have emerged from the Internal Encounter. With thankfulness, I summarise these building stones that we collected together. I say ‘with thankfulness,’ because these building stones offer some real guidance for the way in which the ecumenical community should relate to the IFIs in present and future encounters. Their formulation here is of course open and subjective, but it became clear towards the end of our meeting that these building stones are seen by all as corresponding with the general feeling and spirituality of our meeting.

**1. Honesty and transparency.** It struck us all, while we heard the contributions of the representatives of the IMF and the WB, how openly they admitted that ‘of course’ the rich countries via their shareholders and/or ministers of finance have deep influence on the actions and the concrete behaviour of these two organisations. Mr. Flemming Larsen of the IMF even spoke about ‘the ministers of Finance who rule over the IMF,’ and referred to ‘dominant shareholders in the driver’s seat.’ At the same time, we also heard many statements from both representatives that these institutions are working for the common good since their goals, such as international financial stability and the overcoming of poverty in the world, are in the general interest. Here a

deep tension becomes visible. If those last intentions are seriously meant, then they **should** have organisational consequences. Especially at this present conjuncture where the growing influence of 'the empire' can be seen, for instance, in attempts to bind the IFIs to the promotion of the 'vital' interests of the United States (US) and of specific corporate interests of Western transnational corporations.

It is then choice for one of two options: **Either** the service to the world and its inhabitants implies that the IFIs are set free from the influence of these powers and are brought under the direct umbrella of the United Nations (UN) as the most representative world-wide organisation (reporting to, and working under, the Assembly's general directions); **Or**, if IMF and WB stick to their present structures, which we would deplore, then the very minimum requirement is transparency in their behaviour, including the claims and influences of their rich shareholders, ministers of finance, as well as the US treasury. In this case it is ethically unacceptable, a lie, if the right hand claims to do something which contradicts what the left is doing. It should not be the case that the central offices of the IMF and WB continue to speak beautiful words about their deep concerns for the poor while the regional officers or national directors still follow the lines and recommendations of an outspoken Neo-Liberalism in their practice.

**2. Not "TINA" (there is no alternative), but "Build on the richness of the ecumenical heritage"**. Peter Soederbaum clearly showed us there is no reason at all to give in to the argument that no alternatives are available to present patterns of growth and economic development. The concept of sustainability was taken as an example. It is a term born in an ecumenical meeting in 1974 in Bucharest, affirmed by the 1975 Nairobi Assembly of the World Council of Churches in the concept of a just, participatory and sustainable society, and primarily directed to the task of upholding the future of human societies in all their aspects: economic, socio-cultural, and ecological. This is quite different from the present ruling interpretation of sustainable growth, namely of sustaining economic growth itself so that it can go on forever. Attention was drawn during our meeting to the various complementary ecumenical concepts of alternative economies like the economy of community or sharing, the sustainable economy and the blossoming economy. The last concept departs radically from the concept of the unlimited expansion of so-called tunnel-economies and chooses an organic type of growth with fruits for all nations - which supposes, however, the acceptance of saturation levels in material consumption particularly in the richer countries.

**3. Human economic, social and cultural rights as entry points and crowbar**. Even under the present governance structure of the IFIs it remains true that the UN treaties and agreements on human rights are binding for those nation-states which solemnly accepted them; also when and where these states are represented by their own governors, ministers or delegates in the

IFIs. This should be used as a platform to address these governments and also the IFIs themselves. The UN Human Rights subcommittee declared for instance in its resolution (1999/12) that: *“the integration of human rights in an International Financial Institution’s policy cannot be restricted to adding social programs to the responsibility which they already bear”* (which sentence reminds us directly of the present Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers). This same committee even spoke of *“the centrality and primacy of human rights obligations in all areas of government and development,”* implying that no country program can in fact be started or implemented without the prior acceptance, also by the IFIs, of the rights of all children to be fed, to have shelter and to be educated as one of the indisputable starting points.

**4. The guarding and building up of national and international public sectors.** Hellen Wangusa reported to us the suffering of poor families caused by IFI ‘conditionalities’ that enforce the privatisation of the supply of water. It made us (again) aware that efforts to systematically dismantle public services in favour of further expansion of the market cannot be accepted from an ecumenical point of view. This is not because we reject markets as such, but because markets will always be imperfect: they are tied to existing supplies, existing demands and resulting prices. Therefore, by their very definition, markets can never overcome three basic limitations:

- a) they cannot register and fulfil demands or needs of people who have no buying power;
- b) they will not offer to supply goods and services for which costs are not fully compensated and/or no financial gains are possible; and
- c) they can only value things which have a price.

A thing or dimension of culture which has no price (perhaps precisely because it is so valuable) will thus be treated by the market-mechanism as having no value at all. Because the ecumenical community has to stand by the side of millions of people with unfulfilled basic needs, it must fight for the delivery of necessary vital supplies of services to the poor and uphold the value of what has no price in nature and culture. The ecumenical community can and will never accept markets as societal compasses or final judges of human or institutional behaviour, neither on the national nor on the global level.

**5. The spirituality of resistance.** Konrad Raiser led us to that depth, making clear that when and where reductionist views of the human condition erode the social fabric, the call to resist can no longer be avoided. This radical choice for ‘the other(s)’ has, from the beginning, been a dimension of spirituality, because it stands over and against idolatry and the powers of this world. *“We resist,”* so he said, *“the forces that create and perpetuate poverty or accept it as inevitable or ineradicable...(and)...we resist the exercise of*

*authority that monopolises power and prohibits information.*” This underlines the actuality of a basic ethical rule for finance, which was already written in Deuteronomy 24: 10-11: *“When you make a loan to another man, do not enter his house to take a pledge from him. Wait outside, and the man whose creditor you are shall bring the pledge out to you.”* Creditors, the IFIs included, should never enter into the house of another economy to set their rules. This unacceptable offence on human dignity is sometimes fed by the IMF’s conviction of the ‘sanctity of contracts.’ Convictions like these have to be strongly opposed by the ecumenical community and may even lead to a break in future encounters with the IFIs. As Pamela Brubaker emphasised: we reject this view as opposite to the sanctity of all God’s people and of the whole of creation.

**6. *The fight against materialism and the need for self-critique.*** If the ecumenical community pleads, in the encounters with the IMF and WB, for a world-wide sustainable society in which the rich countries are willing to share with the poor, then it is only possible to do so if the nations and the churches of the North are willing to accept the consequences of that statement in terms of their own (often energy- and natural resource-intensive) production and consumption levels and styles. Charles Birch said it already in Nairobi in 1975: *“the rich should live more simply, so that the poor can simply live.”* Therefore, our external mission has to be complemented by an internal appeal to our own churches to prevent us from being seen as hypocrites.

**7. *Adherence to the tradition of Sabbath and Jubilee.*** As stressed by one of the speakers, as well as by some agencies, the tradition of the Sabbatical years stands for the willingness to forgive debts, especially when and where payment would threaten life itself (theologically: only God is eternal, so no debt is allowed to be eternal). The tradition of Jubilee goes further: it also deals with the access (the return) of the poor to the (economic) sources of life and of their development (then that meant land, but now it also includes the access to capital and public services). The message of Jubilee applies to the present international monetary order wherein the rich countries, and their banks, fully control the creation of international liquidity (key-currencies), without any direct share from or for the poorer countries, adding to its deep volatility. Upholding the Jubilee tradition therefore asks for nothing less than the transformation of the entire international monetary system.

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