

Dilek Barlas: Bidding Farewell to the World Bank

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How did you come to join the World Bank?

I had literally packed my bags and was just about to return to my job in the Turkish government after finishing my LLM at American University's Washington College of Law when I was contacted by the World Bank. This was right after the breakup of the Soviet Union and they were looking for lawyers to work on the Bank's expansion to new member countries. This opportunity to help with the development mission of the Bank and to be a part of historical events was extremely attractive to me. That's why I made a life-changing decision in a very short time and decided to join the Bank.

What were your initial impressions of the Bank?

In the first few weeks, it was hard for me to remember the names of my different colleagues from all over the world—but even more challenging was learning all the acronyms that the Bank uses! Those were my first challenges. Also, because I was working with new member countries that were coming out of the Soviet Union, we were almost like the first foreigners to travel there at that time. From flights to airport transfers to hotels and, of course, negotiations with counterparts, it was all so new to both us and to them. When I get together with my colleagues from those days, we still share our stories and marvel at our experiences! A further twist for me was the Turkic-language speaking countries. Some words in my native Turkish had evolved to mean something totally different, creating humorous and sometimes embarrassing moments. I'll never forget how scared I was when the Azerbaijani pilot asked us to buckle up because the plane was "falling down" when, in fact, he was saying "landing."



What were the highlights of your work in the ECA region?

My first years I was the lawyer for Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Albania and we were supporting these new member countries in developing their legal systems to help with their integration into the international financial markets.

Following that, after the Dayton Peace Agreement was signed in November 1995, I was one of the first lawyers working on the Bank's emergency operations for Bosnia and Herzegovina's reconstruction. We faced so many novel challenges, such as how to support land-mine clearance, how to ensure that indicted war criminals would not benefit from World Bank projects and how to rebuild the Mostar Bridge, a historic and beautiful landmark. We traveled on military planes and stayed in half-bombed hotels. It was one of my most fulfilling and rewarding Bank experiences because on literally every mission we could see the progress and fruits of our efforts after the tragedies of the war.

After Bosnia, I was involved in the reconstruction operation following the earthquake in Turkey in 1999 that killed more than 15,000 people. Within a month's period—we barely slept—we put together an operation of \$500 million to help the government of Turkey. We developed an innovative earthquake insurance program which has become the basis for insurance schemes developed for other operations in the Bank. Then I moved into the financial crisis operations in Turkey as the Bank was preparing millions of dollars of programmatic operations trying to help the banking sector and aid the economic recovery. I felt that I needed to be there, on the ground, so I took on a field assignment in Turkey from 2004 to 2006. Those were two intense years away from my husband who could not join me, but I learned a lot from being close to the government and the people affected by the projects.

When I look back at all these experiences, I feel they were extremely fulfilling and challenging both physically, because of the difficulties in the situation on the ground, and also personally because of the nature of the work. I will keep the memories with me forever.

What prompted you to join the Inspection Panel in 2007?

I must say that I did not know much about the Panel when the then retiring executive secretary, Eduardo Abbott, approached me about an upcoming opening.

Safeguards and environmental and social issues had always attracted me given my work on these issues in the Legal Vice Presidency. As I started learning more about the Panel, I realized the Panel's work was like the flip side of the coin of my work in Legal and that exposure to multiple countries and a wide variety of cases would present even more personal and professional development opportunities. I am so glad I didn't miss the chance to join the Panel!



How would you explain the importance of the Panel's work to the Bank?

The core work of the Panel is accountability, which one of the fundamental principles of the Bank. An essential part of the Bank's mission is to support economic development without causing harm to the very people who are supposed to benefit from development. If there is harm due to the Bank's policies not being followed properly, then there should be a mechanism to be able to look into the issues and help the process to correct itself. The Panel's role is to look into the most challenging issues of development so that there is a contribution to the furtherance of the Bank's development agenda.

Do any particular cases stand out during your time at the Panel?

There are a few of them. One was the first investigation I was involved in, which was the [Albania Coastal](#) investigation. The Panel's work helped the Bank to reconstruct the facts involved. The case really put the Panel on the map at the Bank because of the lessons that came from it. The second one was a [Cambodia case](#) that involved the resettlement of the people in Boeung Kak Lake. I observed a real human tragedy as it unfolded. More recently we had the [Uganda transport case](#), which was the first time the Panel looked into allegations of gender-based violence related to a Bank project. But I must say that each and every case brought about another facet of development. Just when I would think I had seen everything a new case would come along with new challenges. I really enjoyed learning about new countries and projects, and helping affected communities, as well as the contextual issues surrounding those investigations.

What advice would you give to someone just starting to work at the World Bank?

I would have just one thing and that is not to shy away from challenges. When I look back on my work experiences, the ones that were the toughest and most challenging were also the most fulfilling, rewarding and memorable.
