

Summary of Oral History Transcript

Alisbah, Bilsel

Interview conducted by W. Becker and D. Milobsky, on 1993-12-20

Alisbah joined the Bank as part of the first group of the Young Professionals (YP) program. At that time, according to him, not too much thought had as yet been given on how to use them within the institution. He mentions the present complaints of Executive Directors and some in Management that the managers who came through the YP program are short on exposure to the real world. According to Alisbah, the YP program seems to have met its objective in developing a cadre of future executives for the institution, since a good portion of today's managers came through this YP group. On the other hand, some of the criticisms were legitimate as the institution had become too inbred, and employment criteria had not been modified in keeping with the pace of the outside world. He then gives his ideas on designing a management program to identify future managers.

Alisbah started in the technical part of the Bank which was a central unit at the time. He later joined the India Division and worked both as an economist and a loan officer. He talks of the Bank's shift in the '70s from infrastructure to 'softer' sectors (agriculture, education, and health care), its emphasis on the agriculture sector in India, consulting outside experts such as Sir John Crawford in trying to formulate projects, and opines on the Indians as borrowers. He then covers his experience in West Africa beginning in '79, and more specifically, Ghana and the Rawlings regime, Nigeria, and his involvement with the River Blindness program. By the late '80s he was country director in West Africa.

Alisbah addresses the reorganization of 1987, beginning with its merits in bringing up the country focus as a whole, including the idea

of having country directors. He then covers its demerits and the legacy of distrust it left between Management and Staff, the consequences of which were still being felt, according to him. Alisbah mentions the reasons he thought were instrumental when offered in 1989 the position of Vice President, Personnel Administration, his objectives, especially in the aftermath of the '87 reorganization, and his accomplishments while in that position. He explains the workings of the compensation system in the Bank, his role therein, and its critical handling in light of the constantly tense interaction between Management and the Board. Alisbah then turns to staffing and recruitment in the Bank, including staff diversification and areas where this is affected by the compensation system.

Alisbah talks of the controversy that surrounded the construction project of the new building [now known as the Main Complex], and details the mistakes made which he believes were compounded by the deteriorating relationship between Management and the Board. In that context, he runs a comparison between Presidents Conable and Preston. He concludes in briefly talking of the Narmada project in India, the controversies that plagued it, and the lessons to be learned from such a project, especially in dealing with NGOs.