

For World Bank President Ajay Banga, all roads lead to jobs

During the World Bank-International Monetary Fund annual meetings, Banga held a town hall with members of civil society — where jobs were clearly his favorite talking point.

By [Anna Gawel](#) // 14 October 2025, for Devex



World Bank President Ajay Banga. Photo by: Samuel Corum / Sipa USA via Reuters Connect

World Bank President Ajay Banga calls job creation the “North Star” of the bank’s work, consistently returning to the topic during a town hall he held on Monday with civil society organizations during the [World Bank-International Monetary Fund annual meetings](#) in Washington, D.C.

In part, the conversation steered back to jobs so frequently because Banga views the issue as the “ultimate outcome of development” and, as he often says, “the best way to kill poverty.”

When asked about the role of other areas of development — education, food, health — he said jobs do not replace that work, but it is the “goal that sits on top.”

“So if you’re doing something in building a school, in caring about a child’s education, in caring about their nutrition ... the idea is, how does it add up to better opportunities for young people, for dignity, for hope, for opportunity? That’s all. We’re not replacing. This is not an either-or discussion,” he told members of civil society who were gathered around a large circular stage, which [some speculated](#) limited the size of the audience, forcing many into an overflow room.

Banga hammered home his messaging about jobs with a string of familiar statistics, though that doesn’t make them any less foreboding.

“By 2050, more than 80% of the world’s population will live in what today we consider to be developing countries,” Banga said. “In just the next 10 to 15 years, 1.2 billion young people will come across a labor market projected to offer just 400 million jobs — that leaves a shortfall of 800 million.”

“These are estimates, but ... that’s what will define this century. If we match it with the right investment ... I think we can unlock a tremendous engine of growth,” he added. “But if we fail to act, the vigor and the optimism of this generation will turn to despair. It will fuel instability, fuel unrest, and fuel mass migration.”

Another key stat he cited: 90% of jobs ultimately come from the private sector, but as Banga pointed out, they often don’t start there.

“Countries move along a continuum,” he said. “Early on, it’s the public sector that tends to drive job creation. Over time, private capital and entrepreneurship take the lead, but entrepreneurs cannot thrive in a vacuum. They need the right conditions to start to grow, to hire, and those conditions don’t happen by accident.”

That’s where the [World Bank](#) comes in.

Banga breaks it down

Banga outlined a three-pillar strategy developed by a jobs council he formed to ensure those conditions for growth are ripe.

“The first one: Governments lead, often with input from the private sector, to build the human and the physical infrastructure — roads, ports, electricity, digitization, education, skilling, health care.” The bank’s two public sector arms — the [International Bank for Reconstruction and Development](#), and the [International Development Association](#) — finance these investments.

Second is creating an environment where businesses “know the rules and they can trust the playing field. Governments need to establish clear land rights, predictable taxes, transparent institutions. We strive to support these reforms through our knowledge bank, offering policy tools and performance-based financing.”

“And third, once the basics are in place, we help the private sector scale and reward risk-taking,” Banga said. That’s where the [International Finance Corporation](#), the bank’s private sector arm, and the [Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency](#), or MIGA, come in — “providing capital, equity, guarantees, political risk insurance, and [backed up by] the settlement of investor disputes.”

Banga further unpacked the strategy into five sectors for job growth close to where people live — “meaning not relying on outsourcing jobs from the Western world as the only way to create jobs in the developing world.”

The five sectors are: infrastructure and energy; agribusiness; health care; tourism; and value-added manufacturing, which includes the extraction of critical minerals.

“They’re growth industries. They generate locally relevant jobs. They attract real investment,” he said, noting that the bank’s private sector lab is working to lower the barriers preventing that private investment from flowing into emerging markets.

The middle ground between lightbulbs and big AI

[Mission 300](#), an initiative to connect 300 million people in Africa to electricity by 2030, was repeatedly cited by Banga as an example of a project with tremendous job potential. He also waved off criticism that M300 should focus on electrifying businesses over homes. Banga called that “bunk.”

The goal of M300 is not about “one light and one fan in the roof, but productive capacity electricity, which allows them to be capable of generating something economically,” Banga said, recalling a trip to Mozambique where he saw a hair salon, chemist shop, and even a hatchery opened because power became available. “That’s what electricity enables.”

Interestingly, Banga seemed more enthused about basics such as electricity than revolutionary technology that he called “big AI,” such as large language models like ChatGPT. He warned against assuming artificial intelligence in low- and middle-income countries will help them leapfrog over wealthier countries.

“What does big AI need to be successful? It needs computing power, lots of it. It needs electricity, lots of it. It needs data, lots of it, and it needs people who understand how to use all this, many of them. You tell me how many emerging market countries have these four, and I’ll give you a medal.”

But he didn’t discount the potential of what he dubbed “small AI,” such as phone apps.

“If I’m a farmer in a cooperative in ... India, or in Kenya or in Brazil, and I could point a phone at a disease on the crop I’m growing, I don’t need to know the name of the disease ... but if I could know that disease is equal to that insecticide from my cooperative [that costs] \$3 — that’s priceless.”

Was it what civil society wanted to hear?

Also priceless? Knowing how to actually work with the bank. That was the question posed by several civil society representatives, including when it comes to participating in M300.

Anna Bjerde, managing director of operations for the bank, told the audience that work for M300 begins at the country platform level, which encompasses civil society engagement. “In fact, we just completed about 700 consultations in 90 countries on changes we’re making to the country partnership framework,” she said. “Civil society is an integral partner.”

Makhtar Diop, managing director of the International Finance Corporation, offered a more specific example, recommending that civil society take advantage of its presence on the ground.

On M300, that could mean simply getting villagers to pay their electricity bills. “You have the credibility with the head of the village. You have the credibility with the women who are producing in the village, and you can force people who don’t want to pay their bill to do it, because if they don’t do it, the system will collapse,” he said. “So this is a role that you can play, and which is extremely helpful, and we cannot play, because you are at the grassroots level.”

Banga also stressed that the bank is eager to work with grassroots organizations. When asked by a representative from [Catholic Relief Services](#) if that includes faith-based groups, Banga was unequivocal, though he added a caveat: “This task is so big that I think the idea of not taking everybody in who can help you is a really dumb thing to do. So if you’re willing to help me in a way that doesn’t interfere with anybody’s rights or privileges, I will accept your help — 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 times over.”

Perhaps one of the biggest ongoing question marks for civil society groups is the World Bank’s commitment to climate change — and whether it’s diluted its ambitions to please a climate-skeptic Trump administration.

Banga didn’t dwell on the subject, but didn’t shy away from it either.

Climate change is not a “side effect” of the bank’s work, he said. “It is embedded in how we work and what our clients are demanding. You can see the shift in the numbers: 48% of our financing last year supported investments with climate cobenefits, and resilience now accounts for 43% of that financing portfolio.”

That means both physical and institutional resilience — roads that survive storms, schools that withstand heat, and farmers equipped with drought-resistant seeds. “The idea, remember, is smart development that’s resilient, that’s inclusive, and breeds trust, is the only kind that will stick.”

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Anna Gawel is the Managing Editor of Devex. She previously worked as the managing editor of The Washington Diplomat, the flagship publication of D.C.'s diplomatic community. She's had hundreds of articles published on world affairs, U.S. foreign policy, politics, security, trade, travel and the arts on topics ranging from the impact of State Department budget cuts to Caribbean efforts to fight climate change. She was also a broadcast producer and digital editor at WTOP News and host of the Global 360 podcast. She holds a journalism degree from the University of Maryland in College Park.