World Bank

The World Bank Accountability Mechanism (WB-AM)

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The World Bank is an international financial institution that provides loans and grants to low- and middle-income countries to support economic development. It comprises the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) and the International Development Association (IDA), both part of the World Bank Group which includes three other organizations. ***The World Bank Accountability Mechanism (WB-AM)****, established in 2020, consists of two entities: the* ***Inspection Panel*** *(created in 1993) and the* ***Dispute Resolution Service*** *(operational since 2021). Both report directly to the Board of Executive Directors.*[1] *The WB-AM can receive complaints related to IBRD and IDA-financed projects, offering individuals and communities an independent avenue to raise concerns and seek corrective actions for actual or potential harm, if such harm is found to result from non-compliance with Bank Policy.*

STANDARDS AND SAFEGUARDS

The World Bank has established comprehensive policies and procedures to promote environmental and social sustainability and to prevent or mitigate harm to people and the environment. In 2016, it adopted the Environmental and Social Framework (ESF),[2] which applies to all World Bank-financed investment projects, including those supported through the Global Environment Facility (GEF). The ESF became effective in 2018.

The ESF comprises of a vision for sustainable development, an overarching Environmental and Social Policy and ten Environmental and Social Standards (ESS), which address a wide range of thematic areas. These include environmental and social risk management, labor and working conditions, resource efficiency and pollution prevention, community health and safety, land acquisition and involuntary resettlement, biodiversity conservation, Indigenous Peoples, cultural heritage, financial intermediaries, and stakeholder engagement.

The ESF is further supported by a series of guidance notes and two key directives: the Environmental and Social Directive for Investment Project Financing and the Directive on Addressing Risks and Impacts on Disadvantaged or Vulnerable Individuals and Groups. In addition, the World Bank Access to Information Policy—which reflects the Bank's commitment to transparency, accountability, and good governance—applies to the entire Framework and governs disclosure obligations related to Investment Project Financing.

LAND TENURE

The Environmental and Social Standard 5 (ESS5), entitled Land Acquisition, Restrictions on Land Use and Involuntary Resettlement applies to all Bank-financed investment projects. Grievances related to land tenure —such as ownership, access, usage, eviction, and displacement—are within the scope of the WB-AM. ESS5 recognizes that project-related land acquisition and restrictions on land use can have

[1] World Bank Accountability Mechanism. n.d. Mandate & Governance. https://accountability.worldbank.org/en/mandate-and-governance
[2] International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank. 2017. Environmental and Social Framework https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/837721522762050108-0290022018/original/ESFFramework.pdf

adverse impacts on communities and individuals. Project-related land acquisition or restrictions on land use may cause physical displacement (relocation, loss of residential land or loss of shelter), economic displacement (loss of land, assets or access to assets, leading to loss of income sources or other means of livelihood), or both. The term “involuntary resettlement” refers to these impacts. Resettlement is considered involuntary when affected persons or communities do not have the right to refuse land acquisition or restrictions on land use that result in displacement. ESS5 aims to avoid involuntary resettlement wherever possible and, where unavoidable, to minimize its impacts. The standard helps ensure that affected persons are compensated at full replacement cost, supported in restoring their livelihoods and living standards, and meaningfully included in participatory planning and decision-making processes.

The policy applies not only to those with formal land titles, but also to informal users and individuals with customary or traditional land rights, though entitlements may differ between these categories. It emphasizes transparency and consultation throughout project planning and implementation. In cases where projects involve land titling or tenure reform, the standard requires safeguards to promote equitable treatment, provide legal clarity, and respect collective and customary tenure systems.

Environmental and Social Standard 7 (ESS7) addresses impacts on Indigenous Peoples in Bank-supported projects. ESS7 recognizing their distinct cultural identities, close connection to land and natural resources, and history of marginalization. It mandates the avoidance or mitigation of adverse impacts, and the provision of culturally appropriate benefits.

Where projects may have an adverse impact on Indigenous Peoples’ land and natural resources, cause relocation of Indigenous Peoples, or lead to significant impacts on their cultural heritage, Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) is required. The standard applies even when Indigenous communities do not hold formal land titles, requiring that customary land use and tenure systems be recognized and respected. Any resettlement of Indigenous Peoples must fully comply with ESS5. The policy also calls for inclusive engagement, equitable benefit-sharing, protection of cultural heritage, and grievance mechanisms tailored to the specific needs of affected communities.

OUTREACH AND ADMISSIBILITY

The World Bank Accountability Mechanism maintains a website that provides extensive information, including reports, newsletters, announcements, and key documents. Public materials are disseminated through the internet, social media platforms, and other communication channels. The Accountability Mechanism also conducts both in-country and virtual outreach, often in collaboration with other independent accountability mechanisms and civil society organizations. In addition, it organizes and participates in meetings, conferences, and related events to raise awareness and engage stakeholders.

To be considered admissible under the World Bank Accountability Mechanism, a Request must be submitted by at least two affected persons who live in the borrower’s territory. The Request must also include credible claims of actual or potential harm resulting from the World Bank’s alleged failure to adhere to its operational policies and procedures. In addition, the matter must have been previously raised with Bank Management, and a resolution must not have been achieved.

Requests are deemed inadmissible if they are anonymous, clearly frivolous, or absurd. The project in question must either be supported by the Bank or under active consideration for Bank support, and the alleged harm must reasonably relate to at least one component of that project. For projects approved before September 8, 2020, the associated loan must still be active and less than 95 percent disbursed. For projects approved on or after that date, Requests must be submitted no later than 15 months after loan closure.

If a Request revisits issues that have already been addressed, it must present new and material evidence to justify reconsideration. Allegations involving fraud, corruption, procurement-related matters, or Bank staff misconduct related to fraud or corruption fall outside the scope of the WB-AM and should be referred to the Bank's Integrity Vice Presidency.[3] The services of the mechanism are provided free of charge.

FILING A COMPLAINT

To access the WB-AM, individuals or groups must submit a Request for Inspection to the Inspection Panel. This request may be filed by two or more affected persons in the project country, a local representative acting on their behalf, or, in exceptional circumstances, by a non-local representative with prior approval from the Bank's Board of Executive Directors.

Requests must be submitted in writing, but there is no mandatory format or form. They may be sent by mail or electronically and may include supporting documentation, though such documentation is not required. While the Panel operates in English, Requests may be submitted in any local language; however, additional time may be needed for translation and processing. Anonymous complaints are not accepted, but the complainant's identity can be kept confidential upon request. The World Bank has a public statement expressing its zero-tolerance against retaliation.

Project-affected persons are encouraged to first use project-level grievance redress mechanisms to seek early resolution. They may also submit complaints to the World Bank's Grievance Redress Service (GRS). There are no restrictions preventing the WB-AM from considering a complaint that is also under review by domestic legal systems or other international accountability mechanisms, such as the Compliance Advisor Ombudsman (CAO) or the Independent Accountability Mechanisms (IAMs) of co-financiers. In such cases, the Inspection Panel may coordinate with other mechanisms to ensure the complaint is handled efficiently and without duplication of effort.[4]

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROCESS

The World Bank Accountability Mechanism (WB-AM) provides two primary pathways for addressing complaints: the **Dispute Resolution Service (DRS)**, which facilitates voluntary resolution between complainants and borrowers, and the **Inspection Panel**, which reviews claims of harm and assesses the Bank's compliance with its operational policies, failure of which allegedly caused the concerns.

When a Request for Inspection is received, the Inspection Panel issues a Notice of Receipt and, within 15 business days, decides whether to register the case. If the case is registered, Bank Management is given 21 business days to respond to the allegations.

Following the Management Response, the Panel has 21 business days to determine eligibility and recommend to the Bank's Board of Executive Directors whether or not an investigation is warranted. If the Board authorizes the investigation, the DRS first offers the parties the option to engage in a voluntary dispute resolution process. If the Board declines to authorize an investigation, the case is closed.

Once the World Bank's Executive Directors authorize an investigation, the Head of the Dispute Resolution Service (DRS) offers the complainants and the borrower the option to engage in a **voluntary dispute resolution process.** Within 30 business days, the Head of DRS must notify the Executive Directors, the Inspection Panel, and Bank Management as to whether the parties have agreed to proceed. If they agree, the investigation is paused; if not, the Inspection Panel moves forward with its compliance investigation.

The dispute resolution method is selected in consultation with the DRS and is tailored to the preferences of the parties involved. Options may include dialogue, mediation, joint fact-finding, or other similar

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[3] Inspection Panel. 2022. Operating Procedures. https://www.inspectionpanel.org/sites/default/files/documents/IPN%20Operating%20Procedures-1%20December%202022.pdf

[4] Paragraphs 10 –10. 5 Accountability Mechanism. 2022. Operating Procedures. https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/d7f131f6c8c9e550bae65634e88cd516-0490092023/original/AM-Operating-Procedures-6-March-2023.pdf

approaches. The process is limited to the issues under investigation, and both parties must agree on the process design, participants, and timeline. Bank Management may observe the process, and either party may withdraw at any time. The dispute resolution process may last up to 12 months, with the possibility of a one-time extension of up to six months.

The process concludes when an agreement is reached, a party withdraws, or the established time period expires. Any agreement reached is formalized with an implementation plan. The Head of DRS reports the outcome to the Executive Directors, the Inspection Panel, and Bank Management. The parties may choose to keep the agreement confidential or disclose it publicly.[5]

If the parties agree, the DRS may monitor the implementation of the Dispute Resolution Agreement.[6] However, the DRS does not have enforcement authority; implementation relies on the agreement found between the parties. If no agreement is reached, or if some eligible issues remain unresolved, the case can proceed to a compliance investigation by the Inspection Panel.

If the parties do not pursue or complete dispute resolution, the Inspection Panel proceeds with a **compliance investigation** into the approved issues. The Panel conducts a field visit, consults stakeholders, and publishes an Investigation Plan.

The Panel aims to submit its Investigation Report to the Executive Directors within six months, assessing whether the Bank complied with its policies and whether any non-compliance in the Panel's view contributed to harm. After submission, the Panel shares the findings with the Requesters. Bank Management then consults affected parties and the borrower to prepare a Management Action Plan (MAP) responding to the findings. Within six weeks, Management submits its Report and Recommendation, including the MAP, to the Board.

The Board considers the findings and MAP and approves the proposed corrective actions. Within two weeks of the Board's decision, the Investigation Report, Management's Report and Recommendation, and the Board's decision are published. The Panel informs the Requesters and the Bank provides for translation of key documents as may be appropriate.[7]

Bank Management monitors implementation of the Management Action Plan (MAP) and submits progress reports to the Executive Directors at intervals set by the Board. These reports detail completed, ongoing, and pending actions and are published online. Bi-annual summaries are also shared with the Board.

In exceptional cases, the Board may authorize the verification of the implementation of specific MAP actions by the Inspection Panel and/or Group Internal Audit. The Panel then submits its report, along with any audit memo, to the Executive Directors and the President. Management follows with a report stating its position and, if proposing changes to the MAP, seeks Board approval. Both documents are made publicly available.[8]

Throughout both the dispute resolution process and compliance investigation, complainants are kept informed of all decisions and key developments via the Inspection Panel or Dispute Resolution Service (DRS) case registration systems.[9]

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[5] Paragraphs 68-80. IBRD/IDA. 2025. AM Resolution 2025. https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/8f099b813635a1805ede92c4ae6e18a0-0490092025/original/2025-AM-Resolution.pdf

[6] Paragraph 24. Accountability Mechanism. 2022 . Operating Procedures. https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/d7f131f6c8c9e550bae65634e88cd516-0490092023/original/AM-Operating-Procedures-6-March-2023.pdf

[7] Inspection Panel. 2022. Operating Procedures. https://www.inspectionpanel.org/sites/default/files/documents/IPN%20Operating%20Procedures-1%20December%202022.pdf

[8] Paragraphs 86-89 and104. Inspection Panel. 2022. Operating Procedures. https://www.inspectionpanel.org/sites/www.inspectionpanel.org/files/documents/IPN%20Operating%20Procedures-1%20December%202022.pdf .

[9] Inspection panel. N.d. Panel cases https://www.inspectionpanel.org/panel-cases