

## THE WORLD BANK CALLS FOR A NEW APPROACH TO CONSULTATIONS WITH CIVIL SOCIETY, DEFENDS ITS HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD

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In a wide-ranging discussion with representatives from two prominent human rights NGOs, Human Rights Watch and ActionAid USA, a Senior Vice-President from the World Bank has conceded that the Bank's dialogue with civil society often leaves both sides dissatisfied and that a new approach to NGO consultations is needed. He also said that the Bank might consider conducting human rights assessments of Bank projects through its operations evaluation department.

The comments were made by Ian Johnson, Senior Vice President for the Environmentally and Socially Sustainable Development Network at the World Bank, during a November 24, 2002 discussion on the Bank's human rights record at Georgetown University. The meeting was jointly sponsored by the Institute for the Study of International Migration (Georgetown) and the Advocacy Project. The transcript of the discussion has just been posted on the ISIM and AP websites.

Mr. Johnson, who heads an internal task force on human rights at the World Bank, said that the Bank consults with NGOs as a "rule rather than an exception," and that the Bank had appointed civil society officers in all of its field offices. This made it much easier for the Bank to respond to community concerns.

At the same time, he conceded that NGO consultations often leave much to be desired. He said that the Bank had sought feedback from 1000 indigenous representatives over the course of 32 meetings in an effort to develop a new policy to safeguard the interests of indigenous peoples affected by Bank projects. Still, many indigenous people felt excluded. In addition, he said, the Bank could not press the core indigenous demand for more sovereignty. "That just won't wash" with governments, he said.

One solution, he said, would be for the Bank to encourage new "institutions" for such consultations, and develop active partnerships with other agencies better able to challenge governments over human rights.

Mike Jendrzejczyk, Washington Director of the Asia Division of Human Rights Watch, complained that the Bank's consultations with NGOs are often "pro forma," and urged the Bank to intervene more actively when human rights defenders are harassed.

For example, he said, the Bank was investing heavily in the internet and committed to bridging the "digital divide." Yet it had failed to intervene when the Chinese government had arrested Yuan Xhi, a computer operator who set up the first human rights web site in China. It had also declined to press the Indian government to provide protection for

victims of HIV/AIDS discrimination in India – even though ending discrimination could be key to the success of a massive Bank program to combat HIV/AIDS.

Mr. Johnson's comments on human rights assessments are likely to be studied carefully. Human rights groups have long argued that the Bank should conduct analytical assessments of the likely human rights impacts of Bank projects. Mr. Johnson said that the Bank's operations evaluation department would be the logical place for such assessments, but that this would have to be authorised by the Bank's 24-member Executive Board. Would the board be interested? "I don't know. I just don't know."

\* For a complete transcript of the debate visit <http://advocacynet.org/>

\* For a report of the meeting visit the ISIM website: <http://isim.georgetown.edu/>