

World Bank: Human Rights All But Absent in New Policy

Jul 21, 2016 08:55AM

(Washington, DC) – The World Bank has refused to acknowledge its human rights obligations in its new policy^[1] framework, Human Rights Watch said today. The bank’s third, and most likely final, draft of its new environmental and social framework, published on July 20, 2016, does not require the bank to respect human rights. Instead, it only references human rights in its non-binding “vision” statement.

A detainee in a government-run drug detention center in Vietnam. The World Bank provided funding for various HIV-related services in Vietnamese drug detention centers through a project that concluded in 2012.

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A subcommittee of the bank’s Board of Executive Directors endorsed^[2] the framework on July 20, allowing for its publication. It is expected that the framework will be approved when the Board of Executive Directors meets on August 4.

“In refusing to acknowledge its rights obligations once again, the World Bank anticipates it will be able to violate human rights without consequence,” said Jessica Evans^[3], senior international financial institutions researcher at Human Rights Watch^[4]. “Rather than using this review of key environment and social policies to advance human rights and cement its role as a leader in development, the World Bank has done the opposite.”

Sources inside the World Bank told Human Rights Watch that World Bank management opposed language that would require the bank itself to respect human rights throughout its operations.

The new framework was in development for four years and includes some important reforms, including commitments to avoid discrimination and protect labor standards. It also requires governments borrowing from the bank to obtain the free, prior, and informed consent of Indigenous Peoples who traditionally own, occupy, or use land or natural resources that will be adversely affected by a proposed project. But the World Bank snubbed calls from the United Nations^[5], human rights groups^[6], and many of its shareholder governments when it refused to include binding human rights requirements in its new policies.

China, an increasingly influential World Bank shareholder, was the primary opponent of binding human rights requirements that would apply to governments borrowing from the bank. Other key shareholders, including several European governments and the United States, have pushed for human rights requirements.

When the Board of Executive Directors meets to approve the framework, it should agree to an inclusive process for drafting a new and separate human rights policy, Human Rights Watch said. The board is made up of 25 government appointees representing the bank’s 189 member countries. Such a policy should embody a commitment from the World Bank to integrate human rights into its work by analyzing human rights issues that are relevant to development in the context of its country strategies, to work with governments to comply with their human

rights commitments, and to identify and address human rights risks linked to its investments or advice.

The World Bank’s own research indicates that the majority of development agencies around the world had adopted or were adopting human rights policies by 2013. Few agencies had no human rights policies at all, a publication^[7] by the World Bank and the international Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development revealed. Many businesses and commercial banks also now recognize that they should respect human rights. The World Bank remains a laggard^[8] in human rights when it comes to its policies and practices, Human Rights Watch said.

The costs that people bear when the World Bank overlooks human rights are high. In Vietnam^[9], the bank financed activities in drug detention centers^[10] where people were arbitrarily detained, forced to work, and subjected to punishments that sometimes amounted to torture if they refused to work. In Uzbekistan^[11], the bank ignored^[12], for several years, forced labor practices in agriculture, despite being the key financier of the government in that sector. Now, while the bank recognizes the problem of forced labor, it is continuing^[13] business as usual while the government threatens and detains^[14] human rights defenders seeking to expose ongoing labor abuses, including in World Bank project areas. And in Ethiopia^[15], Pastor Omot Agwa, who worked with the bank’s independent accountability mechanism to expose a range of abuses linked to a bank project, has been in prison^[16] for more than a year facing baseless terrorism charges.

The World Bank president, Jim Yong Kim, often quotes Martin Luther King Jr. In May^[17], Kim suggested that King’s call for “vigorous and positive action” for civil rights could apply to climate change.

“The Bank has been quick to adopt the rhetoric of human rights while opposing it in practice,” Evans said. “Jim Yong Kim often quotes Martin Luther King Jr., but to quote King while leading the bank into another era of ignoring its rights obligations runs contrary to what King stood for.”

Referencias

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