

# Bank bashing

In the last decade, the World Bank has been slowly moving towards accountability. But, ironically, some Third World countries are now lashing back.

Large borrowers, such as Brazil and India, have been spearheading an attempt to gut the World Bank's Inspection Panel. The Panel, an independent body created in 1993, has the mandate to evaluate citizens' complaints over Bank-financed projects, and can reject projects found to violate the Bank's own policies. In 1995, for instance, Nepalese citizens used the Panel and successfully stopped the Arun River Dam, which would have had major environmental repercussions and displaced whole villages.

While some Third World countries think of the Panel as an unfair meddling into their internal plans, many international NGOs argue that the body is essential for citizens of these countries – some of the most disenfranchised people on the planet – to voice their concerns.

The proposed changes, essentially, would narrow the definition of what is considered to be harmful to citizens, restrict the Panel members' ability to talk to the media as well as transfer some power from the Panel to the bank's board.

After initially dealing with the proposed reform in secret, the Bank unexpectedly launched a public consultation, which ended on March 24th. Pamela Foster, spokesperson for Halifax Initiative, an Ottawa-based coalition of NGOs dedicated to making international financial institutions more accountable, says that "the Panel is the only independent appeal mechanism available for people impacted by projects financed by the Bank, and the proposed changes would significantly weaken it. That would be a big step back for public accountability."

The bank's board should render its decision within the next few weeks.

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