

World Bank Group's Evolution Process must prioritize Civic Space and Participation

We welcome:

- the current opportunities to [offer comments](#) on the [Development Committee report](#) on the [Evolution Roadmap](#);
- growing [recognition by several States](#) that the World Bank Group (WBG) – and the multilateral financial system at large – [need broad reform and revamping](#); and
- commitments by the new WBG President, Mr. Ajay Banga, to: "forge new partnerships with civil society".

We welcome statements in the text of the Roadmap that recognize the importance of: "greater social inclusion and citizen and beneficiary engagement", "improving gender equality", creating "opportunities for youth", "inclusion of marginalized groups such as persons with disabilities and ethnic and racial minorities", "consideration of the particular needs of people facing compound risks of exclusion" and inclusion of "citizens and beneficiaries" from "fragile countries".

However, environments that stifle safe and robust engagement make meaningful inclusion unattainable. Restrictions on the enabling environment for civic engagement threaten the WBG's development impact and disproportionately silence the marginalized and vulnerable.

This statement, drafted with extensive consultation and collaboration, provides recommendations for how the Roadmap and WBG's overall Evolution Process should address civic space and participation.

Recommendation A: The Evolution Roadmap must acknowledge the importance of civic space and participation to foster inclusive development.

1. The Roadmap must **acknowledge the global crisis of shrinking civic space**, as has been established by credible sources:
 - According to the [Civicus Monitor tracking civic space](#), as of 2022, only 3.2% of the world's population lives in countries rated as having "open" civic space.
 - According to the [Democracy Report](#) by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute at the University of Gothenburg, says "72% of the world's population – 5.7 billion people – live in autocracies by 2022."
 - According to the [Economist Intelligence Unit](#), only 14.4% of countries are full democracies, 35.3% are authoritarian regimes, and in between 50.3% are flawed democracies or hybrid regimes.

2. The Roadmap should **recognize that shrinking civic space threatens the revised WBG goals to foster “sustainable, resilient, and inclusive development”** and requires direct WBG action.
3. The Roadmap should **incorporate commitments to protect civic space**, similar to statements that States – including several WBG shareholders – have made. See, for example:
 - In 2023, 70 governments and authorities endorsed the [Summit of Democracy Declaration](#), committing to protect human rights, civic space (including media freedom), and the rule of law; and
 - In the [2022 Resilient Democracies Statement](#), several states across Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas committed to protect and foster open and pluralistic civic spaces.

Recommendation B: The Roadmap should recognize that defenders’ participation and their protection are crucial for a just transition.

4. The Roadmap should **make clear that communities are the experts of their own development pathways and priorities, and community-led development models are essential for a just transition**. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is clear that [we must shift development pathways](#) towards sustainability, with attention to equity and broad and meaningful participation to build social trust and deepen and widen support for transformative changes. Open civic space is critical to ensure trust and participation. The WBG’s top-down development model and failures to address civic space compromise the stated priority to combat climate change. The absence of civic space and community-led development in the Roadmap calls into question whether the WBG fully recognizes the **fundamental relationship between just transitions and participatory development**.
5. The Roadmap should **acknowledge the critical role of environmental and human rights defenders**, especially activists advocating for climate justice and just energy transitions. The Roadmap must also **recognize that environmental and human rights defenders are one of the most at-risk groups** of activists working today, too often as a result of development bank-supported activities in the [renewable energy](#) and [transition minerals](#) sectors.
6. The Roadmap should **commit to taking all necessary measures that ensure protection of defenders** – both individuals and the communities/collectives they are a part of – in investment contexts. Reprisal risk assessments and subsequent action plans and remedies must be developed with full participation and consent of affected defenders and must be situated in the specific realities the defenders face. The plans should also include pathways to address the impacts defenders might face, directly or indirectly, from WBG supported activities about which they are raising concerns.

Recommendation C: The Roadmap should advance transparent, accountable and participatory development supported by a rights based framework.

Background

On paper the WBG recognizes the importance of [citizen engagement](#) “in making public institutions more transparent, accountable, and effective, and contributing innovative solutions to development challenges.” It touts support for transparency, accountability and participation in protocols and policies including: [The Environmental and Social Framework](#), [performance standards](#), a [citizen engagement mainstreaming commitment](#), [an access to information policy](#), a statement on [zero tolerance for reprisals](#) and accountability and grievance redress processes.

Yet, these fall short of international human rights law and standards and thus limit ensuring robust civic engagement and participation in WBG-supported activities. There also has been inadequate reflection on how a disproportionate focus on private sector-led approaches to development [contributes to reprisals and ineffective development](#). These gaps do not only risk human rights violations in extreme cases. They also prevent the WBG from fully knowing the real effects of day-to-day operations on local communities or understanding the longer term, cumulative social development and human rights impacts of overarching policies and programs.

7. To advance human rights based and participatory development, the WBG should **develop and adopt a strong, intersectional human rights-based framework in close consultation** with communities, social movements, unions, defenders, Indigenous Peoples and civil society organizations. At the very least, the framework must comply with applicable local, national and international human rights law. The framework will require the WBG to develop new policies and adapt existing policies and practices, including:
 - **Require human rights due diligence (HRDD)** on the direct and indirect impacts of WBG supported projects and policies on peoples and communities, which incorporates reprisal risk assessments. The HRDD must be conducted before investment decisions are made, and in close consultation with directly affected defenders and communities, creating opportunities for them to contribute in a safe and reprisal sensitive manner.
 - **Prioritize civic space conditions in country partnership and investment decisions** by institutionalizing assessments that determine the risks and challenges to civic engagement and include appropriate redress. HRDD must also respond to risks related to clients, contexts, and countries where participation may not be possible due to contested or closed civic space, authoritarianism, criminalization, retaliation, power imbalances or a general environment of fear to speak up.
 - **Build institutional capacity, expertise and protocols to distinguish between different contexts in which people can and cannot participate.** The WBG must require governments and state-owned agencies to comply with their duties and responsibilities to preserve defenders’ rights, protect them from attacks and threats, and create and maintain an environment in which the right to defend

human rights is upheld. The WBG must have frameworks for using its leverage over business partners so that they respect human rights, remedy violations, and support defenders to exercise their right to freedom of expression, assembly and association. The WBG must also better address inaction, impunity and/or illegal actions by state authorities when they protect investors rather than those impacted by the investments.

- **Consultatively develop human rights-based development indicators** to meaningfully evaluate overall development impact, especially for social and environmental impacts. Additionally, the WBG must incorporate a civic space metric and indicator in the WBG Corporate Scorecard.
- **Link staff incentives within the WBG to meaningful measures of development impact.** These should include environmental and social impacts assessed with the participation of directly affected populations, especially Indigenous Peoples and local communities where projects and activities are sited – rather than the quantity of funds disbursed.
- **Improve transparency and information disclosure policies and practices** to proactively make key information public, ensuring it is accessible and can be promptly updated.
- **Expand capacity to conduct work and provide information in all languages spoken where the WBG operates.** There are several examples of multilateral organizations – like the United Nations and the European Investment Bank – that support participation in multiple languages, so it is unconscionable that information disclosure and participatory processes associated with WBG activities are primarily in English. ***Even in this consultation process, documents and consultations were initially only available in English.***
- **Provide more resources and capacity building to WBG’s environmental and social departments** and build capacity across the bank on issues relating to transparency, accountability, participation and human rights.

8. The Roadmap should **ensure the independence and effectiveness of WBG’s independent accountability mechanisms (IAMs) and grievance redress processes:**

- **Expand the mandate of WBG IAMs to independently look at the environmental and social impacts of all WBG activities, including development policy loans.** Empower IAMs to make binding recommendations with the participation of directly affected communities.
- **Ensure management and staff respect processes and findings of WBG IAMs.** The WBG must also work with its accountability mechanisms to address client, country or context specific barriers that may hinder communities from accessing the complaints mechanisms, especially on issues related to civic space and reprisals.

9. The Roadmap should **agree to a human rights based remedy framework**, such that communities negatively impacted by WBG projects – including where WBG’s IAMs have

found non-compliance with WBG policies and standards – can shape and receive remedy. Remedy should also be provided to legacy projects where communities have been harmed.

10. The Roadmap should **recognize the value of an external, independent evaluation of how the WBG’s projects, policies, practices and underlying top-down development model** -- with its focus on advancing economic growth and the role of the private sector in development – **have impacted and continue to impact human rights and civic space**. This evaluation would need to be conducted with extensive participation of grassroots communities, defenders and others, including those who are critical of WBG activities, and should also make recommendations to redress past harms and options for moving forward.
11. The WBG must **allow communities and civil society to hold it accountable for human rights impacts using legal processes in national and international courts**.

Recommendation D: Ensure that changes to the WBG’s operational model and financial capacity provide robust, dedicated resources to participation and civic engagement,

12. As it seeks to dramatically increase the quantity of the financing it mobilizes, governs and disburses under the Evolution Roadmap, the WBG must **ensure it allocates the necessary budget for all of the above recommendations**.
 - Expanded budgetary allocations must reflect the reality that the current funding for environmental and social safeguard compliance is already not commensurate with the environmental and social risks of the bank’s activities.
 - With any substantial increases to the volume of WBG financing and more emphasis on leveraging private sector investment must come increased resource allocation to transparency, accountability and participation.
 - Reforms to the operational and financial model must consider how to provide civil society organizations from the Global South with substantial, dedicated funding mechanisms that could be administered by civil society or jointly with the WBG.

In conclusion, **the quality of WBG spending and operations is as important as the quantity of funding made available, which requires that citizens and civil society be more systematically brought into decision-making and implementation across the WBG.**

For years now, social movements, Indigenous Peoples, communities in the Global South, and civil society organizations have been providing concrete policy recommendations (as above) and [systemic solutions](#) to address concerns about:

- the [top-down development model](#) advanced by the WBG which prioritizes economic growth and private profit; and
- the role of the WBG in the [interconnected crises](#) of inequality, food-insecurity, climate change and closing civic space.

However, the **WBG's projects and policy recommendations**, under the watch of its shareholders who are human-rights duty bearers, **have continued to cause or contribute to human rights violations** related to forced evictions, rising debt burden, environmental degradation, increased carbon emissions, and reprisals against those who speak up. These harms are caused (at least, in part) by the WBG's failure to ensure meaningful participation for directly affected people and the inability (and unwillingness) to address civic space dynamics in the countries where it operates and as a result of the clients with whom it partners.

The WBG Evolution Roadmap process could be a unique opportunity to more systematically understand, promote, and protect enabling environments for civic engagement using a human rights lens. Following the recommendations in this statement would enable the WBG to move towards realizing the new vision of achieving development that is "sustainable, resilient, and inclusive". **These are critical first steps necessary for any meaningful institutional reform to take place in good faith.** Given the leadership role of the WBG in the multilateral financial architecture, the roadmap could also positively influence others in the multilateral development finance system to address issues related to human rights and civic space.

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