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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The World Bank and Indigenous Peoples: Evolving from Operational Directives to Policy Frameworks

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Abstract

The article examines the evolution of the World Bank's policies on indigenous peoples, situating these frameworks within the institution's broader historical transformation from its post-Second World War founding to its contemporary role as an architect of global development norms. It traces the Bank's origins in the Bretton Woods system, its expansion through structural adjustment lending in the 1980s and 1990s, and the legitimacy crises generated by environmental and social safeguard controversies. These crises, intensified by indigenous resistance to large-scale infrastructure and extractive projects, catalyzed the Bank's engagement with indigenous rights and protections. The article conceptualizes indigenous peoples as culturally distinct, territorially rooted communities whose livelihoods, governance systems, and identities have been systematically marginalized by neo-liberal development models. Against this backdrop, it critically assesses the rationale, content and implementation of key World Bank policy instruments, notably Operational Directive 4.20 and its successor, the Indigenous Peoples Policy (2005; updated 2017). These frameworks sought to address historical exclusions by mitigating project-related harms, promoting benefit-sharing, and embedding safeguards related to free, prior, and informed consent, cultural heritage, and social inclusion. Empirically, the analysis draws on comparative case studies of World Bank-supported projects across diverse national contexts. These cases demonstrate improvements in risk management and consultation practices, while also revealing persistent shortcomings, including bureaucratic fragmentation, weak accountability, and power asymmetries that privilege state and corporate actors over indigenous communities. Critical perspectives from scholars, non-governmental organizations and indigenous advocates further illuminate patterns of uneven enforcement, procedural compliance and tokenistic participation. The article concludes by proposing reforms aimed at strengthening rights-respecting development, including the creation of an independent participatory oversight mechanism, mandatory culturally grounded impact assessments, and systematic integration of United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples principles into World Bank operations. These recommendations offer broader lessons for multilateral institutions.

Keywords

Development Policies, Indigenous Peoples, Indigenous Rights, Tribes, World Bank.

1. Introduction

This article provides a comprehensive exploration of the World Bank's policies concerning indigenous peoples, set against the backdrop of the institution's history and development. To begin, the article outlines the origin of the World Bank, an institution established in the aftermath of World War II to provide financial assistance for global reconstruction. Over time, its mandate expanded to include development initiatives across the globe, particularly in lower-income countries. Through this growing influence, the World Bank began shaping policies on a range of global issues, including poverty alleviation, economic growth, and infrastructure development. Within this evolving framework, the need to address the unique challenges faced by indigenous peoples emerged, leading to creation of specialized policies aimed at this group. Despite their rich heritage, indigenous communities frequently face systemic challenges, including historical marginalization and exclusion from mainstream development efforts. This marginalization is particularly evident in large-scale development projects and infrastructure expansion, which often encroach their resources and disrupt their way of life.

Focussing on this, the article highlights the World Bank's recognition of the need to develop policies specifically tailored to address the unique challenges faced by indigenous peoples. It critically analyses the World Bank's engagement with indigenous peoples, especially through the creation of policies designed to protect their rights and interests. These policies, often referred to as safeguard policies, aim to mitigate the negative impacts of development projects on indigenous communities. The article discusses the rationale behind these policies, particularly in terms of correcting historical injustices and preventing further harm to indigenous peoples. It also draws on case studies from various countries, illustrating both the successes and shortcomings of World Bank interventions. While the creation of such policies represents progress, concerns remain about gaps in their implementation. Building on these insights, the article culminates by recommending reforms to enhance the World Bank's approach, advocating for a more participatory mechanism that actively involves indigenous communities in decision-making processes. It also calls for adoption of culturally sensitive development strategies that uphold the rights and dignity of indigenous peoples.

2. Origin and Evolution of The World Bank

The World Bank, one of the most influential global financial institutions, was established in 1944 at the Bretton Woods Conference in New Hampshire, USA. This pivotal moment in history laid the foundation for a new international economic framework, aimed at stabilizing the post-World War II global economy. The devastation wrought by World War II underscored the need for an institution that could lead the reconstruction of war-torn nations and foster a stable economic environment to mitigate future conflicts (Del Castillo, 2008). The International Bank for Reconstruction

and Development (IBRD), commonly referred to as the World Bank, was thus created with a clear mission to aid in the rebuilding of countries severely impacted by the war (Kapur et al., 2011). At its inception, the World Bank's primary focus was on post-war reconstruction, particularly in Europe where the damage to infrastructure and economies was most severe (Alacevich, 2009). The bank's first major interventions came in 1947 when it issued non-project rehabilitation loans to France, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Luxembourg. These loans were aimed at helping nations recover from the immediate aftermath of the war (Kapur et al., 2011). Initially, the World Bank's work revolved around addressing the acute needs of rebuilding physical infrastructure, including transportation networks, utilities, and communication systems, to restore essential services and enable economic recovery (Hallegatte et al., 2019).

However, over time, the scope of the World Bank's mission expanded. As Europe began to recover, the institution shifted its focus from solely reconstruction to broader development goals. By the 1950s and 1960s, the World Bank began targeting global issues such as poverty reduction, infrastructure development, and the promotion of sustainable economic growth (World Bank Annual Report, 2013). This marked a significant transition from a post-war recovery bank to a development institution with a global mandate. As the institution's focus broadened, so did its range of financial services. Today, the World Bank provides low-interest loans, interest-free financing, and grants to developing and under-developed countries to fund projects related to infrastructure, healthcare, education, and communication. By offering financial resources and technical expertise, the World Bank has overtime become a central player in the efforts to spur economic growth and raise the quality of life in developing countries (World Bank Brochure, 2007). The World Bank also advocates for sound economic practices among its member countries, encouraging responsible public debt management and sustainable development initiatives (Morris et al., 2020). Through its broad financial reach, the institution has contributed to the improvement of living conditions in numerous countries, providing support that has had long-lasting impacts on economic development and poverty alleviation (Buckley, 2006).

The World Bank is part of the larger World Bank Group, which consists of five international institutions, each with a distinct mandate, working together to promote sustainable development, alleviate poverty, and foster global economic growth (Ghazi, 2021). These institutions include the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), which primarily assists middle-income and creditworthy low-income countries (IBRD, 2024); the International Development Association (IDA), which provides low-interest loans and grants to the world's poorest countries (IDA, 2024); the International Finance Corporation (IFC), which supports private sector development by offering investment and advisory services (IFC, 2024); the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency (MIGA), which provides political risk insurance and credit

enhancement to encourage investment in developing countries (MIGA, 2024); and the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID), which facilitates the resolution of investment disputes between international investors and states (ICSID, 2024). Together, these institutions work to reduce poverty, support development, and promote economic growth worldwide (World Bank, 2024).

The IBRD and IDA, collectively known as The World Bank, provide financial resources to middle-income and low-income countries. The IBRD generates revenue through a modest profit margin on loan activities and re-invests profits to strengthen its financial position. These funds are also transferred to the IDA, which supports the poor nations. This structure ensures that the World Bank remains financially robust while continuing to aid countries most in need of assistance (Kharas & Bhattacharya, 2023). In addition to its own financial resources, the World Bank collaborates with a wide range of partners, including governments, international organizations, private sector, and civil society (Buse & Walt, 2000). These partnerships play crucial for mobilizing additional resources, sharing knowledge, and ensuring the sustainability and impact of development projects (World Bank, 2024). Furthermore, the World Bank coordinates closely with regional development banks and United Nations organizations to address global development challenges, ensuring a comprehensive approach to poverty reduction and economic development (World Bank, 2024). Thus, The World Bank's evolution from a post-war reconstruction institution to a global development institution reflects its capacity to adapt to the changing global challenges. Today, it continues to play a critical role in addressing issues of poverty, infrastructure development, and economic sustainability in developing countries, working in partnership with global institutions to achieve its mission of improving living standards worldwide.

3. Who Are Indigenous Peoples?

Indigenous peoples represent a vast and diverse group of communities worldwide, yet there is no universally accepted definition of who they are. International organizations, governments, and indigenous groups themselves have contributed to a variety of definitions that reflect the complexities of indigenous identity. Indigenous peoples are self-identified groups that distinguish themselves from dominant national societies in which they reside, asserting their distinct social, cultural, and historical identities. The term 'indigenous peoples' is a concise and practical way to refer to a wide range of communities spread across the world, including America, Africa, Europe, Asia, and the Pacific (Brölmann & Zieck, 1993). A commonly accepted description of indigenous peoples is that they are descendants of the original inhabitants of a region before the arrival of people from different ethnic or cultural backgrounds (United Nations, 2024). According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 169, indigenous peoples have ancestral ties to populations that inhabited a country or geographical region at the time of colonization, invasion, or establishment of current state

borders. Additionally, these groups continue to maintain their own social, economic, cultural, and political institutions, regardless of their legal recognition within the state (ILO Convention No. 169, 1989). The principle of self-identification is a key element in the recognition of indigenous peoples. This principle, upheld by various international bodies such as the United Nations and enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), allows indigenous groups to claim their identity based on their cultural heritage, traditions, and community practices (UNDRIP, 2007).

Indigenous peoples are globally dispersed. Despite their widespread presence, indigenous peoples often represent a minority within their respective national populations. Estimates suggest that there are more than 250 million indigenous peoples across over 70 nations (Burger & Strong, 1990). Their geographic distribution is diverse, encompassing a variety of ecosystems, including rainforests, deserts, mountains, and coastal areas, each shaping their cultural practices and relationship with the environment. One of the defining features of indigenous peoples is their deep spiritual connection with natural resources, i.e. water, forest, land and mountains. This bond profoundly influences their way of life, cultural practices, and worldview (Rowkith & Bhagwan, 2020). Indigenous peoples frequently assert that their survival and cultural identity are inseparable from their rights over these resources. These rights are tied to their self-determination and autonomy, and also manifests in their distinct modes of survival and ecological adaptation, marking them crucial for their sustainability (Murphy, 2019). In addition to their ties with natural resources, indigenous peoples maintain distinct institutions and governance structures that reflect their cultural experiences. These institutions often guide their interactions with nature, society, and the broader world, forming a foundation for their social and political systems (Bruchac, 2014).

Despite their diversity, many indigenous groups face common challenges, including economic marginalization, cultural erosion, and social disintegration (Anaya, 2009). Historical injustices such as colonization, imposition of foreign governance, and displacement - have further exacerbated these challenges (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005). As a result, indigenous peoples struggle to preserve their cultural integrity and community cohesion in the face of ongoing external pressures. While indigenous peoples are often seen as vulnerable to the impacts of development, they are also crucial partners in promoting sustainable development initiatives (Yap and Watene, 2019). Their knowledge of local ecosystems, resource management, and sustainable practices positions them as valuable contributors. In short, it can be mooted that indigenous peoples represent a vast and diverse range of communities with distinct social, cultural, and historical identities. Despite absence of a single, universally accepted definition, the principle of self-identification is central to globally recognizing the rights of indigenous peoples. Their deep connection to natural resources, unique governance structures, and contribution to sustainable development make them a vital part of the global community. However, historical injustices and ongoing marginalization pose significant challenges to their survival and cultural

preservation, making it crucial to understand who indigenous peoples are and acknowledge their rights in order to foster global diversity and promote sustainable development.

4. World Bank's Policy Concerning Indigenous Peoples

The World Bank's relationship with indigenous peoples has evolved significantly over the years, reflecting a shift towards an approach which emphasizes inclusion, respect for rights, and active participation. Initially, the Bank overlooked the unique needs and vulnerabilities of indigenous communities, leading to unintended harm. Recognizing these, the Bank undertook a series of policy revisions aimed at safeguarding indigenous interests and integrating their perspectives into project planning and implementation (World Bank, 2005). This section examines the progression of the World Bank's policies concerning indigenous peoples, highlighting key milestones such as the adoption of Operational Policy 4.10 and the incorporation of free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC). It explores how these changes have aimed to transform indigenous peoples from passive recipients to active stakeholders in the development processes, while also acknowledging the ongoing and emergent challenges in fully realizing these policy goals.

The World Bank has increasingly prioritized safeguarding of resources in its development projects, driven by years of criticism and reflection on the unintended negative consequences of its initiatives on indigenous communities. In the early stages of its development work, the World Bank's approach to indigenous peoples was primarily focused on protecting their livelihoods and cultural heritage. However, these efforts lacked a comprehensive participatory framework (Sarfaty, 2005). In 1982, the Bank became the first multilateral organization to recognize the need for distinct safeguards for indigenous communities (Indian Law Resource Center, 2005). This recognition was formalized with the publication of the first policy addressing indigenous peoples, titled Operational Manual Statement 2.34: Tribal People in Bank-Financed Projects (OMS 2.34), which followed the seminal report *Economic Development and Tribal Peoples: Human Ecologic Considerations* in 1981 (Salman, 2006). OMS 2.34 marked an important step by acknowledging the need to protect indigenous peoples, but the policy was limited in its effectiveness. It primarily emphasized protection rather than inclusion, focusing on tribal groups such as hunter-gatherers, shifting farmers, and herders (Ingram, 2003). The Bank's projects during the 1980s were often top-down in nature, with indigenous communities rarely participating meaningfully in decision-making processes. As a result, indigenous peoples frequently experienced negative impacts from development initiatives, reinforcing their vulnerability rather than addressing it (Griffiths, 2005).

By the mid-1980s, the Bank recognized that protection-focused approach was insufficient and that a more inclusive strategy was necessary. In 1987, the Bank began engaging indigenous communities in more meaningful discussions on policy and accountability. This marked a pivotal shift in the Bank's approach, as it began to respect indigenous socio-

cultural systems, ecological adaptations, and modes of production (Davis, 1993; Griffiths, 2005). Despite these efforts, the lack of social science expertise within the Bank and the failure to mainstream indigenous policies into its broader operational frameworks limited the effectiveness of these initial reforms. Projects affecting indigenous communities continued to be framed as top-down interventions, and indigenous participation remained minimal (Griffiths, 2005). This failure to reform practice led to sustained criticism throughout the 1980s, culminating in a significant policy revision in 1991.

In 1991, the World Bank adopted the Operational Directive 4.20 on Indigenous Peoples (OD 4.20), which aimed to protect indigenous rights, dignity, and cultural distinctiveness, in a better manner (World Bank, 2003). The new directive represented a more sophisticated understanding of indigenous peoples' roles in development projects. It emphasized that indigenous peoples are 'social groups with a social and cultural identity distinct from the dominant society that makes them vulnerable to being disadvantaged in the development process' (Ingram, 2003). While OD 4.20 was a significant improvement over previous policies, it was not developed through a participatory process involving indigenous communities, leading to continued criticism from indigenous organizations and leaders (Griffiths, 2005). Nevertheless, OD 4.20 was an important step toward recognizing indigenous peoples as active participants in development, and laid the groundwork for further policy improvements.

In May 2005, the World Bank introduced Operational Policy 4.10 on Indigenous Peoples (OP 4.10), which marked a significant advancement in its approach to indigenous issues. OP 4.10 emphasized the protection of indigenous rights and interests in development projects, and it recognized indigenous peoples as key to sustainable development (World Bank, 2005). The policy reflected growing recognition in international and domestic law of indigenous peoples' rights to self-determination and their ancestral natural resources. OP 4.10 defined indigenous peoples as - distinct social groups with mutual attachment to ancestral territories and natural resources, self-recognition as an indigenous group, and the maintenance of unique political, social, economic, and cultural institutions (World Bank, 2005). A core tenet of OP 4.10 was the promotion of inclusive development that honoured indigenous peoples' social structures and cultural uniqueness (MacKay, 2004).

One of the most critical advancements in OP 4.10 was the requirement for free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) from indigenous communities for projects affecting their lands, resources, or cultural heritage (MacKay, 2004). (FPIC is a process by which indigenous peoples are informed about projects affecting them in advance, given sufficient time to consider the potential impacts, and have the opportunity to grant or withhold consent). FPIC ensured that indigenous peoples had a meaningful voice in decisions that directly impacted them, marking a significant departure from earlier top-down interventions. The inclusion of FPIC in OP 4.10 underscored the Bank's commitment for ensuring that development projects not only avert harm to indigenous

peoples but also contribute to their long-term well-being and sustainability (Inspection Panel, 2016). Currently, the principle of FPIC is recognized by several international bodies and inter-governmental organizations and has been increasingly integrated into domestic laws and jurisprudence. The Bank's adoption of FPIC is significant because it acknowledges the necessity of respecting indigenous peoples' substantive rights to their natural resources and culture. It also recognizes that consultation is not merely a procedural formality but a necessary element in ensuring that development projects respect the rights and interests of indigenous communities (Davis, 2021).

Over the past decade, the World Bank has financed numerous projects with special components dedicated to protection of indigenous lands and resources. The Bank has made it clear that it will not support projects that forcibly displace indigenous peoples or violate any of their traditional rights (Davis, 2021). While the Bank's policies have evolved to better protect indigenous peoples, challenges remain (The Inspection Panel, 2016). Critics argue that the Bank's safeguards are not always effectively implemented, and indigenous communities continue to experience negative impacts from development projects. Nevertheless, the adoption of FPIC and the growing recognition of indigenous rights represent significant progress in the Bank's approach to development. From the initial protection-focused approach of the 1980s to the more inclusive policies of the 21st century, the Bank has made considerable strides in promoting indigenous rights and safeguarding their resources (MacKay, 2005). The Bank's evolving policies on indigenous peoples reflect a broader shift from viewing indigenous communities as passive recipients of aid to recognizing them as active participants in development (World Bank, 2005).

5. Rationality for Separate Policy for Indigenous Peoples

The World Bank's decision to design a distinct policy for indigenous peoples was driven by their unique socio-economic, cultural, and environmental circumstances (World Bank, 2025). Over time, it became evident that the traditional development approaches applied to broader populations were inadequate in addressing the specific needs and vulnerabilities of indigenous communities. These communities, often marginalized and historically affected by colonization, required a specialized framework to protect their rights, and ways of life (Indian Law Resource Center, 2005). This section explores the key reasons why the World Bank developed a separate policy for indigenous peoples, highlighting their distinct socio-cultural conditions, environmental contributions, and the importance of protecting their rights within development processes.

Early Observations and Development of OMS 2.34

The World Bank's journey toward creating a separate policy for indigenous peoples began with the realization that its projects were negatively impacting these communities. In 1989, a review conducted by the Office of Environmental and Scientific Affairs revealed that the Bank's initial policy, Operational Manual Statement 2.34: Tribal People in Bank-

Financed Projects (OMS 2.34), while increasing the identification of indigenous peoples affected by Bank-financed projects, was still limited in its scope (Davis, 2021). The policy was initially applied primarily to small, isolated, and un-aculturated societies, referred to as 'vulnerable ethnic minorities' inhabiting in South America, and Central and South Africa. However, larger and more heterogeneous groups, residing in India and Southeast Asia, were largely excluded from the policy's protection. The guiding principle behind the policy was that development projects should provide sufficient time and conditions for acculturation of indigenous peoples (MacKay, 2005). However, the policy did not go far enough in involving indigenous peoples as active participants in development processes, focusing instead on their protection rather than inclusion. This limited perspective necessitated policy evolution (Indian Law Resource Center, 2005).

Recognition of Unique Circumstances of Indigenous Peoples

The need for a separate policy for indigenous peoples stems from their distinct socio-economic and cultural circumstances, which differentiate them from other populations (Stavenhagen, 2012). Indigenous peoples have historically been marginalized and subjected to foreign legal and governance systems. Colonization, in particular, eroded their traditional ways of life, making them vulnerable to the impacts of development projects that often disregarded their specific needs and knowledge systems (Adeola, 2001; Paradies, 2016). Their deep spiritual and cultural connection to their ancestral resources, especially land, is a fundamental aspect of their identity, which influences their social, economic, and political systems. This distinct relationship coupled with their marginalized position in political and economic spheres, has necessitated the creation of specialized policies to protect their rights and ensure their inclusion in development processes (Errico, 2006). The World Bank's decision to design a separate policy was thus motivated by the recognition of these unique vulnerabilities. Indigenous peoples are often excluded from decision-making processes that affect their ancestral resources and livelihoods, making them more susceptible to negative effects of development. The specialized policy framework developed by the World Bank aimed to address these issues by ensuring that indigenous communities were actively involved in planning and implementation of development projects. This framework ensures that indigenous peoples have a say in projects that impact their lands, territories, and resources (MacKay, 2004).

Influence of International Recognition of Indigenous Rights

The development of separate policy for indigenous peoples was significantly influenced by growing international recognition of indigenous rights. Throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries, various international bodies and agreements, such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), emphasized the importance of protecting indigenous communities from exploitation and marginalization (Anaya, 2009). Development projects, particularly in resource extraction, infrastructure expansion, and agricultural development, have

exacerbated the marginalization of indigenous populations, even in the post-colonial era. For instance, mining activities have generated significant and complex environmental challenges for nearby indigenous communities, as waste products and hazardous materials disproportionately affect their land-based livelihoods (Horowitz et al., 2024). The preservation of indigenous cultures and knowledge systems has become a central concern for international development organizations, including the World Bank, which seeks to ensure that development practices do not further erode these communities' traditional ways of life (Owen et al., 2023).

Preserving Indigenous Cultures and Knowledge System

One of the key justifications for the World Bank's distinct approach to indigenous peoples is the preservation of their culture and knowledge systems. Indigenous knowledge, particularly in terms of sustainable resource management, is increasingly recognized as an underutilized resource in global development (Agrawal, 2002). The World Bank led Initiative on Indigenous Knowledge was created to establish a database of indigenous knowledge practices, highlighting the value of integrating these practices into development projects (World Bank, 1998). By documenting and promoting indigenous knowledge, the World Bank aims to support sustainable development initiatives that are informed by local expertise and practices. This recognition of indigenous knowledge not only preserves cultural heritage but also enhances the effectiveness and sustainability of development projects. The World Bank's collaboration with indigenous peoples and governments is crucial in ensuring that development programs reflect the voices and aspirations of indigenous communities, thereby fostering a more inclusive approach to development (Davis & Wali, 1993).

Customary Ownership over Natural Resources

Another critical factor that underscored the necessity of separate policy for indigenous peoples was the issue of land rights. Much of the land occupied by indigenous communities is under customary ownership, meaning that it is governed by traditional systems rather than formal legal frameworks. As a result, indigenous peoples often lack formal recognition of their rights over their land, territory, and natural resources (World Bank, 2023). The World Bank's policy framework is designed to address this issue by ensuring that indigenous peoples' rights over these resources are respected and that they are not displaced or disadvantaged by development projects (ERRICO, 2006). By recognizing indigenous peoples as distinct social and cultural groups with unique connections to their land, the World Bank's policies aim to protect their rights and promote their inclusion in the development process (World Bank, 2025).

In nutshell, the Bank's decision to develop a separate policy for indigenous peoples was driven by their unique socio-economic and cultural circumstances, their contributions to biodiversity conservation, and the growing international recognition of their rights. The specialized policy framework, aims to protect the rights of indigenous peoples, preserve their knowledge systems, and ensure their inclusion in development processes. By acknowledging their

distinct relationship to natural resources, and addressing their marginalization, the updated policies play crucial role in safeguarding the well-being and cultural integrity of indigenous communities.

6. Notable Initiatives of WB for Indigenous Peoples

The World Bank has implemented an array of development projects around the world, focusing on supporting indigenous peoples through tailored initiatives that address their unique cultural, social, and economic needs. Recognizing the vulnerability of indigenous communities to the negative impacts of development, the Bank has increasingly prioritized projects that safeguard indigenous natural resources, promote sustainable livelihoods, and improve access to essential services such as healthcare and education. These efforts span across regions and sectors, from ecosystem restoration and biodiversity conservation to enhancing social inclusion and securing land rights. This section portrays a few notable initiatives of the Bank in various countries, highlighting its major focus area for improving the well-being of indigenous peoples while promoting their role in global sustainability efforts.

Ecosystem Restoration and Biodiversity Conservation

Several World Bank projects focus on preserving biodiversity and restoring ecosystems, recognizing the deep connection indigenous communities have with their natural environments. In China, the Sustainable Ecosystem Restoration and Biodiversity Conservation Project is a prime example. This initiative promotes biodiversity conservation and ecosystem restoration in the provinces of Shanxi and Sichuan while creating sustainable livelihood opportunities for local indigenous communities. In addition to protecting the ecosystem, the project strengthens institutional capacities for better management of these environments, ensuring long-term sustainability. Likewise, in India, ecosystem restoration efforts extend to several regions. Projects across the dry deciduous forests of Madhya Pradesh and community-owned lands in Meghalaya aim to conserve biodiversity, prevent forest fires, isolate carbon, and generate economic benefits for local indigenous communities. The World Bank collaborates with traditional tribal institutions to restore degraded landscapes, increase water availability during dry seasons, and enhance soil productivity, highlighting the importance of indigenous knowledge in environmental management. The World Bank also supports young indigenous leaders in Latin America and the Caribbean through climate initiatives that help monitor environmental commitments while respecting ancestral traditions and territories. This focus on youth engagement underscores the importance of involving future generations in sustainable development efforts, particularly in regions where climate change poses significant threats to indigenous resources and livelihood.

Healthcare Access and Equity

Improving access to quality healthcare for indigenous communities is another key focus of several World Bank

initiatives. In China, the Rural Health Project: Indigenous Peoples Planning Framework (IPPF) aims to provide equitable access to healthcare, improve financial protection, and strengthen public health management, particularly in rural areas with significant indigenous populations. This initiative ensures that healthcare reforms not only target project regions but also benefit other under-served areas. Similarly, in Cambodia, the Health Equity and Quality Improvement Project seeks to enhance healthcare access for targeted indigenous populations, focusing on protecting individuals from impoverishment due to healthcare costs. This project emphasizes the need for equitable healthcare services in areas where indigenous communities face barriers to accessing medical care, particularly in the provinces of Ratanakiri and Mondulakiri.

Education and Skill Development

Education plays a pivotal role in empowering indigenous communities, and the World Bank has initiated several projects to address educational disparities. In Kenya, the Secondary Education Quality Improvement Project operates under a vulnerable and marginalized groups framework, which focuses on enhancing student learning outcomes and improving transition from primary to secondary education for indigenous and marginalized groups. By addressing educational inequalities, this initiative aims to improve access to quality education for indigenous populations. Similarly, the Higher Education Improvement Project in Cambodia aims to improve equity in higher education by conducting assessments and creating plans to address the specific needs of indigenous peoples. The project seeks to enhance the quality, relevance, and governance of higher education institutions, with provisions to ensure rapid response mechanisms during crises or emergencies. This initiative reflects a commitment to advancing the academic opportunities available to indigenous students.

Sustainable Livelihood and Economic Growth

Many World Bank initiatives are designed to create sustainable livelihood and promote economic growth for indigenous communities. In Vietnam, the Forest Sector Development Project includes an Indigenous Peoples Development Plan, which seeks to mitigate the risks of negative impacts on ethnic minority communities while promoting sustainable outcomes. By incorporating indigenous knowledge and practices, the project supports the creation of livelihoods that are environmentally sustainable and culturally appropriate. Similarly, in Cambodia, the Sustainable Livelihood for Indigenous Communities Project (CSLICP) promotes innovative farming practices and encourages off-farm and non-farm activities, providing indigenous communities with diverse income-generating opportunities. The project is part of a broader effort to improve economic resilience and enhance living conditions for indigenous peoples. Likewise, in Suriname also, the Competitiveness and Sector Diversification Project integrates an indigenous and tribal peoples planning framework to encourage private investment and strengthen value chains in targeted industries. This initiative focuses on sustainable development of indigenous and tribal

communities, ensuring that economic growth aligns with environmental and cultural sustainability.

Social Inclusion and Indigenous Rights

Securing land rights and promoting social inclusion for indigenous peoples is central to many of the World Bank's projects. In Mexico, the Indigenous Communities Development Project aims to improve living conditions and enhance communication networks in the most marginalized indigenous communities. This project is designed exclusively for areas with significant indigenous populations, ensuring that development initiatives reach those most in need. In Colombia, the World Bank supports the Peace and Development Project, which seeks to create social and economic conditions that reduce vulnerability to conflict-related violence. The project facilitates the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to their homes or new rural lands, emphasizing restoration of land rights for indigenous peoples and other vulnerable groups. Additionally, the Bank's Natural Resource Management Project in Colombia includes a successful land titling program for Indigenous and Afro-Colombian populations, demonstrating the Bank's commitment towards securing land tenure in complex and challenging local contexts.

In India, the World Bank's backing of the Atal Bhujal Yojana, the world's largest community-led groundwater management program, benefits indigenous communities by enhancing water security in seven provinces of the country. This project underscores the importance of involving indigenous groups in sustainable management of natural resources, ensuring that their rights and knowledge are central in the decision-making processes. Likewise, in Nepal, the Dedicated Grant Mechanism for Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities, a \$4.5 million partnership between the World Bank and Rural Reconstruction Nepal (RRN), aims to strengthen the capacity of indigenous and local communities in the forest sector. This initiative highlights the role of indigenous peoples in forest conservation and sustainable resource management, emphasizing the importance of building local capacity for environmental stewardship.

The World Bank's numerous initiatives aimed at supporting indigenous peoples - reflect a comprehensive and holistic approach to development, which spans across multiple sectors and prioritizes ecological preservation, education, healthcare, economic growth, and social inclusion. These initiatives are specifically designed to address the unique needs of indigenous communities, recognizing that a one-size-fits-all approach is insufficient for such diverse and culturally distinct populations. The Bank works closely with indigenous peoples to ensure that development projects not only protect their resources and cultural heritage but also foster sustainable livelihoods that align with their traditional practices and knowledge systems. By incorporating indigenous voices into decision-making processes, the Bank empowers these communities to actively participate in shaping projects that affect their lands, resources, and future. This collaborative approach fosters a sense of ownership and ensures that development efforts are respectful of indigenous customs and ecological knowledge. Through projects in

countries with significant indigenous populations - the Bank continues to support the well-being of indigenous peoples. These efforts are crucial for building sustainable futures that are inclusive and respectful of the rights of indigenous peoples.

7. Critique of World Bank Policies

The World Bank's engagement with indigenous peoples has been subjected to extensive criticism over the years. Despite implementation of policies intended to safeguard indigenous communities, the Bank's efforts often fall short, particularly in areas of consultation, participation, and policy enforcement (Bretton Woods Project, 2024). This section examines the key thematic concerns raised by indigenous groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and scholars about the World Bank's policies, focusing on issues related to the mis-application of indigenous policies, inadequate consultation processes, and failures to incorporate recommendations from independent reviews.

Inconsistent Application of Safeguard Policies

One of the most persistent critiques of the World Bank's policies on indigenous peoples is the inconsistent application and enforcement of its own safeguards. Although the Bank recognizes the risks that development projects pose to indigenous communities, its failure to implement effective safeguards often leads to harm. A World Bank directive acknowledges that 'unless special measures are adopted, tribal people are more likely to be harmed than helped by development projects' (Davis, 2021). However, despite this recognition, many development projects continue to overlook these protective measures. Implementation reviews frequently find that government agencies tasked with managing tribal components in projects - lack institutional capacity, funding, and expertise in anthropology. As a result, these agencies struggle to apply the necessary safeguards effectively.

Furthermore, the Bank's Inspection Panel has identified significant gaps in policies related to involuntary resettlement, leaving many indigenous peoples unprotected from the adverse impacts of development projects. Indigenous communities, due to their cultural and economic reliance on land, are particularly vulnerable to projects that alter land tenure or usage rights. A recurring issue is the misapplication or non-activation of the Bank's indigenous peoples' policy. In some instances, the Bank also fails to recognize affected communities as indigenous, despite their meeting the criteria outlined in its policies. This problem is particularly acute in African contexts, where governments are often reluctant to acknowledge certain groups as indigenous or resist using the term 'indigenous' (Inspection Panel, 2016). Even when indigenous peoples are acknowledged, the social impacts on their communities are inadequately assessed, leaving these groups at risk of further marginalization.

Lack of Meaningful Participation and Consultation

The World Bank's consultation processes with indigenous communities have been another significant area of critique. Despite policies that mandate meaningful consultations and inclusion of indigenous peoples in decision-making, participation has remained low (Vita et al., 2017). Indigenous groups have consistently reported feeling excluded or marginalized during these consultations. In many cases, consultations are perceived as superficial exercises meant to legitimize projects rather than genuine efforts to collaborate with indigenous stakeholders. For instance, in Central India, the World Bank's support for large-scale timber plantations displaced the Muria people, devastating their communities. Similarly, in Brazil, Bank-backed development schemes in the Amazon resulted in land invasions and disease outbreak among indigenous population. These cases exemplify the disconnect between the Bank's project goals and the lived realities of indigenous peoples.

Despite policies like Operational Policy 4.10 that emphasize informed participation and respect for indigenous rights (Rodríguez-Garavito, 2011; World Bank, 2005), indigenous participation in design, implementation, and review of projects remains minimal. A key element of these failures is the neglect of 'indigenous Peoples Development Plans,' a requirement under World Bank policies to ensure that indigenous rights are protected during development projects (Fund, 2000). Many projects proceed without these critical plans, undermining the Bank's commitment to inclusive development. Indigenous groups often express frustration over the lack of transparency and accountability, with more than one-third of projects lacking an indigenous peoples component (Griffiths & Colchester, 2000). Even when consultations are held, indigenous participants frequently face significant barriers to effective participation, such as language differences, cultural misunderstandings, and inaccessible project documents.

Failure to Implement Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC)

Another major critique is the Bank's inconsistent implementation of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), a key principle designed to protect indigenous rights (Errico, 2006). While the Bank has committed to requiring FPIC for projects affecting indigenous lands, the scope of its application has often been limited. For example, in Guyana, FPIC only applies to officially 'recognized' or titled lands, which excludes approximately three-quarters of the lands traditionally owned by indigenous peoples. This limitation weakens the protective intent of FPIC, as many indigenous territories remain unrecognized by formal legal systems despite their cultural and historical significance to indigenous communities. The Bank's International Finance Corporation (IFC) mandates that projects minimize, mitigate, or compensate for any negative impacts on indigenous communities (IFC, 2006). However, indigenous groups have criticized the IFC for failing to fully implement FPIC, particularly when it comes to recognizing the customary laws and governance systems of indigenous peoples (de Moerloose, 2020). Instead of securing full consent, the Bank

often relies on 'Free, Prior, and Informed Consultation,' which only requires 'broad community support' rather than explicit consent (Larsen & Chanthavisouk, 2024). This approach is seen by many indigenous groups as a diluted version of FPIC that falls short of protecting their rights (Mahanty & McDermott, 2013).

Inadequate Incorporation of Independent Reviews

In addition to its failures in consultation and consent processes, the World Bank has also been criticized for not fully incorporating recommendations from independent reviews, such as the World Commission on Dams (WCD) and the Extractive Industries Review (EIR). These reviews called for significant reforms in the Bank's approach to indigenous peoples, particularly regarding the need for stronger protections and implementation of FPIC. Despite these recommendations, the Bank has only committed to using these reports as 'reference tools,' rather than integrating their findings into its core policies. Indigenous communities and advocates have expressed frustration over lack of meaningful action in response to these reviews. In many cases, Bank's reliance on weaker forms of consultation, has led to outcomes that indigenous groups perceive it as undermining their sovereignty and rights. Also, reports of indigenous organizations are sidelined in key decision makings related to project design, budget allocations, and governance roles, deepening their mistrust of the Bank's processes (World Commission on Dams, 2000).

Putting summarily, World Bank's policies on indigenous peoples have evolved over time, but significant gaps remain in their application and enforcement. Indigenous communities and organizations continue to criticize the Bank for its inconsistent application of safeguards, inadequate consultation processes, and failure to fully implement FPIC. The neglect of independent review recommendations further exacerbate these issues. While the World Bank has made some progress in acknowledging indigenous rights, its policies and practices often fall short of expectations, leading to scepticism about its commitment to genuinely safeguard the rights and interests of indigenous communities.

8. Case Studies on Indigenous Peoples and WB Projects

The relationship between indigenous peoples and World Bank development projects has long been a source of both progress and tension. While the Bank has made strides toward inclusive development, case studies from various regions highlight significant challenges in effectively engaging indigenous communities in the decision-making process. Through consultations and projects in countries such as Brazil, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Vietnam, Philippines, India etc., the World Bank has sought to refine its policies affecting indigenous peoples. However, despite these efforts, criticisms of superficial engagement, lack of meaningful participation, and inadequate implementation persist. This section shall explore both the successes and the ongoing challenges in World Bank projects concerning indigenous peoples.

Ineffective Consultations

In late 1998, the World Bank conducted consultations with organizations representing indigenous peoples in several countries to assess the impact of its policies on these communities (Griffiths & Colchester, 2000). These consultations aimed to gather feedback and refine the Bank's approach toward indigenous issues. In some cases, these policies contributed to positive development outcomes by mitigating the negative effects of World Bank-funded projects (Fund, 2000). For instance, there were reports of successful poverty reduction and natural resource management programs targeting indigenous peoples, such as land titling projects in Colombia. Antagonistically, despite existence of World Bank policies like Operational Directive 4.20 (OD 4.20), which aim to protect indigenous rights and dignity, compliance and execution often fall short in such projects. Independent case studies conducted by indigenous groups in Latin America, Africa, and Asia have highlighted several instances where interactions between World Bank personnel and indigenous communities were delayed, superficial, or culturally inappropriate (Griffiths, 2005). This inadequate engagement has undermined the effectiveness of World Bank projects, as indigenous peoples remain marginalized in the development process.

Challenges in Indigenous Participation and Governance

A persistent issue raised by indigenous representatives is the lack of effective participation in the governance of World Bank projects. Many indigenous leaders, particularly those involved in executive bodies overseeing Bank loans, have expressed frustration over their limited influence in project governance. The Indigenous Management of Protected Areas in the Amazon (PIMA) project in Peru is an example of this. In this case, indigenous representatives on the governance body found themselves marginalized in decision-making due to majority voting system dominated by government and NGOs (Griffiths, 2005). Rather than empowering indigenous communities, the PIMA project inadvertently disempowered them, limiting their ability to affect key decisions. Despite these setbacks, some progress has been reported, particularly in Latin America, where the number of indigenous participants in World Bank programs has increased in recent years (Head, 2006). The Bank has also initiated several 'do good' projects targeting indigenous peoples, such as poverty reduction, ethno-development, and natural resource management (Uquillas & Van Nieuwkoop, 2003). These programs demonstrate the Bank's evolving commitment to indigenous issues, but they still face significant challenges in achieving effective participation. For instance, while the Natural Resource Management Project in Colombia was hailed for its successful land titling efforts, other initiatives, such as those for decentralization in Cambodia, have excluded indigenous communities and weakened their institutions and culture (Ehrentraut, 2011).

Criticism of Consultation Processes and Exclusion

One of the most persistent criticisms of the World Bank's engagement with indigenous peoples is the superficial nature of its consultation processes. Indigenous communities often

express frustration that they are ‘consulted’ or asked to ‘participate’ in projects they do not control or approve beforehand (Gray, 1997). In many instances, consultation sessions have been conducted without adequate consideration of indigenous peoples’ concerns or cultural contexts. For example, Adivasi (indigenous) leaders in India, who expressed disapproval during World Bank consultation sessions in Jharkhand in 2003 and 2004, found their remarks largely disregarded (Griffiths & Bosu Mullick, 2004). Despite consistent opposition from indigenous organizations to the state’s 2001 Joint Forest Management (JFM) policy, the World Bank and the Indian government moved forward with pilot funding for a forestry project that indigenous groups found contentious (Griffiths & Bosu Mullick, 2004).

These contentions are not just unique to India. Throughout globe, several World Bank projects have been reportedly criticized for lack of transparency and meaningful participation. Significant interventions in sectors such as energy, water, mining, governance, and land administration often proceed with minimal input from indigenous communities. In many cases, these projects have been implemented behind closed doors, with limited information disclosure to the public or the affected indigenous populations (Griffiths, 2000). Additionally, in countries where freedom of expression is restricted, indigenous peoples’ ability to voice opposition to development projects is severely limited. For example, in 2005, the World Bank lent money to the controversial Nam Theun II dam project in Laos, which displaced 6,200 indigenous people from 17 villages of the Nakai plateau (Griffiths, 2000). In such cases, indigenous peoples are often left without the opportunity to meaningfully participate in decisions that drastically affect their livelihoods, culture, and environment.

Ongoing Struggle for Effective Participation

While the World Bank has taken steps to improve its engagement with indigenous peoples, the institution continues to face criticism for its failure to foster genuine and effective participation. A recurring concern is the tension between the Bank’s intent to involve indigenous communities and the reality of how these interactions play out on the ground. Many indigenous representatives feel that their voices are marginalized, especially in projects governed by non-indigenous actors or bureaucracies dominated by government and NGO representatives. For example, in provinces of Chhattisgarh, Odisha and Jharkhand in India, the opposition of forest management policies by indigenous communities and leaders was largely ignored. These instances underscore a broader issue wherein consultation and participation often remain perfunctory, rather than substantive engagements. Furthermore, in countries where indigenous groups lack the freedom to organize or express their concerns openly, these communities are even more vulnerable to exclusion from the development process.

In short, the World Bank’s engagement with indigenous peoples, while evolving, remains fraught with challenges. Case studies from around the world reveal that, despite improvements in some areas, indigenous communities often struggle to have meaningful say in development projects that

directly impact them. Issues such as delayed and culturally inappropriate consultations, marginalization in project governance, and exclusion from key decisions continue to undermine the Bank’s efforts to promote inclusive development. While the World Bank has launched several initiatives aimed at benefiting indigenous communities, much work remains to be done to ensure that these projects truly empower indigenous peoples and respect their rights, culture, and autonomy. The path toward achieving genuine participation and equitable outcomes for indigenous communities in World Bank projects is still a work in progress, requiring greater commitment to transparency, inclusion, and respect for indigenous voices.

9. The Way Forward

The relationship between World Bank and indigenous peoples has been marked by numerous challenges, particularly in regions where large-scale development projects intersect with indigenous lands and resources. Despite the Bank’s role in shaping global development policies, indigenous communities have frequently been marginalized in these processes, often suffering adverse impacts from development initiatives. In light of this, a few critical recommendations have been enumerated hereunder:

- a) *Protect Indigenous Lands and Resources:* It is essential to prioritize the legal recognition, demarcation, and protection of indigenous lands to safeguard them from threats posed by World Bank-funded development projects. Accurate identification and legal mapping of indigenous territories are crucial to prevent land grabs, forced displacement, and exploitation of their resources. The World Bank should work with local governments to ensure that indigenous land rights are upheld, protecting both the physical and cultural survival of these communities.
- b) *Preserve Indigenous Cultural Integrity:* Development projects must be designed to respect and preserve the cultural integrity of indigenous communities. This includes honouring their traditions, languages, social structures, governance systems, and spiritual connections to their resources. Meaningful consultation with indigenous communities is critical, allowing them to decide how they wish to engage and participate in the development process. By fostering a development process that values and promotes cultural diversity, the World Bank can ensure the long-term well-being of indigenous communities while also contributing to sustainable development.
- c) *Ensure Effective Participation in Decision-Making:* Indigenous peoples should have the right to actively participate in all stages of decision-making processes related to development projects that affect their resources and livelihood. Historically, their exclusion from these processes has led to adverse outcomes. The Bank must ensure the principle of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) is rigorously applied, meaning that indigenous peoples are fully informed, consulted, and

have the power to give or withhold consent before any project proceeds. Additionally, clear accountability mechanisms should be put in place to safeguard indigenous rights and ensure their perspectives are considered at every step.

d) *Improve Consultation Processes:* The Bank should ensure that consultations with indigenous communities are culturally relevant, inclusive, and meaningful. Often, indigenous voices are excluded or ignored in development planning. To alleviate this, the Bank should create transparent processes where detailed project plans, including budgets, timelines, and consultation outcomes, are made publicly accessible to indigenous communities. This transparency fosters trust, allowing indigenous peoples to fully understand and engage with projects impacting their lands and resources, ensuring their voices are heard and valued in the decision-making process.

e) *Creating Awareness and Strengthening Institutional Capacity:* To improve the effectiveness of engagement with indigenous communities, the World Bank should prioritize strengthening the institutional capacity of government agencies responsible for indigenous affairs. Many of these agencies lack the resources and expertise necessary to fully protect indigenous rights. By investing in awareness creation and capacity-building programs, such as providing training for government officials in areas like anthropology, customary laws, indigenous rights, and land demarcation, the Bank can improve the protection of indigenous resources, health, and well-being.

f) *Establish Independent Oversight and Accountability:* To ensure World Bank policies aimed at protecting indigenous peoples are properly implemented, independent oversight mechanisms should be established. These would involve third-party reviews of development projects to ensure compliance with safeguard policies, such as Operational Policy 4.10, which is specifically designed to protect indigenous peoples. Third-party oversight would help identify any violations of indigenous rights during project lifecycles. Furthermore, accessible grievance redress mechanisms should be available to indigenous communities, enabling them to challenge detrimental decisions, seek compensation for damages, or demand the cessation of projects that negatively affect their lands, resources, or livelihood. This would ensure accountability and provide a means for indigenous peoples to safeguard their rights.

To conclude, it can be argued that while the World Bank has made decent progress in recognizing and addressing the needs of indigenous peoples, considerable challenges persist in closing the gap between policy and practice. The disconnect between intentions and actual outcomes often leads to adverse effects on indigenous communities. By adopting and implementing these recommendations, the World Bank can move closer to aligning its development projects with the rights, needs, and aspirations of indigenous peoples. This alignment will not only protect their cultural and environmental integrity but also contribute to more sustainable, equitable, and inclusive development outcomes globally.

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