HOW TO COMPLAIN ABOUT A PROJECT FUNDED BY THE WORLD BANK GROUP?

A Guide to the World Bank Accountability Mechanism (Inspection Panel and Dispute Resolution Service)

If the World Bank has funded or supported the project that is causing you harm, you may be able to file a complaint with the World Bank Accountability Mechanism, which is made up of two offices: the Inspection Panel (the Panel) and Dispute Resolution Service (the DRS).

Understanding the World Bank, and the Panel and DRS

WHAT IS THE WORLD BANK?

The World Bank Group is a multilateral development bank headquartered in Washington, D.C., that provides financing to both the public and private sector. It is made up of 189 member countries and consists of five different institutions, including the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (**IBRD**) and International Development Association (**IDA**) (together, the **World Bank**).

If the project causing you harm relates to a World Bank Group **private sector investment** (i.e. where the World Bank is providing funds to a private company, rather than a Government department or agency), you can find information about how to file a complaint on the IFC/MIGA's Compliance Advisor Ombudsman page.

IBRD

> The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) is the world's largest development bank, and the largest institution within the World Bank Group. The IBRD was established in 1944, and provides loans and credits to middle-income and creditworthy low-income countries. Its largest shareholder is the United States, and its stated mission is to reduce poverty and promote sustainable development around the world.

IDA

> The International Development Association (IDA) is the concessional arm of the World Bank Group. It provides grants and low-interest loans to the poorest countries. The IDA supports projects that prioritize poverty reduction, social development, and building resilience in fragile states.

WHAT IS THE WB ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISM?

The IBRD and IDA have an independent accountability mechanism: the World Bank Accountability Mechanism (**World Bank AM**). The World Bank AM is made up of two components: the Inspection Panel (the **Panel**) and the Dispute Resolution Service (**DRS**). The Panel and the DRS each independently report to the World Bank's Board of Executive Directors.

The Inspection Panel was the first accountability mechanism at the World Bank and continues to be the office to which complaints are filed. The Panel receives complaints related to the environmental and social impacts of projects financed by the public sector branches of the World Bank. If you are affected by a World Bank-financed project, you can file a complaint with the Panel.

To file a complaint, you need to provide specific information about the issue you are experiencing, as outlined in the “How to file a complaint” section.

If your complaint is found to be eligible, you have the option of two functions to try to resolve your complaint: **dispute resolution** or **compliance review**. The **DRS** facilitates dispute resolution; and the **Panel** conducts compliance reviews. You can decide which process you would like your complaint to enter if found eligible. If you want to try both dispute resolution and compliance review, you are required to try dispute resolution first. You can learn more about the difference between dispute resolution and compliance review, and which option is better for your complaint, on the homepage of this guide.

DISPUTE RESOLUTION

At the DRS, the voluntary dispute resolution process is called “**dispute resolution**”. During a dispute resolution, the DRS team will facilitate dialogue and negotiations between the affected communities and the World Bank’s client, with the goal of reaching a mutually agreeable solution. You can learn more about this phase below.

The DRS was established by the World Bank Board of Executive Directors in 2020 in order to provide a dispute resolution option for communities impacted by World Bank projects. Prior to 2020, no such option existed. You can learn more about this phase below.

COMPLIANCE REVIEW

At the Panel, the fact-finding investigation process is called an “ **investigation**”. During this phase, the Panel investigates whether the World Bank has complied with its environmental and social policies, and whether any non-compliance has caused harm to the community. The Panel then prepares an investigation report that includes its findings for the World Bank. You can learn more about this phase below.

The Panel began operations in 1994 and was the first independent accountability mechanism of its kind. You can learn more about its current procedures below.

How to file a complaint

CAN YOU COMPLAIN TO INSPECTION PANEL AND DRS?

Before filing a complaint, ask yourself the following questions. If your answer is **yes** to all of the questions, then you can complain to the Panel.

Funding: Is the project funded, or is under consideration for funding, by the World Bank (IBRD or IDA)?

> The Panel can only look at complaints about projects that are financed (or being considered for financing) by the IBRD or the IDA.
>
> You should be able to find this information on the relevant project page on the World Bank website. If not, you may file an Access to Information request or reach out to the Panel directly to ask for help.

Harm to community: Are two or more people in your community harmed by the project?

> The complaint must come from at least two or more people living in the country where the project is happening.
>
> The harm can be ongoing or anticipated.
>
> **Important:** Your complaint cannot be anonymous, but you can ask the Panel to keep your identity confidential. If you are afraid of retaliation, let the Panel know so they can help you safely move forward.

Harm linked to Bank violations: Is the harm caused by the World Bank breaking its own environmental and social rules?

> You must believe that the harm is caused by the World Bank not following its own environmental or social policies or procedures. These are the rules the Bank is supposed to follow when planning and overseeing projects.

Prior communication: Have the concerns been raised with the World Bank already?

> Before filing, the issue must have been brought to the attention of the World Bank's management - for example, through meetings, emails or letters. Describe what steps were taken, and what the Bank's response was (e.g. if management did not respond adequately or at all, or it did not fix the problem).

Procurement: Is the complaint about something other than procurement?

> If your complaint is only about procurement - for example, about how goods or services were bought - then the Panel cannot look into it.

Timing: Is the project still ongoing?

> There are rules about timing, depending on when the project was approved.
>
> If the project was approved before September 8, 2020, you can only file if the loan has not been closed or less than 95% of the money has been disbursed.

> If the project is approved on or after September 8, 2020, you must file within 15 months after the loan has been closed.
>
> You should be able to find this information on the relevant project page on the World Bank website. If not, you may file an Access to Information request or reach out to the Panel directly to ask for help.

New evidence: Is there new evidence or circumstances, if the Panel has already looked into this issue before?

> If someone has already filed a complaint about the same project and the same issue, and the Panel has made a decision, you'll need to show that there is new evidence or circumstances that weren't known at the time.

MODEL COMPLAINT LETTER

We have developed a model complaint letter tailored for the World Bank AM. This template provides a practical starting point for your complaint, designed to help you effectively convey your concerns. Once submitted, the Panel will acknowledge receipt of your complaint.
Download complaint letter

COMPLAINT FILING CHECKLIST

Download checklist

- [ ] **Format:** Submit your complaint in writing. There is no specific format required.
- [ ] **Complainant details:** Include the names of two or more affected people or their representatives, and contact details for complainants or key representatives. If you have a representative, include signed written authorization giving them authority to represent you. Note: complainants are entitled to have local representatives (with authorization in writing), but the Panel will only allow "foreign" representatives if "appropriate representation is not locally available and the Board so agrees at the time it considers the Request". If you wish to have an international/foreign civil society organization supporting your complaint, it may be easier to style them as an "advisor" rather than a formal representative. Advisors can support you but cannot make decisions on your behalf.
- [ ] **Confidentiality:** If you need confidentiality due to fear of reprisals or for other reasons, explain why.
- [ ] **Project details:** Provide the description and location of the World Bank-supported project. Include any other details you know (e.g. sector, company name, or project number). You can find information about projects on the World Bank's website, via an Access to Information request, or through the DeBIT tool or Early Warning System (databases you can search).
- [ ] **Description of harm:** Describe the harm you are experiencing or believe you may suffer in the future because of the project. Explain the seriousness of the harm.
- [ ] **World Bank's role:** Explain why you think the World Bank is responsible for the harm. Describe any actions or failures to act by the Bank (such as in project design, planning, or implementation) that contributed to the harm.

- ☐ **Evidence of attempted resolution:** Describe any steps you have taken to contact World Bank staff or management to resolve the problem. Include the Bank's response (if any), and explain why the response did not resolve the issue. If you can, include any evidence or copies of your communications with the World Bank. If you are not able to meet this requirement due to a fear for your safety, please explain that in your complaint and reach out to the Panel to discuss potential safety measures.
- ☐ **Optional:**
  Including the following can strengthen your complaint:
  - Specify which World Bank policies, guidelines, or procedures you believe were not followed (if known).
  - If Bank Management has said that they are already taking action to resolve the issues, explain why those actions are not adequate to address the concerns in the complaint.
  - Provide any other relevant information, documents, or materials.

STRENGTHEN YOUR COMPLAINT BY REFERENCING WORLD BANK POLICIES

When filing your complaint to the Panel, you may want to reference bank policies that were violated. Environmental and social safeguard policies play an important role in your complaint. These safeguards are rules and policies designed to identify and mitigate risks associated with bank activities, with an overarching goal of preventing environmental and social harms. Understanding these safeguards is essential for anyone seeking to hold banks accountable for harms associated with their investments.

The Panel receives complaints related to all relevant operational policies and bank procedures, including environmental and social safeguards and information disclosure policies.

Including this information is **optional** but can strengthen your complaint by identifying clear grounds for the WB's accountability.

WORLD BANK POLICIES

The World Bank Environmental and Social Framework
Effective October 1, 2018

The IBRD & IDA require its clients to comply with the following performance standards:

Standard 1: Assessment and Management of Environmental and Social Risks and Impacts

This standard requires the World Bank's client to assess and manage environmental and social risks of projects and performance throughout the project by conducting environmental and social assessments, avoiding, reducing and compensating for negative impacts, encouraging better environmental and social practices, and involving and informing people affected by the projects.

Standard 2: Labor and Working Conditions

This standard protects workers rights, promotes fair treatment, non-discrimination, compliance with laws and safe working conditions. It prohibits child labor and forced labor, promotes freedom of association and provides accessible channels to address workplace concerns.

Standard 3: Resource Efficiency and Pollution Prevention and Management

This standard safeguards human health and the environment by promoting sustainable use of resources, reducing pollution from project activities, minimizing project-related emissions and waste generation, and managing pesticide risks.

Standard 4: Community Health and Safety

This standard aims to avoid and minimize adverse impacts on the health and safety of project-affected people and the project itself, including from natural hazards and climate change.

Standard 5: Land Acquisition, Restrictions on Land Use and Involuntary Resettlement

This standard aims to avoid or minimize involuntary resettlement, forced eviction and adverse social and economic impacts from land acquisition or use restrictions by compensating for lost assets and improving livelihoods and living standards for displaced people. It also aims to ensure transparency, consultation and participation of those affected by resettlement activities, and emphasizes sustainable development.

Standard 6: Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Management of Living Natural Resources

This standard aims to avoid negative impacts on biodiversity and habitats, and where unavoidable, implement measures to minimize impacts and restore biodiversity, promote sustainable management of natural resources, and support livelihoods of local communities including Indigenous Peoples.

Standard 7: Indigenous Peoples/ Sub-Saharan African Historically Underserved Traditional Local Communities

This standard safeguards the rights, dignity, culture and natural resources of indigenous peoples and historically underserved traditional local communities in Sub-Saharan Africa, in the development process. This is done by avoiding or minimizing adverse impacts, promoting sustainable development, improving project design through meaningful consultation with indigenous peoples, obtaining Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) from affected communities, and preserving indigenous peoples’ culture, knowledge and practices.

Standard 8: Cultural Heritage

This standard safeguards cultural heritage from adverse impacts of project activities and promotes fair sharing of benefits derived from its use.

Standard 9: Financial Intermediaries

This standard sets out how financial intermediaries will assess and manage environmental and social risks and impacts with the subprojects it finances. It promotes good environmental and social management practices in the subprojects financed by financial intermediaries as well as within the financial intermediary itself.

Standard 10: Stakeholder Engagement and Information Disclosure

> This standard aims to establish a systematic approach to stakeholder engagement through identifying stakeholders, assessing their support, incorporating their views in project design, and promoting effective and inclusive engagement with them throughout the project's life cycle. This standard also emphasizes the timely and transparent disclosure of project information, and highlights the need for accessible and inclusive complaint mechanisms for project-affected communities to raise issues, with borrowers being responsible for responding to and managing complaints.

The World Bank Safeguard Policies
Applies to projects approved before 1 October 2018

> For projects approved before 1 October 2018, the World Bank's old "Safeguard Policies" still apply. These include:
>
> - Environmental Assessment (OP 4.01 and BP 4.01)
> - Natural Habitats (OP 4.04 and BP 4.04)
> - Indigenous Peoples (OP 4.10 and BP 4.10)
> - Physical Cultural Resources (OP 4.11 and BP 4.11)
> - Involuntary Resettlement (OP 4.12 and BP 4.12)
> - Gender and development (OP 4.20 and BP 4.20)
> - Forests (OP 4.36 and BP 4.36)
> - Safety of Dams (OP 4.37 and BP 4.37)

World Bank Group's Environmental, Health, and Safety Guidelines (EHSG)
April 30, 2007

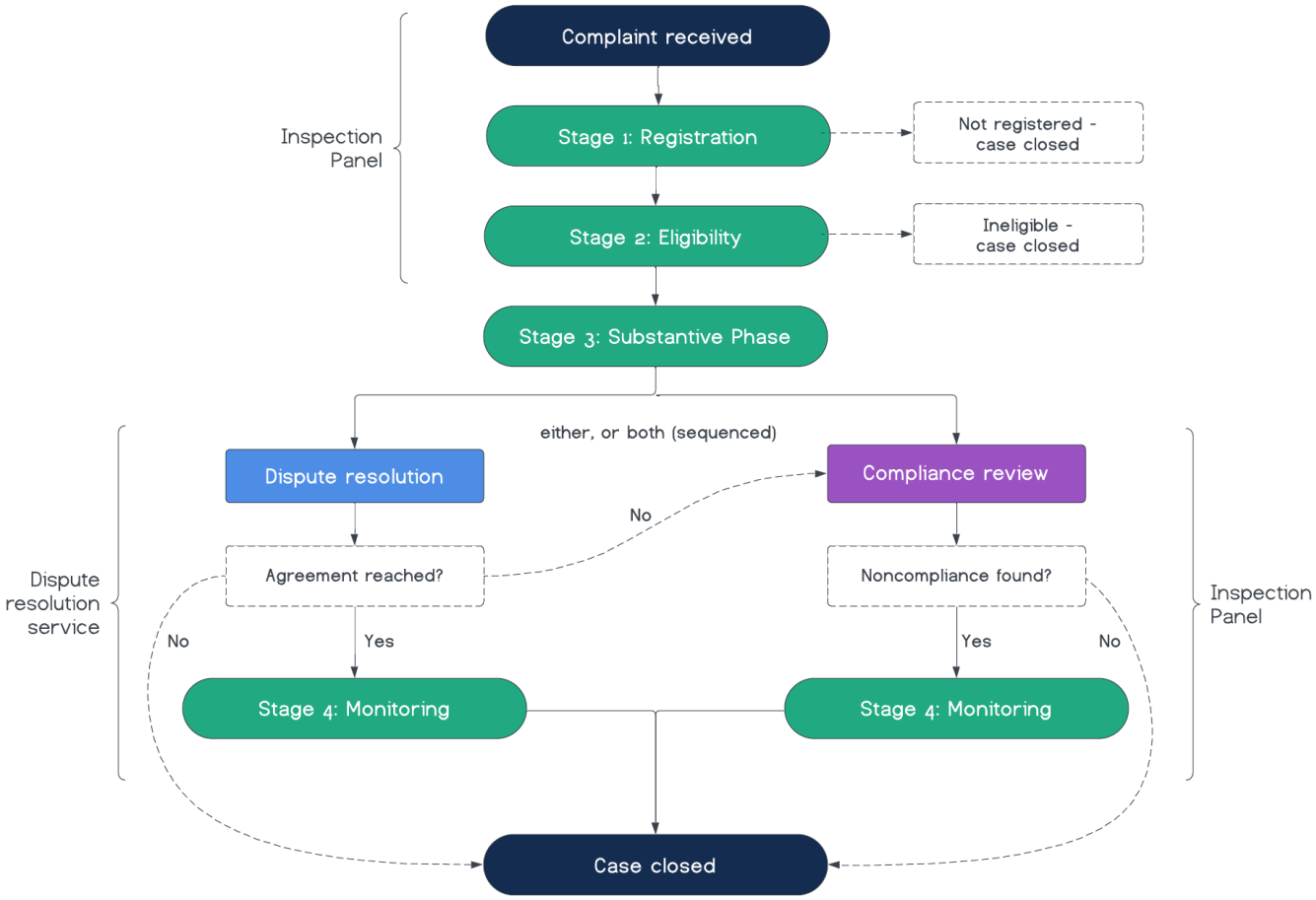
> The EHSG set out additional obligations for projects to minimize risks to people and the environment, including:
>
> - General Approach
> - Projects must apply the "pollution prevention and control hierarchy": avoid, minimize, reduce, and, where necessary, compensate/offset adverse impacts.
> - Follow internationally recognized Good International Industry Practice if local laws are weaker.
> - Environmental Obligations
> - Air emissions: Limit pollutants and greenhouse gases using cleaner technologies and fuels.
> - Wastewater: Treat wastewater before discharge; avoid contaminating water bodies.
> - Waste management: Reduce waste generation, ensure safe handling, storage, transport, and disposal.
> - Hazardous materials: Safely manage chemicals, fuels, and other dangerous substances to prevent spills and accidents.
> - Noise and vibration: Monitor and minimize impacts on workers and communities.
> - Soil and groundwater protection: Prevent contamination through proper design and operations.
> - Occupational Health and Safety
> - Identify workplace hazards and protect workers through safety systems, equipment, training, and monitoring.

  - Provide safe working conditions, emergency preparedness, and health protections (e.g., against noise, dust, chemicals).
  - Prohibit child and forced labor.
- Community Health and Safety
  - Manage risks to nearby communities, including traffic safety, hazardous materials transport, and exposure to pollution.
  - Design infrastructure (e.g., dams, energy systems) to minimize accident risks.
  - Prepare and disclose emergency response plans.
- Construction and Decommissioning
  - Control impacts during building and dismantling phases: dust, noise, traffic, waste, and worker safety.
  - Restore sites to safe and environmentally sound conditions after closure.
- Monitoring and Reporting
  - Regularly monitor environmental and social performance.
  - Engage stakeholders and disclose relevant information transparently.

Access to Information Policy
Effective July 1, 2015

The World Bank has implemented a policy to provide access to information regarding its operations (with exceptions), and procedures for processing requests and reviewing decisions.

What happens after you file a complaint?



Stage 1: Registration

After filing your complaint (known as a **Request for Inspection**), the Panel will decide whether to register your complaint or not. Your complaint will be registered if:

- **It is linked to a World Bank project or program**: The complaint is about a project or program that appears to be supported, or is being considered for support, at least in part, by the World Bank; and that project or program is linked to the harm that you are experiencing or fear.
- **Disbursement / timing:** There are rules about when you can file. If the project was approved before September 8, 2020, you can file only if the loan has not been closed or less than 95% of the funds have been disbursed. If the project was approved on or after September 8, 2020, you must file within 15 months after the loan has been closed. You should be able to find this information on the relevant project page on the World Bank website. If not, you may file an Access to Information request or reach out to the Panel directly to ask for help.
- **Excluded complaints:** The complaint cannot be only about procurement issues - like how goods or services were purchased for the project. The Panel does not handle procurement-only complaints.
- **New evidence (if applicable):** If a previous complaint was already filed about the same issue and project, you must show that new evidence or circumstances have come to light since the last review.

Stage 2: Eligibility

If your complaint is registered, the Panel will review it to determine whether it meets their technical eligibility criteria:

1. **Community:** The complaint must be made by two or more people who live in the country where the World Bank public sector project is taking place, and who are affected by the World Bank project.
2. **Harm:** You must believe that the harm your community is facing (or could face in the future) is due to the World Bank's failure to follow its own environmental or social policies. The harm can be ongoing or anticipated.
3. **Attempted resolution:** If you do not fear reprisals, you must show that you have attempted to raise your concerns with World Bank staff before submitting a complaint. This can include emails, letters, or meeting notes. If you received a response, but it was unsatisfactory, be sure to describe that as well. Keep copies of all communications (even if they are unanswered), and notes from all meetings with management.
4. **Funding:** The project must be funded or under consideration for funding by the World Bank (IBRD or IDA) and meet any disbursement/timing requirements already mentioned in the registration section above.

In addition to these technical criteria, the Panel will also make a recommendation to the Board of Executive Directors (the **Board**) on whether an investigation is warranted. In making this recommendation, the Panel considers:

- Whether there is a plausible connection between the harm described in the complaint and the project;
- Whether the harm and potential non-compliance by the World Bank may be serious;
- Whether Bank management has appropriately addressed the issues raised, including whether they are following - or taking steps to follow - the Bank's policies and procedures;
- Whether management has proposed specific remedial actions, and whether those actions may reasonably address the concerns, taking into account the views of the complainants.

The Panel may visit the project area during this stage. If the Panel finds that the concerns are already being addressed, it may recommend not to investigate. If the Panel finds that an investigation is warranted, and the Board agrees, the complaint will move to the substantive stage. If not, the case is closed.

Stage 3: Substantive Phase

All eligible complaints will then enter the substantive phase. In this stage, your complaint is transferred to the Dispute Resolution Service (the **DRS**), where the Head of the DRS will offer the parties the option of dispute resolution, which would be facilitated by the DRS.

If the parties agree to dispute resolution, the complaint will enter that stage next and the Panel investigation will pause until the dispute resolution process concludes. If the parties do **not** agree to a dispute resolution process, the complaint will enter a Panel investigation.

DISPUTE RESOLUTION

As mentioned above, dispute resolution is a voluntary process where the DRS acts as the facilitator between the community and the World Bank's client. This process can involve dialogue, joint fact-finding, mediation, negotiation, and facilitation, and this process can and should be designed and implemented together. The aim of a dispute resolution is to reach an agreement between all the parties, and find a mutually agreeable solution to your concerns.

Since dispute resolution is voluntary, any party can choose not to participate. If at any stage of this process a party no longer wants to continue with dispute resolution, the case is transferred to investigation.

If parties agree to participate, communities can share their concerns about the project directly with the World Bank's client, and advocate for specific solutions to their concerns. If the parties agree on solutions, the DRS will help them to formalize those solutions in a signed agreement. If no agreement is reached, the case will be transferred to a Panel investigation. Issues for which an agreement cannot be reached will also transfer to the Panel.

The maximum length of the dispute resolution process is one year, extendable for up to six months.

Upon completion of this phase, the DRS will prepare a report on the results of the dispute resolution for the Board.

If you would like to know more about what a dispute resolution process involves, see the Accountability Mechanism Dispute Resolution Service Operating Procedures.

COMPLIANCE REVIEW

If an investigation is authorized, the Panel conducts this investigation. As mentioned above, this is the compliance review phase, which is a fact-finding process where the Panel acts as the investigator to investigate whether the World Bank has complied with its environmental and social policies, and whether such non-compliance has caused harm to the community.

After investigating, the Panel prepares an investigation report with its findings. The Panel then submits its investigation report to the Board. The World Bank management then has a specified period to respond to the report and indicate the actions it will take to address the concerns raised.

If you would like to know more about what an investigation process involves, see the World Bank Inspection Panel Operating Procedures.

Stage 4: Monitoring

If your complaint goes through a dispute resolution process and results in an agreement then the complaint will enter a monitoring phase. If your complaint goes through an investigation and results in a Management Action Plan, the Panel may undertake a limited monitoring process called verification.

DISPUTE RESOLUTION

If an agreement is reached, the DRS may help the parties by monitoring the implementation of the agreement if the parties have agreed to that. Monitoring can be achieved by setting a program, timelines and outcome indicators within the agreement.

When a complaint is closed, the DRS will release a conclusion report.

COMPLIANCE REVIEW

If the World Bank is found to be in compliance, the Panel will close the investigation.

If the World Bank is found to be non-compliant, management will monitor the situation until it believes the World Bank has addressed the non-compliance. This is called verification at the Panel. The Panel may, in some cases, verify the implementation of the management action plans, subject to Board approval.

Management follow up and Panel verification reports will be made publicly available on the Inspection Panel website.

The Panel will then close the investigation.

Real stories from communities who have filed complaints



Transport Sector Development Project, Uganda

COMPLIANCE REVIEW

Assessing the Panel and DRS's performance

COMPARISON TO BEST PRACTICE

✓

Independence: The reporting lines of the Panel and the DRS are independent from bank management; they both report to the Board of Directors.

✓

Transparency: The Panel makes complaints, compliance eligibility reports, dispute resolution eligibility reports, and final compliance reports public. The DRS makes final dispute resolution reports public.

✗

Transparency: The Panel makes monitoring reports public, but these are prepared by management and are not independently verified. It is unclear if the DRS makes monitoring reports public.

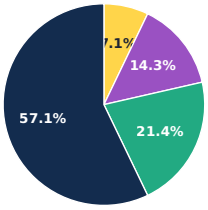
✗

Remedy: The Panel cannot make recommendations for corrective measures to address areas of non-compliance, and does not explicitly have a mandate to recommend remedy for communities.

A LOOK AT THE DATA

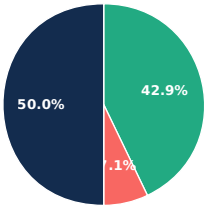
We have brought together some charts, based on the latest data available in the Complaint Dashboard, to offer a deep dive into the Panel and DRS's performance.

Complaint Outcomes



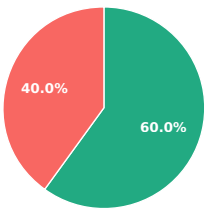
Active	1	7.1%
Monitoring	2	14.3%
Closed With Outputs	3	21.4%
Closed Without Outputs	8	57.1%

Eligibility



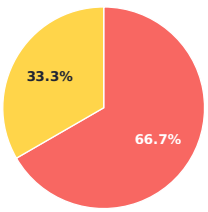
Eligible	6	42.9%
Ineligible	1	7.1%
In Progress	0	0.0%
Not Undertaken	7	50.0%

Dispute Resolution Outcomes (when undertaken)



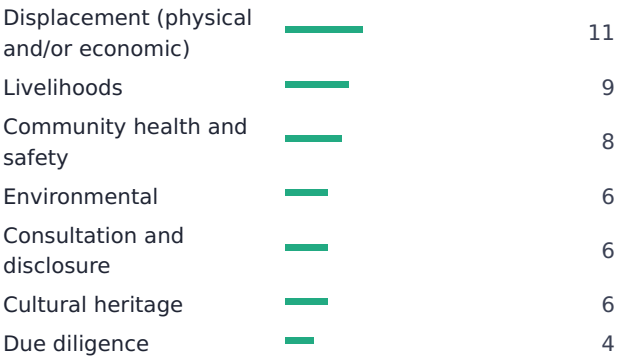
Successful	3	60.0%
Unsuccessful	2	40.0%
In Progress	0	0.0%

Compliance Review Findings (when undertaken)



Compliant	0	0.0%
Non-Compliant	2	66.7%
In Progress	1	33.3%
No Output	0	0.0%

Complaint issues



Complaint sectors



Figures are numbers of complaints recorded in the Accountability Console for this mechanism, as of the download date.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE WORLD BANK AM

The Inspection Panel should have the ability to self-initiate compliance reviews without having to receive a complaint. This would increase the Panel's effectiveness in contexts where reprisals and restrictions on civic space make it too dangerous for project-affected communities to file complaints. (GPP 47)

The Inspection Panel should have the mandate to monitor all cases until all instances of non-compliance have been remedied. (GPP 57)

The Dispute Resolution Service should publish more information about dispute resolution agreements and the implementation of agreed remedial actions. (GPP 67)

Contact Inspection Panel and DRS

World Bank Accountability Mechanism (World Bank AM): https://accountability.worldbank.org/en/home

Inspection Panel (the Panel): https://www.inspectionpanel.org/

Dispute Resolution Service (DRS): https://accountability.worldbank.org/en/dispute-resolution

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