

## **Indigenous People Want Power to Veto World Bank Plans**

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UNITED NATIONS, May (IPS) - Indigenous groups are demanding that the World Bank seek their consent - not just consult them - before carrying out development programmes on their ancestral lands.

Representatives of native communities came away from U.N.-sponsored talks criticising the global lender for, in their view, making cosmetic changes in its development policies, which they said continue to undermine native interests.

Canadian aboriginal activist Arthur Manuel summarised the concern bluntly. "Consultation sounds good, but does nothing," he said. "It's a mechanism to allow for the ultimate theft of our indigenous propriety interests free of charge. Prior informed consent is recognition of our land, culture, and way of life."

By seeking to negotiate with groups within a given indigenous community under the rubric of consultation, rather than simply submitting plans for each community to discuss and decide upon internally, the bank would be "dividing our communities," added Nilo Cayuqueo of Abya Yala Nexus, an indigenous group based in California.

They referred to the bank's new policy on indigenous peoples' development introduced earlier this month.

The bank capped seven years of consultations with indigenous communities, experts, and government officials when it unveiled its new policy, which it said calls for "free, prior, and informed consultations" with communities.

But indigenous leaders, in comments at the conference's end and in interviews with IPS on Tuesday, said they were demanding that the bank recognise their communities' rights to their ancestral territories and natural resources.

"The correct terminology for us is free, prior, and informed consent," said Michael Dodson, an aboriginal activist from Australia. To him and other activists, "consent" has entirely different meanings than "consultations."

"Of course, implicit in the term is the right to say no to development or to projects," he added.

The bank said the revised policy was aimed at preventing community dissatisfaction with development efforts in the first place.

"We moved toward a pro-active approach and a strategic shift," a bank spokesman told IPS on condition he not be named. "According to this revised policy, the bank will provide development financing only when a process of free, prior, and informed consultation results in broad community support."

For activists, however, the new policy remains too vague.

"The only safeguard in the bank's approach is the need, they say, for broad community support," said Dodson. "But what broad community support means is not defined in the policy. Does that mean 51 percent? Is that broad community support? Or is it 70 percent? It's because of this sort of uncertainty that we want the bank to abandon this policy of consultation."

The new bank policy is set to take effect in July. The agency finances more than 230 projects involving indigenous peoples, and it expects to finance nearly 100 more by fiscal year 2008.

Most of the world's 370 million indigenous people, both in rich and poor countries, live in abject poverty, according to the United Nations.

The bank's new policy is "in alignment with the decisions taken at the U.N. Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues," according to the bank spokesman.

The permanent forum is a body of 16 representatives, half of them nominated by indigenous organisations and half by U.N. member states. It meets annually to examine indigenous issues and report its recommendations to the U.N. Economic and Social Council.

At the end of its three-week meeting, the Forum adopted a set of recommendations stressing the need to develop "awareness and sensitivity on all indigenous issues and concerns and to empower communities."

In addition to the World Bank's role, activists also voiced their concern over how governments would interpret the concept of "consultations" with the indigenous communities.

"The governments are not talking about it," said Nina Pacari, an indigenous activist from the Andean region. "They are not talking about how the process of consultations are going to directly and seriously affect the people."

Citing the example of Plan Colombia, the militarised programme to eradicate narcotic crops in the Latin American country, she said the government had taken steps to deal with what it called "illicit crops" but by so doing it failed to take into account the needs of indigenous people.

"In most cases, they have been forced to leave their territories," said Pacari.