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UN official: World Bank a 'human-rights-free zone'

Scathing report condemns the World Bank's record on human rights, ending poverty and environmental concerns

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by [Natasja Sheriff](#)

The World Bank has consistently refused to address issues of human rights, adopting instead an outdated and incoherent approach in order to avoid them, according to a damning report to be presented to the General Assembly on Friday by Philip Alston, the U.N. special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights.

"For most purposes, the World Bank is a human-rights-free zone," he says in his [report](#). "In its operational policies, in particular, it treats human rights more like an infectious disease than universal values and obligations."

The problem, says Alston, is the bank's anachronistic interpretation of its founding documents, which limits bank decisions to economic considerations and forbids bank interference in the political affairs of member states.

But those documents were written 70 years ago, says Alston, and notions about development have changed, noting that the bank used to have a similar aversion to dealing with corruption, which it now recognizes as relevant to its mission.

The World Bank was founded in 1944 to facilitate postwar reconstruction in the aftermath of World War II. Now the publicly funded bank is committed to ending extreme poverty and promoting shared prosperity, according to its [mission statement](#).

The World Bank has long faced criticism for its projects' impact on human rights. Since the 1950s, a series of [dam-building projects](#), for example, have displaced tens of thousands of people, destroyed livelihoods and caused economic degradation. The bank has introduced policies to safeguard people and the environment from the negative effects of its projects, but human rights advocates say the safeguards don't go far enough.

"The safeguards, which are now in the process of being reformed, have very, very weak human rights language in their vision statement," says Sarah Saadoun, a researcher at Human Rights Watch, "which basically suggests human rights are aspirational ... It never commits the bank to actually respect human rights."

In his report, Alston calls on the bank to at least acknowledge that human rights are central to its goals — essential if the bank is going to comply with its intention to do no harm — and to develop a blueprint for a new human rights policy.

"There are innumerable ways in which human rights violations have major economic impacts, and the poor are disproportionately affected," says Alston.

Asking the bank to respect human rights doesn't mean it should become involved in the politics of a country or become a human rights enforcer, says Saadoun. "And it's not saying that if any human rights would be violated, it should freeze its funding, but it has to address and mitigate those adverse human rights impacts."

"It's actually not asking the bank to do anything more than any business is expected to do," she says. "Under the U.N. guiding principles on business and human rights, businesses are expected to undertake due diligence, to address and mitigate any adverse human rights impacts."

The World Bank did not respond to a request for comment.

In September, World Bank spokesman David Theis told [Reuters](#) that Alston's report "fundamentally misrepresents the World Bank's position on human rights, and we are disappointed that Professor Alston is using his voluntary role as special rapporteur to present a distorted picture of our work."

"Human rights principles are essential for sustainable development and are consistently applied in our work to end poverty and boost shared prosperity. For decades, the World Bank has argued that human rights and development are mutually reinforcing," Theis said.

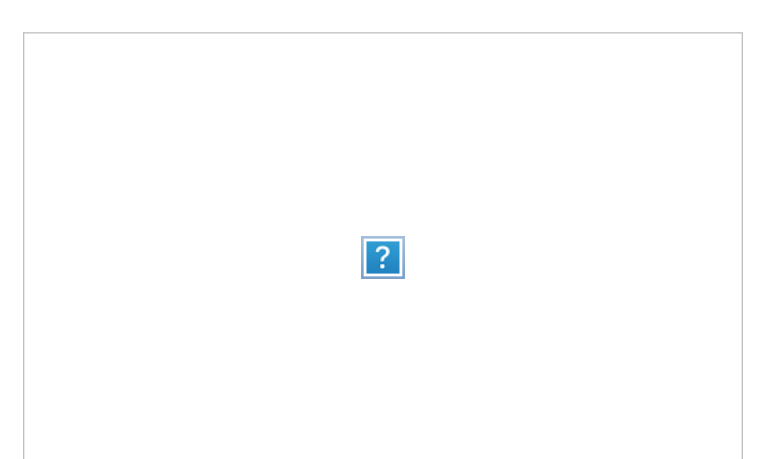
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