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## ACCESS TO INFORMATION AT THE WORLD BANK GROUP

### IN THIS SECTION

- Information is a right!
- Disclosure policies at the World Bank, IFC and MIGA
- Other strategies for obtaining information about World Bank Group operations in your country
- Find out more!
- Quick Reference: How You Can Get Information From the World Bank Group

Civil society has made significant advances in opening up the World Bank Group to greater public scrutiny over the past decade. Nevertheless, the public is still kept in the dark about many of the Bank's decisions and operations.

Access to information is the basic starting point for informed engagement, active resistance and proposals for viable alternatives to World Bank Group operations. Understanding what documents exist, what rights you have to access them, and how to obtain them are powerful tools to have under your activist belt.

### Information is a right!

Article 19 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights includes the right “to seek, receive and impart information and ideas.” This statement encompasses the right to access information held by public bodies, including international financial institutions such as the

World Bank Group. People have the right to know what is being planned for their communities in order to make informed decisions about development processes that affect their lives.

## Disclosure policies at the World Bank, IFC and MIGA

The World Bank, IFC and MIGA have recognized the right to information by establishing information disclosure policies, in the same way that countries have adopted Freedom of Information laws. The World Bank first adopted a disclosure policy in 1994, and has since reviewed and updated its policy at least twice: in 2002 and 2005. The IFC and MIGA followed the World Bank's lead and approved their first disclosure policies in 1994 and 2000, respectively. In 2006, the IFC approved a set of new, updated disclosure standards. Understanding these policies will help you demand access to Bank documents when you need them.

Information disclosure policies at the World Bank typically contain the following elements: principles of disclosure; exceptions to disclosure; routine disclosure; and request-driven disclosure.

**Principles of disclosure:** The fundamental principle of World Bank policies on access to information is “a presumption in favor of disclosure.” In theory, this “presumption” means that all information held at the institution can be requested and publicly released unless it is commercially sensitive or otherwise deemed confidential (on the basis of an exception to disclosure specified in the policy). In practice, however, the World Bank, IFC and MIGA release only a limited amount of information and over-apply their broad exceptions to disclosure.

**Exceptions to disclosure:** The World Bank, IFC and MIGA Disclosure Policies list several types of information that cannot be disclosed, including:

- Confidential business information
- Information related to internal and external negotiations
- Information generated by a third-party (such as a government or consultant)



### WHAT DISCLOSURE SHOULD LOOK LIKE

The Global Transparency Initiative's **Transparency Charter** provides standards upon which the access to information policies of international financial institutions should be based. The principles:

1. Right of Access
2. Automatic Disclosure
3. Access to Decision-Making
4. Right to Request Information
5. Limited Exceptions
6. Appeals
7. Whistleblower Protections
8. Promotion of Freedom of Information
9. Regular Review

Find out more at [www.ifitransparency.org](http://www.ifitransparency.org)



IFC's Disclosure Policy Advisor position was established in 2006 to help the public with information requests. Contact the Advisor if you are having problems getting information from the IFC:  
[www.ifc.org/ifcext/disclosure.nsf/Content/Disclosure\\_Advisor](http://www.ifc.org/ifcext/disclosure.nsf/Content/Disclosure_Advisor)

- Proceedings of the Board of Directors
- Personal information about employees

Most of these exceptions to disclosure are overly broad and could include almost all information held at the institution. In addition to being more narrowly drawn, disclosure exceptions should only protect information that would otherwise cause harm if disclosed.

**Routine disclosure:** The majority of information available from the WBG is automatically – or routinely – disclosed through its website and Public Information Centers (PICs). Typically, this information includes:

- Basic information about the structure of the institution
- Board of Executive Directors contact information, meeting calendar and meeting minutes (including a brief list of attendees, issues discussed and actions taken; not a record of proceedings)
- Operational policies and strategies
- Country analytical studies and programs
- Basic information about loans, investments, guarantees and grants – before and after approval
- Evaluations, including some reports produced by the Independent Evaluation Group (IEG)



### TRANSLATION FRAMEWORK

Approved in 2004, the World Bank's translation framework aims to increase the regular and timely translation of key documents, including strategies and project information. However, the framework hasn't been effectively implemented. Find out more:  
[www.worldbank.org/disclosure](http://www.worldbank.org/disclosure)

## WHAT'S STILL SECRET? PUSHING THE TRANSPARENCY FRONTIER AT THE WORLD BANK GROUP

Although far more information is available from the WBG today than it was years ago, many of the Bank Group's decisions and operations remain shrouded in secrecy. The following areas represent major gaps in the institution's transparency:

- **Draft information** about strategies, policies and projects under consideration is not routinely available to the public, depriving affected populations of the opportunity to influence decisions before they are taken.
- The **Board of Directors** meets behind closed doors and transcripts of discussions are not made public, preventing people from knowing how their governments are representing them and shielding the most important development decisions from public scrutiny.
- The WBG discloses virtually no information during the **implementation of projects and strategies**, hampering efforts to monitor the impacts of the institution's operations and to track the use of its funds while there is still time to correct problems.

**Request-driven disclosure:** All other information that is not posted on the World Bank, IFC or MIGA websites or disclosed at PICs should be available by request from the World Bank Group’s headquarters or country offices.

## Other strategies for obtaining information about World Bank Group operations in your country

Your **government** should be able to provide information on World Bank, IFC and MIGA projects in your country. As discussed in Section 2, the minister of finance or national equivalent is your country’s main liaison with the World Bank Group. Various ministries are involved in the implementation of Bank operations. Sometimes legislative committees are responsible for overseeing government loans from IFIs, including the WBG. Approaching any or all of these sources for information could prove useful.

**Civil society organizations** operating locally, regionally or internationally are also often very good sources of information about World Bank Group projects and policies. The following resources should help you identify civil society groups working on issues relevant to your country:

- IFIwatchnet: [www.ifiwatchnet.org](http://www.ifiwatchnet.org)
- BIC website:  
[www.bicusa.org/bicusa/issues/misc\\_resources/319.php](http://www.bicusa.org/bicusa/issues/misc_resources/319.php)
- Global Transparency Initiative website:  
[www.ifitransparency.org](http://www.ifitransparency.org)

## IN BRIEF

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- People have a fundamental right to know what is being planned for their communities in order to make informed decisions about development processes that affect their lives.
- The World Bank, IFC and MIGA have recognized the right to information by establishing information disclosure policies. However, in practice the institutions release only a limited amount of information.
- Access World Bank, IFC and MIGA information through their websites, the Public Information Centers or the Infoshop. Your government and civil society organizations are also important resources.
- When information is not routinely disclosed, request it and demand an explanation for why something is kept confidential.



Civil society groups working with communities affected by the Chashma Right Bank Irrigation Project in Pakistan



## FIND OUT MORE!

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### Civil Society Resources

- "Transparency Charter for International Financial Institutions: Claiming our Right to Know". Global Transparency Initiative, September 2006. [www.ifitransparency.org/doc/charter\\_en.pdf](http://www.ifitransparency.org/doc/charter_en.pdf)
- "Assessing World Bank Openness: A Transparency Scorecard". Bank Information Center, 2007. [www.bicusa.org/Legacy/IFI\\_Transparency\\_Chptr.pdf](http://www.bicusa.org/Legacy/IFI_Transparency_Chptr.pdf)
- "Transparency and Accountability in International Financial Institutions". Graham Saul, Bank Information Center, May 2003. [www.bicusa.org/Legacy/IFI\\_Transparency\\_Chptr.pdf](http://www.bicusa.org/Legacy/IFI_Transparency_Chptr.pdf)
- "Behind closed doors: Secrecy at the international financial institutions". Global Transparency Initiative, October 2006. [www.bankwatch.org/documents/behindcloseddoors.pdf](http://www.bankwatch.org/documents/behindcloseddoors.pdf)
- GTI Charter of Transparency Principles for IFIs: [www.ifitransparency.org/activities.shtml?x=44474&als\[select\]=44474](http://www.ifitransparency.org/activities.shtml?x=44474&als[select]=44474)

### ORGANIZATIONS AND NETWORKS WORKING ON THESE ISSUES

- IFI Transparency Resource: [www.ifitransparencyresource.org](http://www.ifitransparencyresource.org)
- Global Transparency Initiative: [www.ifitransparency.org](http://www.ifitransparency.org)
- ARTICLE 19: Global Campaign for Free Expression: [www.article19.org](http://www.article19.org)
- Transparency International: [www.transparency.org](http://www.transparency.org)

### World Bank Resources

- World Bank Information Disclosure Policy: [www.worldbank.org/disclosure](http://www.worldbank.org/disclosure)
- World Bank Public Information Centers: [www.worldbank.org/pics](http://www.worldbank.org/pics)
- World Bank Infoshop: [www.worldbank.org/infoshop](http://www.worldbank.org/infoshop)
- IFC Policy on Information Disclosure: [www.ifc.org/ifcext/policyreview.nsf/Content/Disclosure+Policy+September+22+Launch](http://www.ifc.org/ifcext/policyreview.nsf/Content/Disclosure+Policy+September+22+Launch)
- IFC Corporate Relations Unit: [www.ifc.org/contacts](http://www.ifc.org/contacts)



## QUICK REFERENCE: HOW YOU CAN GET INFORMATION FROM THE WORLD BANK GROUP

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### The World Bank, IFC and MIGA websites

Much of the information about World Bank Group operations is routinely available through the World Bank, IFC and MIGA websites: [www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org), [www.ifc.org](http://www.ifc.org) and [www.miga.org](http://www.miga.org).

Some useful World Bank Group webpages:

- The Projects Database links visitors to information on over 9000 World Bank projects, including relevant project documents. Access the database through the “Projects and Operations” link on the World Bank homepage: [www.worldbank.org/projects](http://www.worldbank.org/projects).
- The Document Database links visitors to approximately 27,000 World Bank public documents. Access the database through the “Publications” link on the World Bank homepage: [www.worldbank.org/reference](http://www.worldbank.org/reference).
- World Bank Country Pages provide information on current projects and priorities in borrowing countries, and link visitors to relevant country and project documents. Country pages can be accessed through the “Countries” link on the World Bank homepage: [www.worldbank.org/countries](http://www.worldbank.org/countries).

The Project and Document Databases and country pages are not always consistent, so if you are looking for a specific project, start with the projects database, but if you are seeking general information on operations in your country, search first via the country page.

### Public Information Centers

The World Bank Group has a Public Information Center (PIC) in almost every borrowing country. PICs are places for the public to access information about World Bank Group operations. A full list of PICs can be found at: [www.worldbank.org/pics](http://www.worldbank.org/pics).

PICs should provide the following:

- Direction on how to acquire information on Bank activities and Bank documents in local languages
- Publicly available Bank documents and publications, including those regarding projects in that country
- Adequate and accessible facilities with at least one computer with internet access

Many PICs also provide a reference library with government and NGO publications on economic, statistical, and development topics, and conduct outreach programs to raise awareness about Bank operations and to disseminate information locally.

If you have trouble locating or accessing your country’s PIC, contact the Bank’s disclosure team ([disclosure@worldbank.org](mailto:disclosure@worldbank.org)), the Country Director or your Executive Director.

### Making requests to the InfoShop

The WBG’s main Public Information Center is called the InfoShop, and it is located in Washington, DC. Any information not available through the World Bank, IFC or MIGA website can be requested through the InfoShop by email, fax, telephone or mail, at the addresses listed below. Information about the IFC operations may also be requested from the IFC’s Corporate Relations Unit at the addresses listed below.

World Bank Group InfoShop  
1818 H Street, NW  
MSN J1-100  
Washington, DC 20433 USA  
Tel: +1-202-458 5454  
Fax: +1-202-522 1500  
Email: [infoshop@worldbank.org](mailto:infoshop@worldbank.org)

International Finance Corporation  
Corporate Relations Unit  
2121 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC, 20433 USA  
Tel: +1-202-476-3800  
Fax: +1-202-974-4384  
Email addresses listed at: [www.ifc.org/contacts](http://www.ifc.org/contacts)

#### Tips on making an information request

- Be specific
- Start local. Contact the Bank office in your country first.
- Put your request for information in writing.
- If your request is denied, ask for a written explanation.
- Be persistent

To request information that’s more than 10 years old, contact the WBG archives department: [archives@worldbank.org](mailto:archives@worldbank.org)