

INTERNATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY PROJECT

What we've learned by tracking COVID-19 relief financing for two years

By Jocelyn Soto Medallo and Gustavo Zullo from the International Accountability Project

For the past 2 years, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted us all. At the [International Accountability Project](#) (IAP), we shifted our work to address the immediate needs of our staff and partners. IAP also integrated tracking COVID-19 relief financing and addressing rights abuses in the name of limiting the pandemic into our existing work. More than two years after the COVID-19 pandemic gripped the world, what is the state of community-led development?

To respond to the urgent needs posed by the pandemic, development banks harnessed their political and financial power, committing billions of dollars to the pandemic relief. Many of the projects were proposed as part of a [rapid disbursement or “fast track” modality](#). While funds were initially broadly welcomed, fast-tracking financing meant that projects were proposed and approved with shorter preparation times, often less environmental and social due diligence, and with substantial limitations on stakeholder consultations — that is, communities were less likely to be meaningfully consulted and provided clear opportunities for engagement.

Prior to the pandemic, the practices of development banks already fell short of fulfilling communities' rights to information, participation, and development. (Read our assessment of the disclosure practices and policies of the [IDB Invest](#); the [European Bank for Reconstruction and Development](#); the [New Development Bank](#); the [United States International Development Finance Corporation](#); and the [African Development Bank](#).) The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these existing obstacles, placing [restrictions](#) on communities' movement and right to assemble and be meaningfully consulted, and enabling [crackdowns](#) under the pretext of the pandemic response. The experiences of communities and human rights defenders under pandemic restrictions were documented in [Unhealthy silence: Development banks' inaction on retaliation during COVID-19](#).

Communities already suffering abuses from harmful development projects, were made worse off as the pandemic itself spread and government surveillance and restrictions increased. The [Network of Communities Affected by International Financial Institutions](#), a community-led network of people

negatively affected by development bank investments in Latin America, has requested direct reparation for damages caused by these investments, asserting that they should be first in line for COVID-19 relief:

“Projects financed by (development banks) have contributed for a long time so that the diverse communities in our region are subject to enormous socio-environmental damage that is currently exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. With these vulnerabilities generated by your investments, we have had no way to deal with COVID-19. We are more exposed than the communities not affected by your projects. Not only have we been displaced from remote places and in rural areas towards crowded cities, but there is no health care in most of the affected territories.”

It is precisely within the pandemic context that tracking and influencing these projects remains essential for holding government and corporate actors to account — to ensure that the recovery from this pandemic is centered on and built alongside the visions of those directly affected by these investments. And yet we know that without safe access to early and accessible information, affected communities are unable to meaningfully participate and contribute their vital knowledge and expertise to bettering project outcomes and avoiding adverse environmental and social impacts. This gross lack of transparency and accountability around these investments has made the task of monitoring the development banks and government response — and opportunities for engagement — both challenging and necessary.

“The pandemic has laid bare the frailty of our countries’ public health systems and profiteering by the private sector. What’s more, citizens have been left in the dark with these investments, often unable to track how the money was spent,” states Nadeen Madkour, Safeguard Policy Analyst at the NGO Forum on ADB.

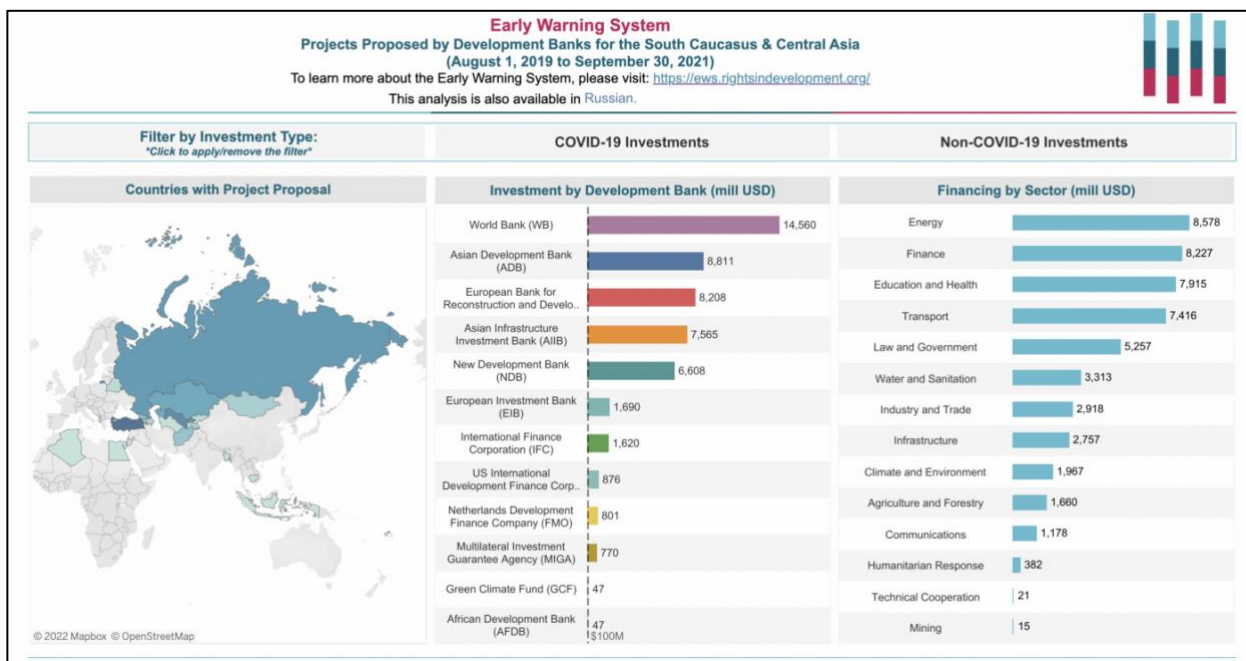


[COVID-19 DFI Tracker](#)

In response to this gap in transparency, the IAP and our partners have tracked the responses and activities of the development banks monitored by the [Early Warning System](#).

From 1 January 2020 to 31 January 2022, the [Early Warning System](#) has published and shared information on over 1,530 known investments proposed by the largest and most influential development banks as part of their operational COVID-19 response — a total of at least \$167 billion USD across at least 136 countries.

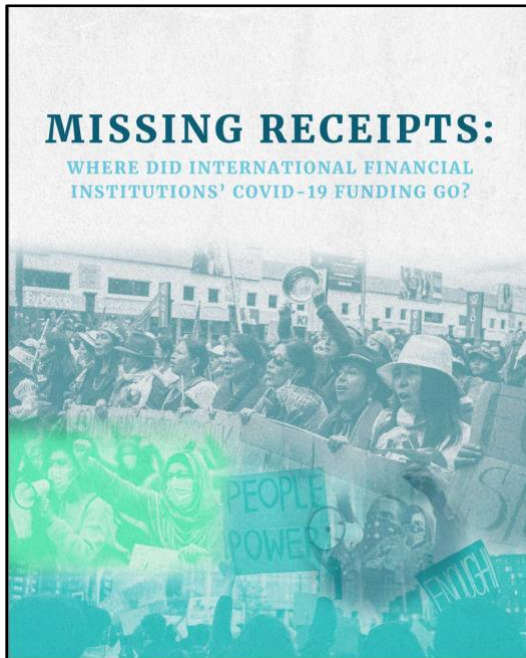
The only centralized and public platform to provide both granular-level project documentation and top-level analysis of COVID-19 financing, the [COVID-19 DFI Tracker](#) tracks disclosed projects by the most influential development banks in the world. The regularly-updated interactive [COVID-19 DFI Tracker](#) centralizes this information and provides financing trends by region, development bank, sector and the recipient of the funds (whether the direct recipient was the public sector or private sector). Project level information was then distributed by the [Early Warning System](#) team to civil society organizations most likely to be impacted.



[COVID-19 DFI Tracker for South Caucasus & Central Asia Region](#), also available in [Russian](#).

As the [COVID-19 DFI Tracker](#) has illustrated, these investments are in every region and in virtually every sector and industry. While many investments have been to governments to strengthen their response to the pandemic, substantial resources have also been directed to private actors to mitigate losses and liquidity issues arising from the pandemic. Notably, even some public sector recipients of financing funneled funds through financial intermediaries or provided support to private sector development.

Additionally, a collective of more than 20 groups worldwide, including IAP, developed national level case studies for 20 countries on COVID-19 relief financing. To underscore the shortcomings of the development bank-funded responses, the [Coalition for Human Rights in Development](#) and other partners assembled these analyses with relevant recommendations into the global report, [“Missing Receipts”](#).



And throughout all this, business as usual continued, with development banks proposing and financing infrastructure and energy projects that pose significant environmental and social risks.

As governments and financiers emphasize support to health care, there is less attention towards the effects of harmful projects that are being implemented,” states John Mwebe, IAP Community Organizer in Africa. “Communities have experienced more violations as governments push forward projects that hitherto met community resistance. It’s now a common practice by governments to criminalize community efforts towards stopping the harm disguised as measures to curb the spread of COVID-19.”

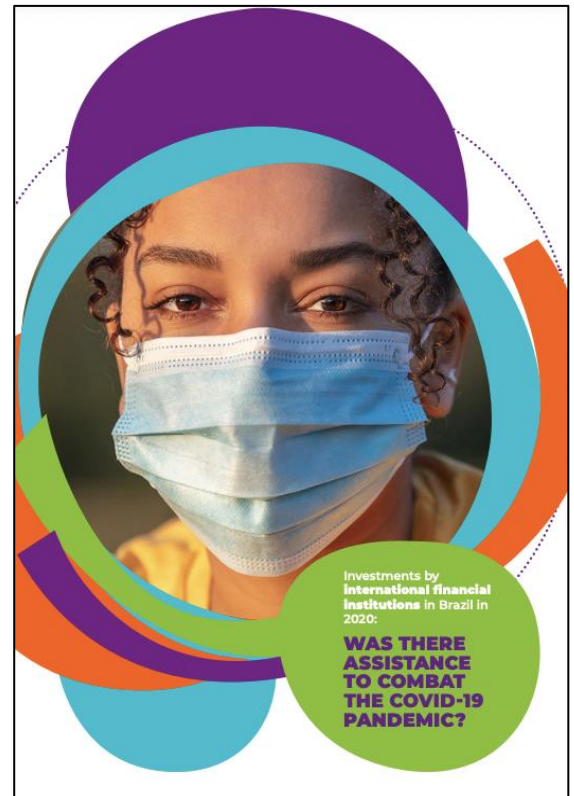
In the past two years, the [Early Warning System](#) team shared project information with our networks of civil society and community groups and hosted 29 webinars and online trainings. These activities inform partners’ own analysis of and advocacy on their governments’ response to the pandemic through development financing. Through direct one-on-one meetings, project by project outreach and webinars, the International Accountability Project and the [Early Warning System](#) team supported partners in accessing and using the EWS data.

The [COVID-19 DFI Tracker](#), which had an enhanced redesign in late 2020 to make regional trends analysis more accessible, has been viewed over 12,000 times. The Global Investigative Journalism Network featured the COVID-19 DFI Tracker in its guide to [Tracking World Bank COVID-19 Funding](#).

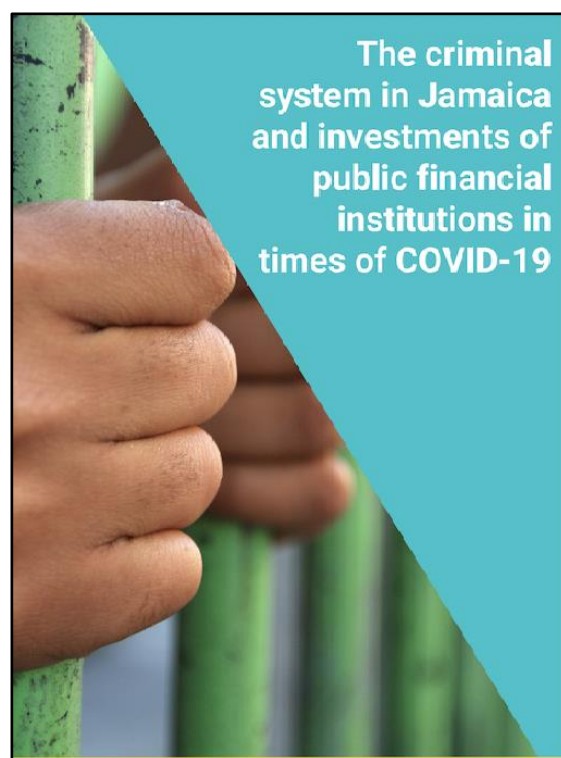
EWS data has built a strong foundation for evidence-based advocacy that will continue into 2022. Recognizing that a broader number of civil society and community groups will continue to monitor projects as they are implemented, IAP published the [Tracking the COVID-19 Response Toolkit](#) to explain how to analyze and track COVID-19 relief financing. The Toolkit will be translated into regional languages and further distributed in 2022. The Toolkit is meant to be used alongside IAP’s [Community Action Guide](#) series, which provides community organizers training and tactics to reinforce their own community-led development campaigns.

The COVID-19 data provided by the [Early Warning System](#) and staff and partner expertise have supported a breadth of advocacy activities, building the foundation for continuing local, national and international advocacy. Here is a sample of IAP's activities since the COVID-19 pandemic started in early 2020:

- In **Armenia**, the EWS data is being used by the *Center for Rights Development* in their analysis of government spending on healthcare in response to COVID-19.
- In **Asia Pacific**, IAP, [NGO Forum on ADB](#) and the *Coalition for Human Rights in Development* hosted a webinar to highlight trends for Asia-Pacific tracked by the [Early Warning System](#), and findings from the three country studies in India, Bangladesh, and the Philippines, continuing to support advocacy to make the Asian Development Bank and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and their borrower and clients more transparent and accountable in their COVID-19 response.
- In **Brazil** with our partners [Institute of Socioeconomic Studies](#) (INESC) and [Instituto Máira](#) in Brazil, the EWS data was used in a report, available in [Portuguese](#) and [English](#), that shows how development bank funds during the first year of the pandemic were not properly focused on the most at-risk populations and only poorly related to projects concerned with climate and environment issues.
- In **Colombia**, the EWS data was used to study investments related to austerity and will be featured in the upcoming report, *How International Financial Institutions support the drop in social (and environmental) expenses in Colombia*.
- In **Jamaica**, the EWS data was used by IAP and [Stand Up for Jamaica](#) to analyze COVID-19 projects that impacted the criminal justice system. The resulting in a report, [The criminal system in Jamaica and investments of public financial institutions in times of COVID-19](#) formed the basis of advocacy with the Jamaican Permanent Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Security, as well as the European Union.
- In **Kyrgyzstan**, [interactive data visualizations on COVID-19 financing](#) were created to aid access to information for partners, and discussed with civil society partners in a series of webinars on community organizing around development finance projects.



- In **Latin America and the Caribbean**, equipped with information about the COVID-19 response in the region, the [Network of Communities Affected by International Financial Institutions](#) organized a list of their demands to the development bank in [The Responsibility of Development Banks: Assist Communities Affected by Bank Projects First](#) (also in [Portuguese](#)). This community-led network has continued to engage decision-makers at development banks and shareholder governments.
- Also in **Latin America and the Caribbean**, in August 2020, [Network of Communities Affected by International Financial Institutions](#) published [a declaration](#), requesting direct reparation for damages caused by these investments and attention to the deepening of the impacts caused by the COVID19 crisis (also in [Spanish](#) and [Portuguese](#)).
- In **Latin America and the Caribbean**, the civil society network, *the IDB Working Group*, which monitors the Inter-American Development Bank, used EWS data to write the upcoming report, [Inversiones del Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo para la respuesta y recuperación al COVID-19 en Latinoamérica: ¿Riesgos y beneficios para quién?](#), analyzing the role of the Inter-American Development Bank in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the region and to identify the main problems and raise concerns regarding the investments being approved in this context.
- Similarly, the co-administrators of the *Early Warning System* in **Latin America and the Caribbean** have hosted a series of webinars on development finance and tracking COVID-19 investments. For example, in June 2021, [Sustentarse](#), one of the EWS co-administrators in Chile, hosted a [webinar on how to use the Early Warning System to support communities](#) and in September 2021, an two similar webinars in [Portuguese](#) and [Spanish](#), were hosted by the EWS co-administrator in Brazil, [Instituto Maíra](#).
- In **Myanmar**, an [interactive COVID-19 data analysis for Myanmar](#) was shared with civil society groups monitoring the February 2021 coup d'état. The EWS data was used to understand development bank financing for the country and in February 2021, 219 civil society and community groups [sent a collective](#) letter urging development banks to halt lending obligations, suspend disbursements, pending grants and loans across all sovereign and non-sovereign operations, until conclusive confirmation that these do not legitimize military rule. IAP also issued [a public statement](#).
- In **Nepal**, IAP adapted tools and strategies, purchased tablets and data cards, and built basic know-how in order to assist the indigenous communities in the remote areas to participate in



over 10 online meetings with project financiers, accountability mechanisms, project developers, and their civil society advisors — [Indigenous Women’s Legal Awareness Group \(INWOLAG\)](#), [Community Empowerment Social Justice Foundation \(CEmSoJ\)](#), and the [NGO Forum on ADB](#), the [International Accountability Project](#) — enabling them to assert their rights in the Asian Development Banks’ complaint process on the [Tanahu Hydropower Project](#).

- In the **South Caucasus and Central Asia** region, COVID-19 investments for the region have been updated regularly through interactive data analysis in [English](#) and [Russian](#) are being shared with partners, through an ongoing series of webinars.
- In **Sub-Saharan Africa**, during the African Coalition for Corporate Accountability General Assembly, the IAP and *Coalition for Human Rights in Development* shared COVID-19 tracking trends for the region during the launch of the report, [Unhealthy silence: Development banks’ inaction on retaliation during COVID-19](#).
- In **Sub-Saharan Africa and Middle East/North Africa**, in November 2020, IAP, [Lumiere Synergie pour le Developpement](#), and the [Arab Watch Coalition](#) hosted a webinar, [Tracking of COVID-19 Financing and Affected Communities’ Access to Information](#), as part of the African Development Bank’s civil society meetings.
- In **Tajikistan**, IAP developed an analysis of development finance in Tajikistan, focusing on transparency and participation, that was published as part of the *Foreign Policy Centre’s* [Retreating Rights: Examining the pressure on human rights in Tajikistan](#) series of articles in May 2021. IAP’s Community Organizer in Tajikistan presented the article during a panel discussion [launching the essay collection](#). The publication was disseminated among network partners in [English](#) and [Russian](#).
- In **Turkmenistan**, project information from the *Early Warning System* prompted engagement with the Government of Turkmenistan, the World Bank, and USAID to raise concerns about the absence of stakeholder engagement around the World Bank’s proposed [COVID-19 Response Project](#) as well as USAID’s related funding.
- In **Uzbekistan**, interactive data visualizations were created to aid access to information for partners in [English](#) and [Russian](#), and shared with human rights monitors in a series of webinars on community organizing around development finance projects.
- In **Vietnam**, an [interactive data analysis of COVID-19 projects in Vietnam](#) supported partners in their ongoing analysis of projects aimed at supporting women-led enterprises. This information was shared during civil society workshops on development finance in Vietnam and through a joint webinar for Vietnamese partners organized by the independent complaint mechanisms of the World Bank, International Finance Corporation, and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

Since the start of the global pandemic, the development bank pandemic response has been characterized by a gross lack of transparency. However, more than ever, within the context of the pandemic,

development banks must ensure that communities' rights to development and access to information are respected. After all, the right to information is [not a checkbox — it is the foundation for truly sustainable development](#).

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