



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## **Inter-American Development Bank washes its hands of responsibility for dangerous Hidroituango dam and related human rights violations in Colombia**

*Fearing imminent collapse of the dam, communities in Antioquia, Colombia, have learned that the public lending arm of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) will not be investigated*

**Washington, DC** — Last month, the Board and management of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) announced it would not approve an investigation of the Bank’s role in financing the construction of the controversial Ituango Hydroelectric Project (Hidroituango) in Colombia. The decision disregards allegations of acute and far-reaching harms caused by the project, including a humanitarian crisis that has displaced hundreds of families and caused human rights abuses, including assassination and intimidation of community members who oppose the project.

The announcement comes more than a year after communities affected by the construction of the Hidroituango dam on the Cauca River in Antioquia, Colombia, filed a claim with the Independent Consultation and Investigation Mechanism (MICI). The claim, signed by more than 400 individuals affected by the dam, sought recourse from the MICI for the IDB’s alleged failure to comply with its own environmental and social safeguards.

“We publicly denounce the IDB’s decision to evade its responsibility for the environmental damage and human rights violations resulting from the Hidroituango project, and we condemn the role of the MICI in facilitating and manifestly supporting this decision,” remarked Isabel Zuleta, representative of Movimiento Ríos Vivos Antioquia. “It is unconscionable that the IDB is attempting to rewrite history by absolving itself from its responsibility for enabling and financing high-risk development projects that have extreme environmental impacts and blatantly violate human rights,” added Zuleta.

The IDB has two lending arms, one that invests in the public sector (the IDB) and another that invests in the private sector (IDB Invest). The MICI is the accountability mechanism of the bank, in charge of evaluating environmental and social compliance of the institution’s investments.

The IDB initially invested in the Hidroituango project in 2012, which paved the way for and facilitated millions of dollars of additional investments from the IDB, as well as an additional billion from other international banks. The MICI, whose mandate is to provide accountability for harms caused by IDB investments, recommended *no investigation* of the IDB’s role in the project.

Despite the decision not to review the IDB’s compliance, the MICI could continue its investigation regarding IDB Invest’s investment in the Hidroituango project. However this will depend completely on approval by the Bank’s Board.

Before the dam was approved, communities warned of precisely the environmental and social impacts that have occurred.

“For an institution that seeks to improve the lives of people in Latin America, the IDB’s decision is absurd, irresponsible, and disrespectful. It exemplifies a complete disregard for people living within the Cauca River Basin. Unfortunately, this disregard too often characterizes the IDB’s engagement in large-scale infrastructure projects throughout the region,” said Alexandre Andrade Sampaio of International Accountability Project.

“What is the value of environmental and social policies at the IDB, when they are ignored and dismissed precisely when they are most needed to protect people’s lives? This lack of accountability is unacceptable, and it demonstrates why communities affected by the actions of development banks have found it necessary to resort to the courts to secure their rights,” remarked Carla García Zendejas, Senior Attorney at the Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL), in reference to the recent US Supreme Court decision in *Jam v. IFC*, which recognized that international organizations such as the IDB are not immune from litigation in US courts. “This decision exemplifies the perils of an accountability mechanism that lacks the independence and legitimacy to initiate and carry out a genuine investigation of a bank’s projects,” added García Zendejas.

“Since day one, the Hidroituango project carried out a weak impact assessment, inaccurate surveys of affected people and deficient environmental implementation and monitoring, but the IDB has continued to invest in it,” sustained Carlos Lozano of the Interamerican Association for Environmental Defense (AIDA). “The project was approved and is under construction without having previously carried out an evaluation of alternatives,” he pointed out.

Members of Movimiento Ríos Vivos Antioquia, who represent affected communities in the complaint, continue to receive ongoing threats and suffer intimidation, homicides, and other forms of violence. The IDB has shown its disregard for the volatile situation surrounding Hidroituango, including the continued presence of paramilitary groups in the area. The IDB has also ignored community requests to delay dam construction to exhume mass graves from the armed conflict in the area affected by the dam.

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**Note for editors:**

The Ituango hydroelectric plant will be the largest in Colombia, with a 49-mile (79 km) reservoir that will flood a surface of 11,120 acres (4,500 hectares). The IDB Group has financed the project through various types of investment: initially \$2 million in technical cooperation for the Colombian State in 2012 and then \$550 million in direct investments in 2016 to Empresas Públicas de Medellín (EPM), the company in charge of the project. Additionally, the IDB manages a \$1 billion dollar loan package, with funds from multiple institutional investors, including European banks.

After a construction failure at the dam construction in May 2018, more than 25,000 people had to be evacuated from the area due to flooding, landslides, and avalanches. The humanitarian crisis has worsened dramatically: people have lost their property, livelihoods, and access to health and education services, which have always been meager in the area. Many people have been displaced and those who have stayed are not properly cared for. In addition, people who are members of Movimiento Ríos Vivos are discriminated against. There is a lack of food, people suffer from diseases, and shelters are deficient. People are pressured to return to risk areas and sign documents waiving their claims. In short, communities are facing a situation of systematic human rights violations as a result of the project.