

Wednesday, January 12, 2011

Natalie Bridgeman Fields

Natalie Bridgeman Fields is not afraid of the courtroom - through her own law practice, she is co-lead counsel representing the nonprofit Amazon Watch and a group of Peru's indigenous Achuar residents in a tort case against Occidental Petroleum Corp. She's also local counsel for the Yale National Litigation Project, representing convicted terrorist Jose Padilla in his constitutional claims against former Bush administration lawyer John Yoo.



But Fields has seen her greatest impact outside of court as a leader in using nonjudicial remedies to help communities affected by large-scale development projects.

To that end, Fields founded and serves as executive director of Accountability Counsel, a small nonprofit organization that champions environmental causes and human rights. The year-old organization uses accountability mechanisms at institutions such as the World Bank and the Overseas Private Investment Corp., and also advocates for new ways international institutions can increase accountability.

"Nonjudicial grievance mechanisms are not a substitute for the use of courts to remedy human rights abuses," Fields said, "but rather they're a complement that lawyers can use to help their clients achieve more immediate action to address pressing human rights issues."

Peru is one place she's making strides. Over the past year, Accountability Counsel collaborated with another San Francisco nonprofit and two Peruvian indigenous federations to file a complaint with the World Bank's International Finance Corp., which funded a Maple Energy oil project that resulted in five oil spills in 15 months. Members of the Shipibo indigenous population said the spills polluted their water and food sources and led to deaths and sickness, and that their men were used to clean up the spills without the benefit of protective gear.

The Shipibo had tried negotiating with the oil company and appealing to the Peruvian government. When those avenues failed, Accountability Counsel helped the villagers assess their options. A World Bank ombudsman has since blessed their complaint, and the parties are now stepping to the table for negotiations.

"The most powerful thing in terms of her advocacy skills is that she's not pushing her own agenda," said Neil Popovic, a Sheppard Mullin Richter & Hampton partner who has known Fields professionally for more than a decade, and recently assisted on one of her projects. "She's acting as an advocate for the people whose interests she's trying to protect."

Fields believes in teaching young lawyers about out-of-court avenues to justice. Currently, a group of UC Berkeley School of Law students through the school's International Human Rights Law Clinic is helping Fields with a project in Oaxaca, Mexico. The project enabled a group of indigenous people who lost an important water source to a hydroelectric power project to file the fifth-ever complaint in OPIC's internal Office of Accountability.

"Natalie is a person who really values other people's opinions," said Roxanna Altholz, acting director of the UC Berkeley clinic. "My students have been treated as equal partners in this project, which is amazing for a second-year law student."

Fields has also been a consultant to the World Bank Inspection Panel and to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

- JILL REDHAGE