

*UN Vision Project on Global Public Policy Networks*

*www.globalpublicpolicy.net*

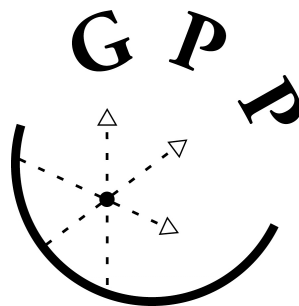
**BEYOND TEMPLES AND TOMBS:  
TOWARDS EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE FOR SUSTAINABLE  
DEVELOPMENT THROUGH THE WORLD COMMISSION ON DAMS**

---

**Sanjeev Khagram**

Center for International Development and Hauser Center for Non-Profit Organizations, The  
John F. Kennedy School of Government Harvard University

Case Study for the UN Vision Project on Global Public Policy Networks



## I. INTRODUCTION: THE GLOBAL CONFLICT-INDUCED STALEMATE AROUND BIG DAMS

---

Big dams have been contrastingly characterized as modernization and destruction, as temples and as tombs, as progress and as injustice. On the one hand, the massive scale of these projects, and their seeming ability to bring powerful and capricious natural forces under human control, has given them a unique hold on the social imagination. Perhaps more than any other development initiative, big dams had over the years symbolized the progress of humanity from a life controlled by nature and tradition to one where nature is ruled by science, and tradition by rationality. On the other hand, big dams have more recently been identified with the injustice of humanity as a result of their untold destruction of nature as well as the sacrifice of diverse peoples, cultures and ways of life in the name of science and rationality.

Big dams bring together virtually the entire set of issues and actors that are central to conflicts over sustainable development locally, nationally and internationally. Nowhere have the conflicts between competing approaches to sustainable development been more vividly displayed than in the contestation over the planning, design, appraisal, construction, operation, monitoring and even decommissioning of these grand technological, ecological, socio-economic and political interventions. At the heart of the debates and struggles over dams, however, lies the *governance* challenge of generating the institutional arrangements and decision-making processes needed for achieving sustainable development.

Given the *seemingly* tremendous needs for water (nearly 1 billion people do not have adequate supplies of drinking water), irrigation (for increasing agricultural production as global population expands beyond 6 billion), electricity (over 2 billion people do not have access to stable sources of electricity), and flood control (witness the massive and destructive floods that have engulfed numerous river basins over the past several years), in addition to the powerful set of interests and institutions promoting and supporting big dams (governments, international agencies, multinational corporations, domestic industrialists, agricultural lobbies and urban consumers), the rapid and dramatic decline in the construction of these projects globally over the last three decades is puzzling.

The number of big dam projects built annually had grown from virtually zero in 1900 to nearly 250 by mid-century. The rate exploded thereafter and peaked at around 1000 big dams being constructed annually from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s. But even more dramatically, the number of these projects completed per year fell precipitously to under 250

by the 1990s. This represents a 75 percent drop in the construction rate of big dams in less than a decade! The number of major dams completed each year similarly declined: during the 1970s, 93 of these mega-projects were constructed while only 20 were built during the first half of the current decade.<sup>1</sup>

Four types of arguments can be offered to explain this trend: technical, financial, economic and political. The technical argument highlights the decreasing availability of sites for big dam building to account for the falling completion rate of these projects. However, as of 1986, 95 percent of big dams were concentrated in twenty-five countries which had built more than 100, while less than 2 percent were spread over the more than one hundred-fifty other countries of the world where sites are still available, if not plentiful.<sup>2</sup> During the 1990s, the number of big dams under construction have increased slightly from about 1500 to 1700 per year, as the number of big dam-starts has continued to average 300 per year.<sup>3</sup> Thus, there has been a diverging trend over time between the number of sites still available - as well as the number of dams being started and under construction - compared to the number of big dams actually being completed every year.

Financial and economic factors, such as shortages in available funding and the increasing relative viability of 'conventional' alternatives to big dams, are two other possible explanations for the decline in big dam building.<sup>4</sup> The world-wide recession during the 1980s, the growth in indebtedness of many third world states, donor fatigue among foreign

---

<sup>1</sup> The numbers of big dams being completed decreased partially as a result of the larger and larger size of projects that were initiated over time. For example, 10 major dams were built before 1950, 35 during the 1950s, 64 during the 1960s, and 93 during the 1970s. Figures calculated from T.W. Mermel; "The Worlds Major Dams and Hydro Plants," International Water Power and Dam Construction Handbook, 1993-1996.

<sup>2</sup> ICOLD; World Register of Dams, Paris: ICOLD, 1988, pg. 1. Only slightly more than 10 percent of the world's technically available hydropower potential has been developed. See Jose Roberto Moreira and Alan Douglas Poole; "Hydropower and Its Constraints," in Thomas B. Johansson et. al; Renewable Energy: Sources for Fuels and Electricity, Washington D.C.: Earth Island Press, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> ICOLD; Circular Letter 1427, December 1995, Circular Letter Number 1388, January 16, 1995, and Circular Letter 1342, October 4, 1993, Paris: ICOLD. 'Under construction' and 'starts' can mean anything from receiving formal approval from authorities to actually in the process of being built with a reasonable certainty of completion.

<sup>4</sup> This does not include non-conventional and renewable sources of energy production such as wind or solar power.

lenders, and a strategy shift towards privatization all contributed to the decreasing availability of public and international financing for these projects. The decreasing costs of other conventional alternatives, particularly natural gas power plants in place of hydroelectric dams, also reduced their comparative financial and economic feasibility. The increasing time and cost overruns associated with big dam projects further detracted from expected financial and economic returns of these projects and improved the relative viability of alternatives.

These technical, financial and economic factors have clearly made big dam building less attractive, but they do not tell the whole story. Political factors have increasingly contributed to the decreasing financial viability of, and changing economic calculations regarding big dams. Mounting public protests against these projects have caused time overruns, which in turn have produced cost overruns. Costs have also escalated because big dam builders and authorities have been compelled to investigate and mitigate negative environmental and social effects, such as to improve the life-chances of displaced peoples. As these environmental and social costs have been more fully internalized, economic benefit-cost or financial rate of return criteria justifying the building of these projects have become more difficult to meet. These requirements for the formulation, sanctioning and implementation of big dams either did not exist or were not followed in the past.<sup>5</sup>

Site depletion, moreover, actually has been as much a cause for the generation of political opposition to big dams as it has been a direct factor in the decline of big dam building. Particularly in North America and Western Europe, the continual loss of free flowing rivers associated with the damming of more and more sites sparked much of the initial mobilization and organization of domestic conservation groups. The success of these early campaigns around big dams played a critical role in the growth of national environmental movements in numerous countries in the West from the 1950s to the 1970s.<sup>6</sup> The declining opportunities for big dam building in the first world and increasing demand in the third world for the services these projects offer subsequently drove big dam builders to

---

<sup>5</sup> The World Bank estimates that a one year delay in completion will reduce the benefit-cost ratio of projects by one-third and a two year delay by over one-half and that costs associated with resettlement can increase project costs up to 30%. The World Bank; The Bankwide Review of Projects Involving Involuntary Resettlement, April 8, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> For the United States, see Tim Palmer; Endangered Rivers and the Conservation Movement, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986 and R. Gottlieb; Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement, Washington D.C.: Earth Island Press, 1993.

progressively shift even more of their activities to developing countries. As a result, approximately two-thirds of the big dams built in the 1980s and three-quarters under construction during the 1990s were located in the third world.

But over the last two decades, coalescing from a multitude of struggles and campaigns waged at the local, national and international levels, transnational civil society groups and organizations advocating participatory, equitable, and sustainable development has dramatically altered the dynamics of big dam building in the third world. Directly affected people, social movements and domestic nongovernmental organizations in many parts of the world have empowered themselves to reform or block the completion of big dams in their own countries, often by forming partnerships with like-minded foreign supporters. At the same time, nongovernmental organizations from the first world and international nongovernmental organizations working on human rights, the protection of indigenous peoples, environmental conservation and other issues, have increasingly focused their energies on slowing or halting the global spread and growth of big dam building. As a result, in contrast to the first world where historically, domestic technical, financial, economic and political factors contributed relatively equally and interacted to cause the decline in big dam building, the primary explanation for these changing dynamics in the other countries is increasingly political-economic, having to do with the shifting transnational power relations surrounding the construction of these projects.

Government agencies, private sector firms and international organizations had begun to slowly reform their policies and practices with respect to big dam building globally, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. Part of these reforms were motivated by the scientific and practical knowledge base that had been built up from the tremendous amount of research experience with dam building over the last fifty years. But, these actors were persistently, and progressively pushed to initiate, expedite, modify, and broaden reform efforts or often just halt building dams by growing numbers of transnationally allied critics - primarily local peoples' groups, social movements and nongovernmental organizations at the regional, national and international levels.<sup>7</sup>

It was clearly transnational civil society groups and organizations who successfully pushed for an independent and comprehensive review of big dams, a demand for which they had been lobbying for several years and which most recently was articulated in the Curitiba

---

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, the various policy reforms of the World Bank during the 1980s and 1990s.

Declaration. The declaration itself was drafted and approved at the historic First International Conference of People Affected by Dams held in Curitiba, Brazil between March 11-14, 1997. Nearly 100 dam-affected people and dam critics from speaking more than 12 languages from 17 countries including Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, France, Germany, India, Lesotho, Mexico, Norway, Paraguay, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, Thailand, and the United States attended the meeting and endorsed the declaration.<sup>8</sup>

The Declaration of Curitiba, which affirmed the right to life and livelihood of people affected by dams, built on the norms and goals espoused in the previous transnational civil society San Francisco Declaration of 1988 and the Manibeli Declaration of 1994.<sup>9</sup> It argued that the actual benefits and costs of dams had not matched what had been predicted and identified a set of powerful actors: international lenders and credit agencies, private companies and corporations, engineering and environmental consultants, bureaucrats and politicians, as being responsible for the centralized and undemocratic promotion of destructive dams inimical to sustainable development. The primary principle espoused was the opposition to the construction of any dam that has not been approved by the negatively-affected people, especially those to be displaced, through an informed and participatory decision-making process. The declaration demanded the establishment of an independent commission to conduct a comprehensive review of all large dams supported by international agencies, subject to the approval and monitoring or representatives of transnational civil society, and similar reviews for each national and regional agency which had supported the building of big dams.

By the 1990s, a stalemate had clearly begun to emerge between big dam opponents and proponents. On the one hand, while opponents had been successful in halting specific projects and generating gradual policy change more broadly, many were interested in institutionalizing mechanisms for halting unacceptable big dams early on so that more of their resources could be deployed for an "alternatives" agenda rather than be drained by the continuous battles to reform or stop the next "destructive" project. On the other hand, proponents bemoaned the decline in prospects for big dam building but continued to extol the

---

<sup>8</sup> See the various documents presented and generated at the conference found in Proceedings: First International Meeting of People Affected by Dams, Berkeley: International Rivers Network, June 1997.

<sup>9</sup> The following is based on "Declaration of Curitiba," Proceedings: First International Meeting of People Affected by Dams, Berkeley: International Rivers Network, June 1997, p. 11-13.

virtues and benefits of these projects. Many dam proponents were interested in having clear rules on when, how and by whom big dams could be built to increase predictability and lower risks and transactions costs.<sup>10</sup>

In response to the impasse, the World Bank and World Conservation Union (IUCN) convened a workshop to bring "together leading experts and representatives of major stakeholder groups . . . to initiate an open and transparent dialogue," on the future of large dams globally.<sup>11</sup> In April of 1997, thirty-nine participants representing governments, international development agencies, the private sector, professional associations, nongovernmental organizations and peoples' movements met at a workshop entitled, "Large Dams: Learning from the Past, Looking to the Future," held in Gland, Switzerland. After criticizing as biased and flawed the first ever post-evaluation of World Bank financed big dam projects that had been conducted by the World Bank's own Operation Evaluation Department, a consensus emerged among participants at Gland that no existing group or organization had the legitimacy to authoritatively evaluate the historical experience with dams and alternatives and propose recommendations for the future. Consequently, the constitution of a World Commission on Dams was proposed to fill this vacuum of legitimate authority at the international level and facilitate a path through the impasse.

## **II.1 The World Commission on Dams: Origin and Purpose**

Arguably one of the most innovative international governance experiments in the area of sustainable development today, the unprecedented objectives of the World Commission on Dams (WCD), as outlined in the mandate it was given by the "Gland Reference Group" of key stakeholder representatives in was to: a) conduct a global review of the development effectiveness of dams and assess alternatives for water resources and energy management, and b) develop internationally-accepted standards, guidelines and criteria for decision-making in

---

<sup>10</sup> "With a multi-million dollar dam the costs of long political delays are enormous," said Mr. Jan Strombland of ABB, the dam-building multinational that had received a beating from pressure groups for its involvement in the Bakun Dam and other similar projects throughout the world. See Stephanie Flanders; "Truce called in battle of the dams," Financial Times, April 14, 1997.

<sup>11</sup> Actually, the World Bank's Operational Evaluation Department approached IUCN to co-sponsor the workshop with the objective of reviewing its draft review of the development effectiveness of World Bank funded dams. IUCN representative agreed to co-sponsor on the condition that the full range of stakeholders be invited and that the agenda be broadened beyond a focus solely on the review.

the planning, design, appraisal, construction, monitoring, operation and decommissioning of dams."<sup>12</sup> The guiding principles of the WCD, also embedded in the mandate endowed to it by the Gland Reference Group, are independence, inclusiveness and transparency. It was further agreed that the WCD would have a limited life-span of two years at which time it would present its report to the international community at large and thereafter cease to exist. The WCD would thus not contribute to international bureaucratization that very few would defend as a positive trend.

It is from the process by which it emerged, its objectives, its guiding principles, and its time-bound life-span that the WCD has drawn its legitimacy - and legitimation is the primary challenge of any such organization. Emerging from a process that itself was participatory and transparent, in which no major type of stakeholder was entirely absent, gave the idea of a Commission a great deal of momentum early on.

But the way forward from Gland was hardly easy. The Gland Reference Group established a smaller Interim Working Group of selected representatives from across the spectrum of stakeholders to take the WCD from idea to reality. This negotiation process took nearly a year with virtually every decision being hotly contested, from the selection of a Chair to the number and composition of the Commission members to the appropriate role of the World Bank, IUCN and broader reference group once the WCD was firmly established. The fact that these decisions were negotiated in an inclusive and participatory way, again with no major interest completely absent, was critical to the ultimate establishment of the WCD.<sup>13</sup> Certainly, the institutional, financial and political support provided by the World Bank and IUCN also contributed to the prospects for a Commission.

The twin objectives as specified in the mandate provided further legitimacy to the WCD. By combining an evaluation of experiences of the past (a global review of dams and assessment of alternatives) which was the main focus of critics with the formulation of

---

<sup>12</sup> See IUCN; "Large Dams: Learning From the Past, Looking at the Future," Workshop Proceedings, and "WCD Mandate," Cambridge: IUCN, August, 1997 and February, 1998.

<sup>13</sup> Perhaps the most important victory for the WCD process at this early stage was the invitation and acceptance by Professor Kader Asmal to be Chair of the WCD. Asmal had impeccable credentials as a Professor of International Law, leader in the international Anti-Apartheid movement, as the then Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry in South Africa, and as a member of the ongoing World Commission on Oceans. While he was not immune to criticisms from various stakeholders, his expertise, experience and stature not only prevented any side from blocking his selection but also greatly contributed to the respectability and legitimacy of the WCD.

recommendations for the future (standards, criteria and guidelines for decision-making around big dams) which was the main concern of proponents, all stakeholders had something to gain and lose from the WCD's activities - strong incentives to stay involved. And stipulating that both the evaluation and recommendations would be completed within a specified and imminent period of two years meant that the results would be important and useful to various stakeholders because of their timeliness.

The guiding principles of independence, transparency and inclusiveness are perhaps the most important legitimating mechanisms for the WCD. Because all existing groups and organizations (including international bodies) were seen as vested or biased in one way or another, establishing an independent body was certainly necessary. Moreover any organization, after it is established, could be coopted or even hijacked. To minimize the likelihood of these possibilities required the WCD to be transparent. A commitment to inclusivity, moreover, has ensured that the WCD would not become an unaccountable body - a criticism levelled against many more established international institutions. One could have imagined an independent commission of eminent individuals who did not have any specific stake in the actual outcome of the process. However, this alternative model would not satisfied the concomitant focus on inclusivity, the acknowledgement that the WCD was as much a negotiation process as a policy formulating body, and the belief that the results of a Commission which was composed of active stakeholders would be more likely to command acceptance from the broader range of interested groups.

Of course, the principles of independence, transparency and inclusivity also have a deep ethical basis besides their functional importance, and this moral foundation further increases the legitimacy that the WCD invokes when it reflects and upholds these principles in all of its structures and activities. What has thus been attempted through the structures and activities of the WCD is to provide an independent, transparent and inclusive arenas and processes in and through which the multiple groups and organizations that have stakes in big dams could negotiate through their differences, find areas of common ground, identify areas of continuing divergences, and formulate global public policy where possible and feasible.

## **II.2 The Constituent Structures of the WCD**

The key structural elements of the World Commission on Dams are the Commissioners, the Secretariat, the WCD Forum, and the broader stakeholder constituencies (including funders) as depicted in the figure attached to this case study. Each of these structural elements will be

discussed in greater detail but it should be noted that each circle moving inwards is a reflection of diversity of the broader set of stakeholders active in decision-making around big dams. Moreover, one might argue as well that the degree of influence over the final outcome of the Commission decreases as one moves radially outwards from the core, which is the Commission members themselves.

The most important structural element of the WCD is the Commission members themselves. The 12 Commissioners were selected to represent the range of stakeholders involved in conflicts and decision-making around big dams. The Commissioners as a group represent a diversity of institutional, disciplinary and political backgrounds. They were selected on the basis of their recognized leadership in government, the private sector, or civil society as well as their significant experience and expertise with big dam projects. Roughly 1/3 of the members are considered to be proponents of dam building, 1/3 are considered to be opponents of dam building, and 1/3 are considered to be moderate reformers or supporters. The backgrounds of Commission members range from Goran Lindahl - CEO and President of the multinational company ABB, to the Chair Kader Asmal - former Minister of Water Affairs, now Minister of Education of South Africa, to Medha Patkar - the internationally acclaimed activist leader of the Save the Narmada Movement and National Association of Peoples Movements in India. The Commission members are also relatively evenly divided in their origins, from countries such as China, India, Brazil, South Africa, the United States, Switzerland, the Philippines and Australia with approximately 1/2 of the members coming from developing countries.<sup>14</sup>

Debate over the balance amongst the Commission members has bedeviled the WCD since its inaugural meeting held in Washington D.C. in May of 1997. In particular, to convince nationally based stakeholders that the Commissioners do not represent the views of any particular country is difficult. This has created problems from all sides of the dams debate. In the case of India, dam proponents (and the Government of India in particular) saw the two Commissioners from India as being anti-dam and thus questioned the overall independence of the WCD process. On the other hand, dam critics and affected peoples from Brazil found the presence of generally pro-dam Commissioner from that country as preempting a fair hearing of their views. The message that the Commission has continually

---

<sup>14</sup> For more information on Commission members see The World Commission on Dams, "Interim Report, Cape Town: WCD, August, 1999.

communicated has been that the Commissioners are reflective of the diversity of stakeholders by sectors and issue areas globally, and not nationally. But this has not always been sufficient to ally the critics.

The other challenge was to accommodate the full range of stakeholders given the relatively small number of Commission members (12). Clearly, not all groups would be represented and any set of Commissioners ultimately chosen would not be beyond controversy. However, a better mapping of the political environment would have revealed early on that, partly because of the composition of the stakeholder representation in the Interim Working Group, commissioners with more expertise and experience with dams and alternatives for irrigation and agricultural production were left out of the set ultimately chosen. On the other hand, the WCD Forum (see below) has been a safety valve for those key interests who did not find direct representation in the form of a Commission member, including such groups as those promoting irrigation dams and others promoting agricultural strategies where irrigation is less of a priority.

Moving one concentric circle outwards from the set of 12 Commissioners is the secretariat of the WCD, members of which were selected based primarily on their experience and expertise. However, as a group they were also selected to complement one another in terms of their disciplinary, institutional, and geographical backgrounds. The Secretary General, also an ex-officio (non-voting) member of the Commission, who was selected by the Chair but approved of by the Interim Working Group, holds the pivot function at the nexus of the Commission members, the Secretariat and broader set of stakeholders and funders of the WCD. The other, approximately 10 members of the Secretariat, bring disciplinary expertise as engineers, environmental specialists, social scientists, policy analysts, and communications specialists. They also range in their institutional backgrounds, working previously in organizations as diverse as private sector consulting firms to international development agencies to universities. The combination of expertise and diversity has increased the comprehensiveness of the activities undertaken, contributed to the outreach capabilities of the WCD, as well as raised confidence in the capacity of the Commission to fulfill its mandate.

Again, creating and maintaining the balance within the secretariat has been a difficult challenge for the WCD. It is quite a task to find and attract the best experts with cross-regional work experience on dams, water and energy resources to move to another country (the Secretariat is based in South Africa) to be part of a process that will only be two years long and has an extremely uncertain fate. It is in particular difficult to find and attract such

experts from developing countries, as there is an extremely short supply of such qualified individuals. As a result, although there are members from developing countries, the composition of the Secretariat is still weighted towards those from the first world. In addition, some important gaps in regional backgrounds and professional expertise exist in the Secretariat. For example, no member comes from East or Southeast Asia and no member can be considered an expert on legal issues.

These challenges of a small, time-bound, and highly specialized secretariat have been partly overcome by the WCD Work Programme through which hundreds of consultants and reviewers from around the world have contributed to generating the knowledge base of the Commission (see below). In addition, the regional backgrounds and disciplinary expertise of both the set of Commissioners and the WCD Forum has also compensated for those gaps and weaknesses within the Secretariat. The WCD Forum, however, has not been taken full advantage of in this regard, although there is still time for Forum members to be more deeply involved before the Commission completes its activities by the end of 2000.

The WCD Forum is a critical structural component that also has assisted in operationalizing the guiding principles of transparency and inclusivity. The Forum is an expanded version of the Gland Reference Group that initially proposed the establishment of the Commission. Approximately 60 representatives from the most important stakeholder groups and organizations involved in conflicts and decision-making around dam building internationally are members of the WCD Forum. Again these groups and organizations have been selected from across the spectrum of civil society, private sector, governmental and intergovernmental organizations. There is also a relatively equal balance of Forum members coming from the North and South.

The Forum acts as sounding board and networking mechanism in the WCD process. Forum members are specifically invited to participate and comment in the various activities of the Commission. They are also a critical vehicle in the Commission's outreach to the various sectoral and issue-area networks involved in the dams' debate. The Forum is also likely to be an important mechanism for the dissemination of the WCD's recommendations and other follow-up activities after the Commission ceases to exist at the end of 2000.

While the Forum has been a key structural innovation of the WCD process, as noted earlier, it has not been used as effectively as it might ideally be. Part of the reason is the difficulty of coordinating a group of approximately 60 extremely busy individuals working in organizations spanning the entire globe. For example, given the resource and time constraints

of the WCD, to convene a meeting of all the Forum members, requires extraordinary skill and tremendous amounts of logistical planning. Just to keep Forum members informed about the ongoing work and status of the Commission is a challenge in itself. Certainly, the widespread availability of e-mail has been indispensable in this regard. But to reach those Forum members who are from or work at the grassroots, especially those from developing countries, e-mail does not suffice. To date, an adequate mechanism for overcoming this constraint has not been developed.

Another critical structural component of the WCD is, of course, the donors. Funding for the Commission has also been sought out and received from the widest possible range of groups and organizations from the private sector (approximately 1/4 of the total budget), from governmental and intergovernmental agencies (approximately 1/2 of the total budget), and from nongovernmental organizations and foundations (approximately 1/4 of the total budget). Moreover, to ensure that the guiding principles of the Commission are not contradicted, funders must provide untied financial support such that the WCD's independence is not questioned, an informal rule is that no single donor should contribute more than 10% of the total budget, and donors are not automatically given membership in the WCD Forum.

Funding the WCD has perhaps been the greatest challenge of all, especially given the range of funding sources and untied nature of the funding that has been sought out. It would likely have been much easier if the World Bank would have donated the entire \$10 million budget of the Commission from the outset. But, as discussed earlier, the independence and legitimacy of the WCD would have been weakened if such a strategy had been pursued. On the other hand, to convince donors to give money to a new organization, without a track record, with an uncertain future, and which might possibly generate findings and conclusions against the interests of donors is truly difficult. This difficulty has been gradually overcome by the legitimacy created in the WCD by the various factors noted previously and by critical infusions of support and funding from key organizations at key moments. Certainly the World Bank's donation of \$1 million early on was crucial to get the Commission underway. But the donation of an even larger amount by the UN Foundation mid-way through the Commission's life was just as crucial in strengthening the WCD's financial base. In addition, the WCD could not have been financially sustained without the support of a few bilateral donors (in particular from Norway, Germany and Sweden).

The fact the fund-raising has continued to be a priority of the Commissioners and Secretariat throughout the life of the WCD has, however, detracted from time and focus on

other activities (the Work Program, Commissioner deliberations/negotiations, and communications/outreach). The effect on the WCD meeting its potential by the challenges of funding cannot be underestimated. The uncertainty of an insecure financial base clearly weakened the quality of work that the WCD could do. For example, given the instability of funding, it was unclear whether several parts of the WCD Work Program could even be undertaken let alone completed at a high level of quality for many months. Commissioner meetings spent more time on issues of fundraising than on the deliberations and negotiations around key substantive issues. And the full complement of secretariat members were not brought on board as early as they could have been as well. If all the funding had been secured prior to the establishment of the Commission, many of the other difficulties mentioned above could have been handled more easily.

In summary, the four critical structural components of the WCD are the group of 12 Commissioners, the Secretariat, the WCD Forum, and the donors. The composition of each is reflective of the broader set of active stakeholders in the dams' debate and each has been structured to give life to the Commission's guiding principles of independence, transparency and inclusivity. Each component contributes to the broader WCD process, and each will be critical in shaping and activating the outcomes of the WCD process. The intensity and importance of the input and output functions served by each of these constitutive components of the WCD, however varies over time in relation to the various activities that are being conducted during the WCD process.

### **II.3 The Activities of the WCD**

The activities of the Commission can be divided into three general types which are strongly interconnected: 1) the formal Work Program, 2) Commissioner deliberations and negotiations, and 3) broader communications efforts. The Work Program is the bridge between the first and last of these three. Its basic objective is to develop the most comprehensive knowledge base possible to assist the Commission in achieving its objectives while fulfilling its guiding principle through its four components which include 10 in-depth basin and national case studies, a larger survey of 150 dams around the world, 17 thematic reviews of cross-cutting issues such as dams and social impacts or international trends in project financing, and the active solicitation of stakeholder views and perspectives through regional consultations and submissions.

Each sub-component of the Work Programme contributes different types and levels of knowledge for the Commission.<sup>15</sup> While the survey of 150 dams will yield information on the broader trends and patterns with respect to the performance and decision-making with respect to dams on a relatively small number of issues, the case studies will provide more holistic histories of the development effectiveness of a smaller number of dam building experiences within river basins or countries. The contribution of the thematic reviews will be to further deepen the knowledge base by focusing on specific cross-cutting issues. Finally, acknowledging that a significant amount of the conflicts over big dams lies not in controversies over specific pieces of information but on broader debates about values, the Work Program consciously includes an open invitation to all stakeholders to offer their views and perspectives through written submissions and, if selected, through oral presentations at the various regional consultations of the WCD.

The sub-component of the stakeholder inputs overlaps a great deal with the WCD's broader communications activities which include the WCD Forum gatherings, regional consultations, web-site, regular newsletter, as well as the active participation of Secretariat members and Commissioners in various meetings, conferences and other events around the world. The primary purpose of the communications activities is to insure that the all stakeholders who want to be informed about, participate in and contribute to the WCD are able to do so. In addition, a comprehensive communications program increases the likelihood that the WCD reaches "beyond the usual suspects". But another, perhaps equally important, purpose of the communications activities is to generate greater awareness of the Commission's mandate, structure, and activities in order to increase the WCD's profile and legitimacy among various stakeholder groups and networks.

The third core activity of the WCD process is the ongoing deliberations and negotiations of the Commissioners. While the Secretariat members work full time managing the Work Programme and implementing the broader communications activities, Commissioners meet every three or four months (for a total of 9 meetings in the slightly more than two year period) to discuss the progress of the Commission, evaluate the emerging knowledge base, and negotiate through divergent views and perspectives. In between these meetings, Commissioners often attend meetings, review specific areas of the Work Program in which they have deep interest or expertise, as well as communicate through e-mail, regular

---

<sup>15</sup> See World Commission on Dams, "Work Programme," Cape Town: WCD, December 1999.

mail, telephone and fax. But the most important work of the Commissioners is their active and serious involvement in the discussions and negotiations at their regular meetings.

Given the diversity that exists among Commissioners and the extremely active professional lives all of them lead, their continuing involvement in the Commission is a persistent challenge. And as the focus of their meetings moves from the stage of identifying priorities and formulating the WCD Work Program and communication activities towards more substantive discussion and negotiation, the possibilities for greater levels of conflict significantly increases. A strategy that was helpful early on was to have Commissioners focus on process issues rather than substantive debate, especially on formulating a common set of strategies to raise the profile and budget of the WCD. A second strategy has been to have the Commissioners present themselves as a corporate unit through various joint activities (such as at Forum meetings, regional consultations or with selected field trips) rather than as individuals. A third strategy has been to have Commissioners focus on the findings and conclusions to be derived from the common knowledge base that is being assembled through the Work Program, rather than negotiate on the basis of their own personal experience. A fourth strategy has been to identify areas of convergence to build a basis from which the remaining divergences could be addressed. But as the Commissioners move forward towards negotiating the more difficult and conflictual sets of substantive issues, the need for other strategies to be utilized will no doubt be increased. Clearly greater use can be made of best practice negotiation and mediation techniques as the process unfolds.

In summary then, the WCD involves three core sets of activities which serve different functions but are interlinked and often overlap. The Work Program is geared towards developing the knowledge base that will provide the raw materials for both the Commissioners' deliberations/negotiations as well as the final outputs of the WCD. The communications activities contribute to the implementation and enrichment of the Work Program and Commissioners' deliberations/negotiations by encouraging submissions and participation and also raise the profile through disseminating information about the progress of the WCD. The Commissioners' deliberations/negotiations have shaped the direction of the Work Program and communications activities and will ultimately determine the content of the WCD's recommendations, final products and follow-up agenda.

## **II.4 The Challenges and Future Prospects of the WCD**

The range of challenges faced by the WCD is vast and many of already been highlighted. In this section, some challenges that were either not envisaged or have have not be addressed well by the Commission are identified. These include: 1) the need to acquire at least the cooperation if not the broader engagement of governments, 2) the difficulty of getting the certain segments of the private sector to take a more pro-active role, 3) the constraints on outreach to affected people at the grassroots in the developing world, 4) the potential inability to capture best knowledge and best practice globally, and 5) the question of how the WCD's recommendations can be activated and implemented after the Commission ceases to exist. The Commission's ultimate impact will be strongly conditioned by the extent to which the Commission can meet at least some of these challenges, in addition to the others that have been mentioned previously.

As an independent international commission with an advisory and not adjudicatory role, the WCD has often been rebuffed by governments as being "self-appointed" or as being without "locus standi". Moreover the WCD has on occasion just been ignored by governments who don't see why they should be interested in this maverick international experiement. Because implementation of the WCD Work Program has required at least the approval if not the cooperation of governments, cold shoulders from governments have slowed down the assembly of the knowledge base a great deal. Moreover, implementation of the WCD recommendations will ultimately involve governments and thus the long term prospects of WCD impact can be significantly curtailed by weak government involvement with the Commission.

Several tactics have been used effectively to engage governments. Commission members, and in particular the Chair, as well as Secretariat members have communicated directly and in a sustained way with various government officals to persuade them of the WCD's importance. Various Forum members, such as the World Bank, have urged governments to allow the Commission entry into their countries to implement Work Program activities.