
The World Commission on Dams: Lessons Learned About Setting Global Standards

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In talking about the World Commission on Dams, I'm going to give some tentative—and I emphasize tentative—personal reflections on some of the lessons we've learned about setting a global standard. Ismail's talk earlier today was almost an introduction to why there is a World Commission on Dams. The 45,000 dams that have been built have provided enormous benefits—including hydroelectricity, irrigation, water supply, and flood control—but at a great cost, of which we are more aware now than we were before: the annual displacement of millions of people as well as environmental impacts ranging from the drying up of rivers to the disappearance of the Aral Sea and half of the world's wetlands. For example, we saw on a recent trip to India that the Yamuna Barage had a nice fish ladder, but no water on either side. Moreover, benefits, broadly defined, have been inequitable, especially from hydropower, with most of the benefits going to urban areas. Few of them went to rural areas, which nevertheless bore the costs. So dams have become highly controversial. This very day, for example, the *New York Times* reported on the Western China Project as a "North-South struggle over aid." Developing countries are pulling one way and the United States and the industrialized countries are pulling another. With dams we see again and again that existing mechanisms cannot resolve the resulting problems.

How the World Commission on Dams came into being
The World Commission on Dams (the WCD) was formed because there was no forum for trying to reach a consensus on how to ensure that the "good dams" were built quickly and efficiently, and that the "bad dams"

were not built. Bob Picciotto, who is sitting here, played an important role in getting the WCD started. After an OED review of the impact of World Bank lending for large dams, Bob wisely pulled together a coalition of the IUCN and the Bank to convene a meeting in April 1999 of 35 stakeholders from NGOs, the private sector, funding agencies, and indigenous people—ostensibly to review the OED report. Predictably, the report was dead on arrival because of its Bank-related authorship. The content didn't matter: the Bank was not a credible interpreter of events. What came out of this meeting is a story in and of itself—a story of careful facilitation. The consensus was that the world needed an independent body with moral authority to do three things: first, review the development effectiveness of large dams; second, assess alternatives for developing energy and water resources; and third (and most important), try to develop internationally acceptable criteria and guidelines for the planning, construction, operation, and decommissioning of dams.

We discussed not only “what” to do but “how” to do it. The consensus, appropriately, was that this should be an open, transparent, independent, inclusive, and consensus-driven approach, accessible to all stakeholders. The IUCN and the Bank were charged with bringing this commission into being with a 10-person “reference group,” representing various stakeholders. Bob happily passed that over to me and others. I don't know how many years I aged in the next year.

Our first critical step in forming this commission was to get a chair. The chair we selected was Professor Kader Asmal, South Africa's Minister of Water at the time. Kader Asmal is a politician whose close association with Nelson Mandela brought legitimacy to this choice. He is a lawyer with a distinguished history in human rights activism, which added enormously to his credibility. That he had played a key role in South Africa's transition was important, and as Minister of Water he had handled the Lesotho Highlands Water Project, a celebrated case of multiple requests to the Inspection Panel. In my view, if Kader Asmal had not agreed to be chair, we would have had no commission. There was no second choice—nobody else on whom everybody could agree—a vulnerability that is rather frightening.

Next we held an important discussion about commissioners. Should we have a commission like Ismail Serageldin's World Commission on Water, with notable people in an independent capacity, or should this commission be people who clearly represented involved interest groups? Without a good deal of careful thought, we leaned toward the second option: respected individuals who were associated with interest groups. We then spent a year trying to put this commission together. Kader was absolutely critical in this process. Once he was appointed, he very much took charge. He was the source of moral authority that kept contending forces at the

table, which neither the Bank nor the World Conservation Union could have done, in my view. Kader saw the big picture and kept the process going. In the midst of all this, when discussions were hot and heavy, an election was held in South Africa and Kader became the fourth most popularly elected politician in the ANC. The sense of personal political legitimacy he received from that democratic process was tremendously important; he felt a deep sense of entitlement in pushing forward through a difficult and contentious process, which came close to breaking down many times. A South-South solidarity developed—in this case between South Africa and Narmada¹—which changed the normal dynamic (in which the noisiest groups from the North often disrupted the process).

We eventually got a commission representing a wide range of views. The commission secretariat was located, importantly, in South Africa—not in Washington, Geneva, or New York. Financial contributions came from a wide range of donors—something like 50 donors—from government agencies (40 percent), multilateral agencies (6 percent), the private sector (27 percent), and NGOs and foundations (24 percent).

Where things stand

The work program has been ambitious: All of the different stakeholders have participated in developing a knowledge base. Substantial regional consultations and stakeholder meetings have allowed all of the interested parties to have their say. The commission has also convened a World Commission on Dams forum, including all of the groups who were involved initially—about 70 people—against whom they have constantly checked the commission's progress.

Has the commission operated with complete transparency? Yes and no. The gathering of data was all open, transparent, and participatory. And there is a commitment that the secretariat will produce three "synthesis papers" (on development effectiveness, alternatives, and criteria) which will be subject to wide peer review. But at the end of the day the commissioners will have to review all of this work (and especially the three synthesis papers) and come to their own conclusions.

Last weekend the commission met in Cape Town, where all of the commissioners worked on the first draft of their final report. That's where things stand right now. The report is due in August.

Lessons learned

From this experience I have learned several things about setting global standards on issues that are hotly contested. First, *there must be demand for solving a problem*. You cannot get people to spend an enormous amount of time

on a vaguely defined issue. It has to be a problem that really bothers them in order to make them want to go into that meeting room. Once that happened, of course, the problem was not really dams. A whole set of general issues, including sustainable development and water and energy resource management, got addressed through our specific focus on dams. That gave us an enormous advantage.

Second, and for me the most important, *the people driving the process should be the people who have to live with its consequences*. That Kader is a minister in a country where he has to pay attention to development, the environment, and so on was tremendously important. He also has relations with others in developing countries, who expect him to represent their interests in the process. As World Bank President James Wolfensohn said when he met with Kader Asmal and some of the commissioners—"the real test of the report will be whether the governments of developing countries accept the recommendations of the Commission." Having a minister from a developing country as the chair greatly increases the chances of this happening. You also need people like Medha Patkar who has spent her life campaigning for the rights of resettled people on the Narmada, and like Goran Lindahl who is CEO of ABB, the world's biggest supplier of engineering equipment.² These people had no interest in attending a seminar; they came because they had real interests at stake.

A critical, related issue here is the degree to which it is the commissioners and not the secretariat (which is not nearly as balanced as the commission) plays the dominant role—the familiar "principal-agent" problem. As with all else, time will tell!

Third, *moral leadership really matters*, and so, in my view, does political leadership. This is not a technocratic issue. Both the sense of legitimacy Kader brought to this process and his skills as a politician were vital to the process. His experience managing "impossible transitions" was helpful in forging consensus and keeping his eye on the ball. Before the forum meeting began, for example, Ahmed Kathrada took all of the people from the forum to Robben Island, where Mandela and he had been imprisoned for 27 years. Kader had a clear purpose in having the group go there. He wanted to remind people of what really mattered, that there was more at stake than their own personal interest. He wanted them to remember that this had been done before. I'm South African and can say that 10 years ago none of us thought what happened in South Africa would happen. Kader has been heavily involved in that, and it was interesting watching him use that experience to bring people back to the table when fissures began to appear in the process.

Fourth, *the World Bank plays a different role at different times*. In stage one, we used the convening power of OED and the Bank to get the commission launched. During stage two, the Bank supported the commission as it worked toward a consensus, but rigorously respected the commission's independence. (In the view of some, we have been too "hands-off" in the

process—only time will tell whether this is true.) Depending on whether or not the recommendations pass “the Wolfensohn test” (namely, will our borrowers want to implement its recommendations and will private financiers and developers be willing to engage in what has become a costly and risky business), the Bank will probably play an active supporting role in stage three—dissemination. And during stage four—implementation—the Bank will also, again depending on the commission’s findings, play a strong role in demonstration.

Fifth, *don’t count your chickens before they hatch*. This has been an extraordinarily successful process, and none of us thought, a few years ago, that we would get as far as we have. But the commissioners have not yet come to agreement; this is not yet a done deal. And if they do come to agreement, what does that mean? We still have to hope that the report is both implementable and implemented. Will there be a consensus in the broader community? We hope so. The final test, of course, will be if we can do a better job out in the real world, which was the whole purpose of the commission. Can the 45,000 existing dams be operated better? Can we ensure that good new dams are designed, built, and operated appropriately? Will the many dams that should never have been built get screened out? And finally, will developing countries find the right balance? It isn’t simple. Dams provide huge benefits of hydropower, irrigation, and flood protection, which are desperately needed in many of our borrowing countries, but there are large social and environmental costs. The test is whether the World Commission on Dams will lead to people living a better life.

Notes

1. A dam on the Narmada river in India became such a cause célèbre with environmentalists that the Bank pulled out of its investments there and a commission was appointed. Narmada has become a symbol for concerns about the resettlement of indigenous people.
2. Regrettably, since the launch of the commission, ABB decided to get out of the hydro business, raising questions about the degree to which the interests of developers would be represented on the commission.