

The World Commission on Dams

A New Framework for Decision-Making

One of the greatest challenges facing Greater Mekong Subregion countries is deciding how development in the Mekong River basin should proceed. GMS countries, with support from institutions such as the Asian Development Bank, have proposed and constructed several dams on the Mekong and its tributaries which have led to increases in poverty and environmental decline.

The World Commission on Dams (WCD) report, released in November 2000, proposes a new framework for decision-making that can help resolve the competing needs in the Mekong basin.

What was the World Commission on Dams?

The World Commission on Dams was established by the World Bank and IUCN – The World Conservation Union in May 1998 in response to the growing opposition to large dams. Its mandate was to:

- review the development effectiveness of large dams and assess alternatives for water resources and energy development; and
- develop internationally acceptable criteria, guidelines and standards for the planning, design, appraisal, construction, operation, monitoring and decommissioning of dams.

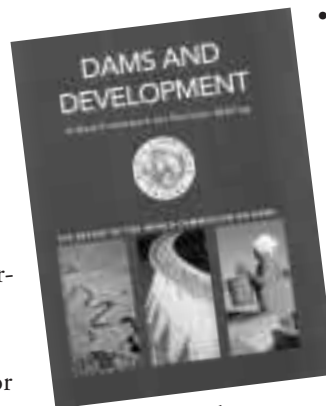
The 12 Commission members came from a variety of backgrounds, representing a broad spectrum of interests in large dams – including governments and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), dam operators and grassroots people’s movements, corporations and academics, industry associations and consultants.

What did the WCD do?

The WCD relied on extensive public consultation and commissioned a large volume of research. An associated Forum with 68 members from 36 countries representing a cross-section of interests, views and institutions was consulted during the Commission’s work. The \$10 million necessary to fund the Commission came from more than 50 governments, international agencies, private corporations (including many of the main dam industry multinationals), private charitable foundations and NGOs.

To conduct the most comprehensive and independent review of the world’s dams to date, and

base its conclusions on a solid foundation, the WCD commissioned and assessed:



- in-depth case studies of eight large dams on five continents, and papers assessing the overall dam-building records of China, India and Russia;
- 17 thematic reviews on social, environmental, economic and financial issues; alternatives to dams; different planning approaches and environmental impact assessments;
- brief reviews of 125 large dams in 56 countries;
- four public hearings in different regions; and
- 950 submissions by interested individuals, groups and institutions.

The Commission’s final report, *Dams and Development: A New Framework for Decision-Making*, was released in November 2000.

What were the WCD’s main findings?

The WCD found that while “dams have made an important and significant contribution to human development, and benefits derived from them have been considerable ... in too many cases an unacceptable and often unnecessary price has been paid to secure those benefits, especially in social and environmental terms, by people displaced, by communities downstream, by taxpayers and by the natural environment.” Applying a “balance-sheet” approach to assess the costs and benefits of large dams that trades off one group’s loss with another’s gain is seen as unacceptable, particularly given existing commitments to human rights and sustainable development.

The WCD's final report provides ample evidence that large dams have failed to produce as much electricity, provide as much water, or control as much flood damage as their supporters originally predicted. In addition, these projects regularly suffer major cost overruns and time delays. Furthermore, the report found that:

- Large dams have forced 40-80 million people from their homes and lands, with impacts including extreme economic hardship, community disintegration, and an increase in mental and physical health problems. Indigenous, tribal and peasant communities have suffered disproportionately. People living downstream of dams have also suffered from water-borne diseases and the loss of natural resources upon which their livelihoods depended.
- Large dams cause great environmental damage, including the extinction of many fish and other aquatic species, huge losses of forest, wetlands and farmland.
- The benefits of large dams have largely gone to the rich while the poor have borne the costs.

What were the WCD's recommendations?

The Commission provides a new framework for decision-making on water and energy projects based on recognizing the rights of, and assessing the risks to, all stakeholders. Those who would be adversely affected should participate in the planning and decision-making process and have a share in project benefits. The Commission's main recommendations include the following:

- No dam should be built without the "demonstrable acceptance" of the affected people, and without the free, prior and informed consent of affected indigenous and tribal peoples.
- Comprehensive and participatory assessments of people's water and energy needs, and different options for meeting these needs, should be developed before proceeding with any project.
- Priority should be given to maximizing the efficiency of existing water and energy systems before building any new projects.

- Periodic participatory reviews should be done for existing dams to assess such issues as dam safety, and possible decommissioning.
- Mechanisms should be developed to provide reparations, or retroactive compensation, for those who are suffering from existing dams, and to restore damaged ecosystems.

Why is the WCD important?

The WCD prepared the first global, independent review of large dams. The process was transparent and participatory, and extensive research was conducted. The WCD found that the economic, social and environmental costs of large dams are high and often outweigh their benefits, and that alternatives for water and energy are available, viable and often untested. The WCD put forward a series of recommendations that have relevance not just for energy and water planning, but for development planning generally.

As an internationally respected commission, the WCD's findings and recommendations can carry great weight in dam debates worldwide. What the WCD says is matched in importance by who is saying it. The WCD was co-sponsored by the World Bank. The commissioners included the Chief Executive Officer of engineering multinational company ABB and an ex-President of the International Commission on Large Dams (ICOLD), the lead professional association of the global big dam industry. At the same time, it included representatives of dam-affected people, NGOs and indigenous people. The report was unanimously endorsed by all the Commissioners.

What is the WCD's relevance for the Greater Mekong Subregion?

The WCD recommendations suggest a participatory process for determining how to best meet energy, water and flood management needs. As the WCD represents international best practice, GMS countries and their donors should work towards adopting these recommendations into national law and the policies of donor agencies. No river development projects should go forward that are not in accordance with WCD recommendations.

For more information, visit the following web sites:

World Commission on Dams: www.dams.org

International Rivers Network: www.irn.org



International Rivers Network

1847 BERKELEY WAY, BERKELEY, CA 94703, US

TEL: 1-510-848-1155 FAX: 1-510-848-1008

WEB: WWW.IRN.ORG EMAIL: IRN@IRN.ORG