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Briefing Paper

The World Commission on Dams – Ten Years on.

In 2010, the World Commission on Dams celebrated its tenth anniversary. A decade after it was launched, what is the relevance of the WCD today for ensuring our rivers are sustained for future generations?

What is the World Commission on Dams?

By the late 1990s large dams had become widely known as the cause of massive disruption for local people and were a direct contributor to tensions over the use and access to water across the globe. The independent World Commission on Dams (WCD) was initiated to bring together different stakeholders in dams to negotiate an approach to better decision making on water infrastructure.

The WCD was a global multi-stakeholder body constituted in 1998 by the World Bank and World Conservation Union (IUCN) to consider the impacts and development effectiveness of large dams, consider alternatives to dams and to develop guidelines for decision making on planning, constructing, operating and ultimately decommissioning large dams.

The WCD delivered its final report in 2000¹. It was launched in South Africa by Nelson Mandela and it documented the lessons learned from a century of building large dams, and most importantly, sets out a framework and guidelines for better decision making for the development of water infrastructure, alongside the protection of the environment and the rights of people who use and rely on rivers and their resources for their livelihoods.

¹ Dams and Development: A New Framework for Decision Making; <http://www.dams.org/report/>

What are the outcomes:

The WCD presents a framework for decision making, which includes 5 core values, 7 Strategic Priorities and 26 guidelines. It also includes an extensive “knowledge base” made up of the research, commissioned papers, case studies and submissions that were received for the WCD process. The WCD proposes that the most favourable development results will be delivered from negotiated outcomes based on rights- and-risks assessments.

The WCD core values and strategic priorities are generally accepted without dispute by all stakeholders. The core values are:

Equity	Efficiency	Participatory decision making	Sustainability	Accountability
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The seven strategic priority areas for improved decision making on dams are:

- gaining public acceptance for key decisions (SP1);
- the need to undertake comprehensive assessment of all available options for meeting water and energy needs (SP2);
- addressing outstanding issues from existing dams before building new ones (SP3);
- the importance of protecting healthy rivers for livelihoods (SP4);
- recognising the entitlements and equally sharing benefits (SP5);
- ensuring compliance (SP6) and;
- sharing rivers for peace, development and security (SP7).

These are then further articulated into 26 guidelines for good practice implementation of the principles outlined in the strategic priorities.



Current status

The WCD recommendations form the basis for many decision-making processes for dams around the world and constitute international soft law. The rights approach espoused in the WCD, reflects International Human Rights recognised in a range of UN conventions. The recommendations have been adapted to national contexts in various public dialogue processes around the world, as well as being promoted through development partnerships amongst donor/recipient governments.

But despite this, many key dam building nations, institutions and dam developers are not using the WCD comprehensively. Some feel that its approach to assessing rights and risks is not practicable.

But some areas covered by the WCD, considered contentious at the time, have seen a lot of progress over the decade since its launch. For example WCD promoted the importance of gaining the free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) of Indigenous Peoples affected by a project, and in 2007 the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples came into force confirming the right to FPIC. Also, the concept of environmental flows for rivers has become far more accepted in planning infrastructure and managing rivers for environmental and social outcomes. And there is a growing acceptance that avoiding social and human rights impacts is good risk management for businesses developing and operating infrastructure projects; and that projects based on strong human rights based impact assessments will more likely gain (and retain) a social license to operate.

Why isn't the WCD framework more widely implemented?

Even though the WCD core values and strategic priorities are accepted by many stakeholders in dam development, some claim that implementing the guidelines comprehensively would lead to no infrastructure ever being built again. Some nations and intergovernmental processes do use the WCD though – such as those who require assessment against WCD compliance for accessing carbon credit markets². Others have used the WCD as a base for stakeholder dialogue, and some private institutions have used elements of the WCD to inform policy and decision making. But despite this uptake the key challenge remains for seeing the WCD approach used more consistently and comprehensively.

² Eg. EU linking directive; German Government

What needs to happen?

Globally the competition for scarce resources is only increasing. Water, as a fundamental building block for life, is at the heart of the tension. Decision making on how we use, manage and preserve water resources and rivers now and into the future is one of the fundamental international challenges; heightened in importance by the effects of climate change. The outcomes of these decisions directly affect the environment, the poor and those who rely on rivers for their livelihoods. In many ways this was exactly what the WCD was constituted to assist with, and as such, points to the relevance of its recommendations in coming decades. But whether or not the WCD itself is the focus, recognizing the rights of, and assessing the risks to all parties affected by water infrastructure remains essential to better sustainable development outcomes.



Further reading:

International Rivers Briefing Kit. *Protecting Rivers and Rights: The World Commission on Dams Recommendations in Action*. Available at

<http://www.internationalrivers.org/node/5593>

Dams and Development: A New Framework for Decision Making. Available at

<http://www.dams.org/report/>