

# UPDATE

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## **Mega Dams and the World Commission on Dams**

*How do governments devise an adequate mechanism of consultations before a project is planned, so that it does not get delayed because of opposition from communities facing displacement or by groups concerned about the long-term adverse environmental impact.*

One of the inevitable consequences of damming a river and flooding an area could be the resettlement of those who live there. Resettlement is not simply a technical term involving the migration of people from one place to another. Exodus causes agony of rootlessness. In fact, it is an act of violence, a coercive effort to inflict pain on the lives and minds of the people. Expectedly, only the poor people are the victims of such an exercise.

It is not surprising that those who are embarked for resettlement are frequently unwilling to move. Love of birthplace, no matter how inhospitable it may appear to others, is a universal human characteristic. Land is the very charter on which the Adivasi / indigenous culture is based, the resting place of ancestors and the source of spiritual power. It is thus regarded with respect and reverence. As a result, large dam projects, specially the developing countries, ironically have become the symbols of survival, anxiety and agony for people affected by these projects, whose voices and grievances are not heard by the project authorities. In spite of its adverse effects on the people and the environment, no government in the world is ready to reconcile with the emerging challenges posed by these large dams. The proponents have been saying that dams are necessary for electricity, irrigation and water supply. According to them, hydroelectric power supply remains very cheap and less polluting compared to other sources of electricity such as nuclear and thermal. They add that in many developing countries, safe drinking water and irrigation are one of the biggest problems. Therefore, having mega dams would eventually solve all those problems.

### **The Dams World over: Development and Disaster**

However, many critiques have observed that large dams should be a great source of hazards of many kinds. They argue that such large-scale projects not only destroy the environment but the lives of those people on whose cost they are built. Besides, large dam projects have proved to be unreliable. In fact, a study indicates that 1% of such project fail every year. For example when the 23-meter high *Johnstown* dam in the Pennsylvania broke, it led to the death of 2,000 to 10,000 people. Another very common feature is the 'overtopping' during floods. Such overtopping occurred with Maichu II dam in Gujarat in 1979 and caused the death of 1,500 people downstream. In the recent years the relationship between large dams and earthquakes has come under renewed scrutiny as large reservoirs have proved to be inducing earthquakes. In spite of very genuine and strong criticism, support for such projects remain intact. The Governments and its officials remain unconcerned.

It is not surprising that people affected by these projects have resisted against the destruction caused to their lives and their livelihood by such large-scale development projects around the globe. In Sweden, Switzerland and Norway, widespread public opposition has stopped construction of all large-scale projects. In France, the proposed *Serre de la Fare* dam on the Loire River was scrapped in 1994. In Canada, a planned expansion of the massive *James Bay* project was cancelled after intense opposition led by the affected indigenous peoples.

In Thailand, widespread protests by dam-affected communities led the Prime Minister's office to announce in 1995 that no more dams would be built for power production. Meanwhile, in Nepal, the *Arun III* dam was cancelled in 1996 after severe public opposition. In India, the *Sardar Sarovar* dam on the Narmada River has

been stalled. The Government has been cornered to reconsider the 'Tl'hri dam project, which is coming on the River Ganges. Recently, opposition has been growing even to inedium-sized dams as well.

The large dams even today are considered to be ultimate symbol of prosperity. The Indian government, ever since it began to celebrate such large dams to generate electricity to meet the growing industrial and domestic demands, to control devastating floods and most important, to provide irrigation and water, went to the extent of declaring them as "Temples of Modern India". However, according to the reports of the Public Accounts Committee (1982-83), of the 205 major projects taken up since independence, only 29 had been completed by the stipulated target date. As many as 16 cases of failure of large dams have been reported in the country. Out of them, 13 were reported in the post-independent era and 11 had reportedly failed within 5 years of completion.

### **The World Commission On Dams**

In order to reconcile the emerging unrest from people's movement, International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and World Bank agreed to jointly host a workshop on the future of large dams. In April 1997, Stakeholders representatives from Governments, civil society organisations, international financial institutions and the private sector met at a workshop in Gland, Switzerland. The most important recommendation of the workshop was to establish a two-year World Commission on Dams. Thus the WCD was established to address a central issue of controversy in the global debate on sustainable development. It provides a unique opportunity to bring into focus many assumptions and paradigms which are at the centre of research to reconcile economic growth, social equality, environmental conservation and political participation in the changing global context. This independent commission has a two-year mandate centred on reviewing the development effectiveness of large dams, alternatives and developing standards criteria and guidelines to advise future decision making.

The commission will be an independent body and its remit will include issues that address both broader considerations such as water and energy policy as well as more specific technical questions, such as resettlement, compensation of affected communities, ecological impacts and wider effects in basic-wide catchment contexts. The commission's work will be of an advisory nature not investigatory in the sense of judicial commission. Its scope of activities will include project specific broader river basin and selected national case studies, issue specific research, consultations hearing, panels or task forces on key issues, research on selective methodological questions as well as Any other tools of information gathering and assessment. The commission's reports will include recommendations on policies, standards guidelines, best practices and codes of conduct. The result would also include an understanding of the accuracy of predictions of costs and benefits used in the dam planning process and of their overall development effectiveness and the need for restoration and preparation where necessary.

The work programme of WCD will serve the purpose of independently verifying facts and views, as a basis from which commission members can proceed in formulating their questions raised in the WCD mandate. Case studies and thematic reviews will provide a means of studying in detail specific dams, river basing, sectoral strategies and key issues. The work programme also facilitates inputs from interested groups and individuals through a range of process for interaction.

In addition, a *Consultative Groups* known as the WCD Forum, consisting of 50 members representing a broad cross-section of stakeholder views and institutions has been established and will have ongoing input into the Commission. The Commission's General Secretary and Secretariat staff is based in Cape Town, South Africa. The Commission will present its report and recommendations to the international community by June 2000. Governments, World Bank, NGOs, Industries would fund the commission, as well as, both pro and anti-dam activists groups.

When the Commission has begun its First hearing on large dams, it had chosen the South-Asian region. Its first meeting was scheduled in India on 21 and 22 of September 1998 Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. But, Govt. of India has refused to allow WCD to hold its public hearing. The Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission Mr. Jaswant Singh, succumbed to the pressure of the Gujarat Government and asked the WCD to defer its visit to India. In his message Mr. Singh said that, 'this is not an opportune time for the visit of the commission to India in view of the tendency of the Sardar Sarovar case in the Supreme Court of India' Even as the Commission stressed repeatedly that it does not seek to adjudicate on specific disputes or events surrounding large dams.

Instead, the hearings were planned to provide the commission with facts and perspectives, which would help it to prepare a report within the next 18 months. This report would be advisory in nature and would seek to influence international public opinion on the Future of large dams. But the government was in no mood to listen to these points, This sudden reversal on the part of the government explicitly shows us that the BJP led coalition Government at the Centre is all against the idea of public debate and free flow of different ideas. This undemocratic. Anti-people move of this government has been criticised and condemned by many environmentalists, political ideologues, senior journalists, lawyers other eminent persons and the victims of the dam projects. While commenting on this move of the government, leading environmentalist and one of the two members from India, on the WCD, Medha Patkar hit out at the BJP's leadership for its highly insensitive move.

Unlike the unceremonious and last-minute cancellation of WCD's maiden hearing in India. The Sri Lankan Government welcomed the commission to hold its meeting in Colombo on 11 - 14 December 1998. The focal point of the first day was on the multi-million dollar *Mahaweli* power and irrigation project. The Government presented its arguments by highlighting the positive aspects of the projects. But, Ms. A. R. Karunawathie, President of the *Samagi Kantha Samithiya* (Women's Peace Organisation), presented a different picture as how the project became the source of agony and trauma for the people.

Subsequently, the controversial Kalahagh dam, downstream of the existing Tarbela dam on the Indus River in Pakistan came up for discussion. To many people's surprise, Managing Director of the project said the project stands shelved, as there was a strong opposition to the dam from many quarters. Both supporters and critiques had a conciliatory approach to each other, in the sense that there was an acknowledgement by both sides that environmental and social considerations had not been taken into account when the two large dams, the *Mangala* and the *Tarbela*, were built in the 60s and 70s.

In spite of no official representation to the proceedings from India, the supporters of large dams including three ex-secretaries of water resource ministry. Government of India, as well as the critiques have put forward their arguments. All the presentations focussed on the central issue: How do governments devise an adequate mechanism of consultations before a project is planned, so that it does not get delayed because of opposition from communities facing displacement or by groups concerned about the long-term adverse environmental impact. Representations from India, Nepal and Bangladesh placed before the commission members both in defence and in opposition of large dams. After having two days of hearing from various quarters the WCD concluded its First public hearing on large dams.

The WCD is an opportunity made possible due to the efforts of people struggling against large dams all over the world. To make best use of this opportunity, there is a need for concerted efforts on the part of all concerned individuals and organisations to actively participate in the WCD process. With a view to achieve this in South Asia, there is a process started for the formation of an active networking of concerned individuals and organisations in the region. The main role of the networking is to disseminate information about WCD and its activities and also to Facilitate inputs from various parties concerned into WCDs investigations.

For one thing is quite clear, those who have been marginalised and denied right to live, WCDs proposed visit to India was actually an attempt to provide space for these victims of many a development project and to provide a platform to articulate their grievances. But the victims have been denied an opportunity by the present BJP government on the basis of a flimsy pretext of the Sardar Sarovar Project case pending in the Supreme Court of India.

The Commission however is determined to go ahead with its hearing programme in other parts of the globe. And will) a strong commitment to its objective of bringing a more reasonable approach to investments in large dam projects by conducting the first-ever independent global review of their costs and benefits and the consequences of damming a river.

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Dutch decide to let flood waters flow Low-lying nation has relied on dikes for centuries.

AMSTERDAM, Netherlands - The little Dutch boy's days are numbered. The youngster who saved the Dutch from watery graves by plugging his fabled Finger into a leaky dike got it wrong. Hood-control experts now say. Their latest technique in the centuries-old struggle to keep people's feet dry in the low-lying Netherlands is nothing short of radical: strategic dike breaching. This fundamental change - selectively opening dikes to ease the destructive force of surging water by spilling some into unpopulated areas - comes as a \$1.6 billion project to strengthen the country's vast system of earthen levies nears completion.

"We can't just go on endlessly building dikes higher and higher," said Henk Zomerdijk, mayor of the villages of Echteld and Ochten in the central Netherlands "The higher they are, the danger there is if they break."

Flooding is always a threat for this soggy country, more than half of which lies below sea level.

Mr. Zomerdijk knows the danger well. His villages were the scenes of frenzied, round-the-clock dike strengthening in February 1995, when the swollen Waal River came perilously close to breaking its banks. "If the dike had broken, most of Ochten would simply have been washed away," he said.

Some of the Dutch dikes date to the Middle Ages. Switching from reinforcing to breaching will take some getting used to for a land where resisting the forces of water is deeply rooted in the national psyche.

But with climate watchers predicting wetter winters in the next century, the realization is dawning on the 15 million Dutch that no matter how hard they try, nature always threatens to gain the upper hand.

"Despite all our work, it remains difficult to keep our heads above water." Monique de Vries, the secretary of state for water policy, told a recent symposium on the future of water management in the Netherlands. By breaching dikes with sluices at carefully selected points, water managers hope to be able to keep flooding where they want it - in unpopulated fields and out of cities and towns.

The Dutch call the technique, which also includes deepening river channels, "making room for the river."

"We must reserve space now for extreme conditions." Ms. de Vries said. "It is a calculated sacrifice."

The new policy doesn't mean the end of the storied Dutch dikes. The ubiquitous walls are still vital to the nation's survival. Without them, much of the country would regularly be flooded. "You can't just throw away

700 years of work," said Johannes van Blommestein, chairman of the Association of Dutch River Municipalities. "We must carefully investigate where rivers best can be allowed to overflow."

In a taste of things to come, water managers recently knocked holes in some dikes in the northern Netherlands to prevent floodwaters from threatening homes. It was a very different story in 1995, when water from melting snow streamed out of mountain ranges hundreds of miles upstream from the Netherlands and filled rivers to the bursting point. Entire towns were threatened with devastation, prompting the largest Dutch civilian evacuation since World War II.

Soldiers and volunteers were sent to the affected areas to shore up the dikes. They held - just barely - and 250,000 people returned to dry homes. The Dutch Government, faced with the reality that the ancient dikes were weakened and vulnerable, drew up the Delta Plan for Major Rivers, an unprecedented public works program to reinforce 465 miles of dikes.

The effort, which should be completed in 2000, was hatched almost overnight and rushed into being with emergency legislation to cut through the red tape that can hold up such projects for years in the Netherlands.

Now Mr. Zomerdijk and others are appealing for similar legislation to push through plans to designate certain areas for flooding before they are developed and it is too late.

But while municipalities in the recognize the need, they are not eager to give up to water precious land that can be developed.

"Who's going to foot the bill?" Mr. van Blommestein said. "That is the question."

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