

Chapter 6

Implementing the Work Programme: Consultations and Outreach

Public consultations have increasingly become a norm for development policy processes at the regional and global levels. Because the Brundtland Commission gave public consultations higher visibility, decision-makers have viewed them as ways of raising awareness of forthcoming policies, providing a sounding board for policies' acceptability, and strengthening their content. In the recent history of global commissions, public consultations have played an important role in helping commissioners to define their problem statement and sustain wider public engagement. Multilateral development banks have increasingly built public consultations into policy processes.

For the World Commission on Dams, the regional consultations served both a fact-finding purpose and a way of raising the profile of the Commission and its work around the world. In a symbolic sense, the regional consultations were intended to portray the WCD as an open, listening commission and to make Commissioners more accessible to people. In this way, the decision to hold regional consultations grew directly from the Commission's commitment to inclusiveness and transparency and its commitment to project an appropriately unbiased image. However, raising the public profile also brought the Commission under greater scrutiny and increased the risk of alienating interest groups, if consultations went wrong.

This chapter examines the Commission's success in fulfilling the multiple objectives of the public consultations: Did the Commission gather diverse viewpoints from its consultations? Did it raise the profile of its work with concerned stakeholders? And most important, what aspects of the consultations strengthened or undermined the Commission's broader legitimacy?

A Listening Commission: The Regional Consultations

The Commission undertook four regional consultations: in South Asia, Latin America, Africa and the Middle East, and East and Southeast Asia. (See Box 6.1.) In total, 1,400 individuals from 59 countries took part in the regional consultations.¹ The Commission also held 20 country and river basin-level consultations to discuss its case studies.

Box 6.1

WCD regional consultations

- South Asia—Colombo, Sri Lanka, 10–11 December 1998
- Latin America—São Paulo, Brazil, 12–13 August 1999
- Africa / Middle East—Cairo, Egypt, 8–9 December 1999
- East and Southeast Asia—Hanoi, Vietnam, 26–27 February 2000

Source: WCD website, www.dams.org/consultations/ (28 September 2001).

Given limited funds and time, the Commission decided to focus on listening to stakeholders in world regions where dam building was high on the agenda for future development, i.e., in developing countries.² By 1998, Europe and North America had some of the longest experience in dam building, but they had largely exploited their hydro potential. Stakeholders widely accepted the emphasis on Southern regions: Not only did those regions face the greatest challenges in water and energy supply, but their citizens also had the greatest difficulty in accessing international policy fora. It was fitting that the Commission should come to them.³

*The consultations provided
legitimacy for the Commission's
final report.*

When it came to marketing the Commission's final report, the consultations served as a strong public relations tool for legitimising the product. Given the historical precedent of and increasing expectation for consultation in local, national, and international development processes, the absence of consultations would likely have undermined the Commission's credibility, particularly with civil society groups. Such mechanisms were incorporated in concurrent environment and development processes, such as the World Water Vision process. (See Box 6.2.)

The Sensitive Interface of Global Process and Local Politics

The WCD's first consultation, planned for the South Asia region and to be held in India, ran headlong into the complexities of domestic politics. Instead of an opportunity for the WCD to model how it would listen to different sides of the dams story, the event turned into a lesson on the perils of national and local politics for the perceived independence of a global commission.

The Commission chose Bhopal, in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, as its meeting site. The neighbouring state of Gujarat is intended to be the prime beneficiary of water and power from the huge and controversial Sardar Sarovar Project on the Narmada River. The Narmada River, for which more than 3,000 dams have been proposed, runs through both states. Over time, the social movement opposing the project has built up a remarkable national and global alliance of support groups. Major donors have withdrawn from the project in light of its serious social, environmental, and economic impacts, including the World Bank whose Morse Commission sounded the alarm following a thorough inquiry. This history and context made the Gujarat government particularly sensitive to international intervention.

The WCD's field trip to the Narmada Valley construction and protest sites, planned by the activist Indian Commissioner Medha Patkar, caused great concern to Gujarati officials. The

Government of India already suspected the WCD of an anti-dam bias, as recounted in Chapter 4, simply because Ms. Patkar was on the Commission. When news of the proposed siting of the consultation in Bhopal and the Commissioners' field trip to the Valley filtered out, the officials felt their worst fears about international intervention had been confirmed. The Gujarat assembly pressured the national government to withdraw its permission for the WCD meeting. The national government did so, only four days before the scheduled meeting date. The state government called the proposed WCD visit "an invasion by developed nations on under-developed countries."⁴ The Indian press carried negative reports of the WCD. Of the many columns that appeared, one went so far as to dub the WCD a "fraud commission."⁵ Another characterised the Commission as "conceived last year by a group of about 40 people from various countries to launch a campaign against large dams."⁶

*The WCD's proposed field
trip to the Narmada Valley
concerned Indian
government officials.*

This difficult beginning tarnished the Commission's reputation with external audiences and led to much soul-searching within. It taught the Commissioners and Secretariat a lesson they would never forget: the consultations of a global body can be highly sensitive in certain local and national contexts. The Commission's substitute regional consultation for South Asia was held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in December 1998. Commissioners and Secretariat staff lauded the event for its success in bringing opposing sides of the debate to the table for constructive exchange. "I never imagined seeing such democracy at work," said Medha Patkar of the diverse participation at the Colombo meeting.⁷ The Commission continued its regional consultation events in São Paulo, Cairo, and Hanoi.

Meeting Participation under Restrictive Political Regimes

The Commission chose country venues for its regional consultations based primarily on practical

Box 6.2**The World Water Vision process**

The WCD process took place at the same time as an evaluation of water management at the global level: the “Long Term Vision for Water, Life and Environment in the 21st Century,” or World Water Vision process (WWV, 1997-2000). The objective of WWV was to formulate a shared vision for how to mitigate the forthcoming global challenge of water scarcity. The exercise was based on regional and sectoral visions produced by stakeholders through a series of consultations. A complementary World Commission on Water was formed in July 1998 chaired by Ismail Serageldin, then a Vice President at the World Bank, to issue an independent report based on the visioning exercise.^a

According to the Vision report, the WWV’s consultative process involved “authorities and ordinary people, water experts and environmentalists, government officials and private sector participants, academics and NGOs.” The organisers estimate that at least 15,000 people were directly involved in drafting Vision documents for specific regions and sectors through these consultations.^b Although the WWV reached a greater number of people through its consultative process than the WCD did, the WWV provided a platform for a narrower range of stakeholders to express their views than did the WCD.

The sectoral consultations were organised around four principal themes: Water for People; Water for Food and Rural Development; Water and Nature; and Water in Rivers. Major water experts and water-related interest groups, such as the International Committee for Irrigation and Drainage (ICID) and members of the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) system, organised these consultations and wrote the resulting “Vision” documents.

The regional consultations were initiated by the regional committees of the Global Water Partnership, a pre-existing network representing “eminent expertise within each region on water resources management.”^c They took place in all major continents, as well as in major river basins or riverine systems, such as the Nile and Aral Sea Basins. Notably, the World Water Vision’s regional consultations were decentralised: “A key part of the “contract” with the groups doing the consultations was that they would be free to identify the issues of concern to them and draw their own conclusions.”^d This structure was nearly opposite to the WCD’s, in which consultations took the form of hearings and were tightly organised under the central control of the Secretariat staff. The promise of the WWV model was that stakeholders might achieve a more collaborative interaction and greater ownership through direct participation. The risk of the model was that consultations might be dominated by the actors with greatest power and authority, the water “establishment.”

Widespread accounts of the consultations, including accounts by the WWV Secretariat itself, indicate that governmental and quasi-governmental water agencies did play a dominant role.^e There was a greater effort to incorporate women’s groups and NGOs during the latter half of the process after these groups complained that

they felt excluded.^f And the sectoral consultation on Water for People, co-ordinated by the Collaborative Council on Water Supply and Sanitation, was notable for its attempt at a “bottom-up approach.”^g But the Vision’s organisers concede that overall, the process was not as inclusive of grassroots and civil society inputs as they had hoped.^h

The WWV process resulted in a global report that painted future scenarios for water use and water scarcity in broad brushstrokes and provided general recommendations for averting an acute crisis. The sheer number of large and influential water agencies involved in the process ensured that it captured headlines when the Vision report was released in March 2000 in The Hague. This event, the Second World Water Forum, involved a ministerial meeting that was well attended by international agencies and NGOs.

Advocacy NGOs were highly critical of the WWV process, to the point that they issued an alternative vision for management of the world’s water.ⁱ One NGO press release called the WWV consultations a “sham.” It charged, “The process has been controlled from the start by a small group of aid agency and water multinational officials, mainly from the Global Water Partnership, World Water Council, World Bank and Suez-Lyonnaise des Eaux. The key conclusions of the WCW [World Commission on Water] report that there is a global water shortage crisis which can only be solved with a massive increase in private funding for water projects in developing countries, backed up with guarantees from the World Bank and other aid agencies was predetermined.”^j

a. World Water Council, *World Water Vision: Making Water Everybody’s Business* (London: Earthscan, 2000). Online at: www.worldwatervision.org/reports.htm (28 September 2001).

b. World Water Council, *World Water Vision: Making Water Everybody’s Business* (London: Earthscan, 2000). Online at: www.worldwatervision.org/reports.htm (28 September 2001).

c. Global Water Partnership website, www.gwpforum.org (28 September 2001).

d. W.J. Cosgrove and F.R. Rijsberman “The Making of the World Water Vision,” March 2000, p. 5.

e. see list of consultations for the World Water Vision process, in the appendix of World Water Council, 2000. Online at: www.worldwatervision.org/Vision/Documents/Appendix.pdf (28 September 2001).

f. W.J. Cosgrove and F.R. Rijsberman “The Making of the World Water Vision,” March 2000, p. 2.

g. W.J. Cosgrove and F.R. Rijsberman “The Making of the World Water Vision,” March 2000, p. 2.

h. Personal communication with World Water Vision Management Unit staff, 10 May 2001.

i. Both Ends, *People-Oriented River Basin Management: An NGO Vision* (Netherlands, 2000).

j. Excerpted from the statement “Old Water in a New Bottle: World Water Vision is Chronically Short-sighted.” Written by International Rivers Network (USA), International Committee on Dams, Rivers and People, and Both Ends (Netherlands) and endorsed by 16 non-governmental groups from Brazil, England, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Slovakia, South Africa, Switzerland, and Thailand, 17 March 2000.

considerations: which governments were willing to grant permission, which locations were well situated geographically, and so on. For instance, Egypt was a natural crossroads between Africa and the Middle East.⁸ Vietnam provided a good opportunity to influence dam decision-making as it had so many dams on the drawing board.⁹

The host country's political regime affected stakeholder participation in Commission events.

The Commission also had to consider how a host country's political regime affected participants' ability to express themselves. For a Commission seeking to promote a new consensus on dams and to operate in an inclusive way, the choice of country venue posed important trade-offs. Countries with open democratic systems would facilitate participation of diverse stakeholder interests. Those with less of a democratic tradition would potentially constrain it. The Commission faced choices between mobilising diverse stakeholder participation in countries with open political regimes, and advancing norms of multi-stakeholder participation in countries that traditionally allowed less political space for dialogue. Yet, as WCD Chairperson Kader Asmal noted, closed decision-making processes were the very reason for the WCD's formation, and were the practices the WCD most sought to change. This observation argued for holding consultations where democratic process was weak, with the intent of advancing norms of public participation.¹⁰

Among the WCD's choices, the political environments in Sri Lanka and Brazil allowed for expression of diverse viewpoints in the dams debate. By contrast, in Egypt and Vietnam the number of independent civil society groups was limited.

In Egypt, the government had passed a law in 1998 requiring governmental intervention in the management decisions of non-governmental organisations.¹¹ Environmental NGOs, while regional and global in their vision for environmental protection, dared not question the equity and benefits-sharing aspects of large water projects¹² and this was reflected in the limited nature of the

Egyptian presentations at the WCD event. (See Box 6.3.) In Vietnam, the government has long discouraged independent civil society organising. The only independent Vietnamese voices at the Hanoi consultation, as opposed to ministry views, came from staff of an international NGO.¹³

At the same time, both the Egyptian and Vietnamese consultations, particularly the Hanoi meeting, illustrated the WCD's ability to be a catalyst for greater openness. The WCD consultation took place at a time of opening in Vietnam, only two months after the national government passed a decree recognising non-governmental entities ("foundations") for the first time. The Commission required freedom from restrictions on travel by participants from around the region as a condition for holding the meeting in Hanoi, and

Box 6.3

The missing voice of Egyptian Nubians

The Aswan High Dam, completed in 1972, is a huge monument to centralised development. The dam was built to reduce Egypt's vulnerability to flood and drought and expand its irrigated agriculture. A total of 120,000 ethnic minority Nubians were displaced from their homelands in Egypt and Sudan during the dam's construction.^a The displaced Nubian population on the Egyptian side of the border reached 50,000. The government never recognised some families' claims for compensation.^b

At the World Commission on Dams' regional consultation in Cairo on 8-9 December 1999, a morning was dedicated to hearings about Egypt's large dams experience. These presentations showed only the official history. They covered the development benefits to Egypt of the Aswan High Dam and, to a limited degree, contentions over environmental impacts. In spite of outstanding issues around compensation to the affected Nubian community and long-term impacts of loss of cultural heritage, social justice and distributional issues around water in Egypt were not part of the agenda.^c The missing voices of the Egyptian Nubians from the regional consultation demonstrate the compromises to full and frank dialogue that occur when a global Commission, seeking to establish democratic process and norms, chooses to operate in an authoritarian context.

^a Personal communication with Commissioner, August 2001.

^b Interview with Egyptian Nubians, 11 December 1999. The assistance of Yomna Kamel in interpreting from the Arabic is gratefully acknowledged.

^c Interviews with Egyptian Nubians, Cairo, 7-10 December 1999.

there were, indeed, no reported restrictions. In some ways, the government's hosting of the WCD meeting demonstrated willingness to experiment with a more open development dialogue. In the words of a Vietnamese social science researcher: "The Vietnamese government has created favourable conditions for NGOs in Vietnam now and democracy is increasing quickly."¹⁴ Likewise, some Egyptian government officials were impressed to hear an "unusually" diverse range of views at the WCD regional meeting in Cairo.¹⁵ Although these consultations were constrained, they may well have promoted the value of multi-stakeholder consultation in policy formulation. Future commissions will have to weigh carefully the choice of country—if they are to ensure rich, productive dialogue—and clearly negotiate the terms of the consultation with the host country in order to advance norms of participation in closed societies.

Challenges of Outreach to a Broad Range of Stakeholders

The WCD's modes of outreach for its regional meetings relied heavily upon the personal and professional networks of Commission, Secretariat, and Forum members. The Secretariat issued announcements and calls for submissions for the regional meetings, which were disseminated predominantly through the Forum's networks.¹⁶ For instance, the World Bank, IUCN, International Rivers Network, and the International Commission on Large Dams (ICOLD) formed major outreach nodes. The Secretariat also sent announcements to contacts in government and in the Secretariat staff's own professional networks.¹⁷ Typically, the announcements were translated into the host country language (Hindi, Portuguese, Arabic, Vietnamese) to raise local awareness. The WCD announced forthcoming events in its English language quarterly newsletter *Dams* (circulation 2000), and it posted news of forthcoming events on its website.

Civil society organisations on the WCD Forum and their networks made extraordinary efforts to solicit community inputs to the process. NGO and social movement representatives phoned, faxed, e-mailed, and met with dozens of community organisations, particularly in Africa, South Asia, and Brazil, to encourage them to make submissions to the WCD and participate in regional meetings. In addition, they organised and produced reports of regional hearings in South Africa

and Western Europe, to which Commissioners and Secretariat members were invited. The hearings were intended as formal inputs to the Commission's process. (See Box 6.4.)

Civil society groups made extraordinary efforts to solicit community input for the process.

The mobilisation by the Brazilian Movement of Dam-affected People (MAB) was particularly effective.¹⁸ MAB saw the Latin America Regional Consultation as a key opportunity for dam-affected people without easy access to phone, fax, and e-mail to contact the Commission directly and to demonstrate the strength of their movement. The leadership anticipated that this event would be tremendously meaningful for grassroots participation and that it could be "the time for MAB to print its own stamp on the WCD process."¹⁹ As a result of their efforts, 600 Brazilian dam-affected people attended the regional consultation in São Paulo. Limits on space precluded all the participants from filling the conference hall at once, and participants were disappointed at the lack of an open forum for exchanging views. However, they reported being moved by the experiences from neighbouring countries and heartened by their success in opening up the event beyond government, business, and academic participation. In all, 40 percent of the presentations at the São Paulo consultation came from MAB and its NGO allies.

However, civil society resources were limited, and the WCD did not compensate civil society efforts at outreach. Moreover, as with the Commission and Secretariat, civil society networks were not comprehensive either. For instance, the groups in Southern Africa that mobilised significant community input for the African regional event (see Box 6.4) had few contacts in East Africa, where controversial dam-planning and building are underway. In this case, adding another Forum member from the under-represented region may have boosted the WCD's ability to mobilise participation.

In a successful effort to broaden participation, the WCD did provide funding for developing country participants to attend regional meetings, based

Box 6.4

NGO-organised Regional Consultations and Mobilisation Efforts

Mobilisation in Africa

In Southern Africa, the Environmental Monitoring Group (EMG) along with the Group for Environmental Monitoring and the Botswana office of the International Rivers Network organised the “Southern African Hearings for Communities Affected by Large Dams.” The hearing was not an official WCD event, but it was directed explicitly at the Commission. The event was intended to provide affected communities with an opportunity to present their experiences, which these NGOs felt had not been adequately covered in the Commission’s work. The Secretariat staff, Chairman, Secretary-General, and one Commissioner attended.^a

Participants produced a “Final Declaration:Voices of Affected Communities” that decried the social, cultural, economic, and ecological dislocations caused by large dams in the region and called for authorities to address outstanding historical injustices.

Based on contacts made in this process, EMG encouraged community groups to make formal submissions to the Commission. In addition, EMG staff e-mailed, faxed, and phoned all their contacts in community groups and NGOs throughout Africa to encourage submissions to the WCD. This outreach bore fruit: as a result of their efforts, EMG mobilised about 35 submissions to the WCD. The Commission selected seven of those authors to present their views in person and gave the authors grants to travel to the Africa and Middle East regional consultation in Cairo. According to a displaced man from Kwa-Zulu Natal, the information and moral support provided by EMG made his journey possible.^b

Given that the WCD Secretariat’s outreach for the Africa and Middle East consultation was limited largely to contacts in their staff’s professional networks, such as the World Bank, IUCN, and governmental communities, along with stakeholders who had e-mail access, EMG’s efforts to undertake a broader mobilisation proved invaluable in diversifying participation.

Mobilisation in Europe^c

In Europe, NGOs led by Friends of the Earth–Slovakia organised a hearing entitled “Dammed at Home, Damming Abroad” in January 2000. The hearing was supported by private foundations and was closely coordinated with the Commission’s schedule. Only one Commissioner and two Secretariat members attended

the event, which was taken as a slight to the organisers.

Participants presented case studies of European dams and overseas dams involving European financing and construction. They raised various concerns about the WCD process and produced a letter to Chairperson Kader Asmal requesting that a long list of NGO concerns about dams performance be addressed in the remainder of the WCD’s work programme.^d

Mobilisation in India

In India, the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), the movement with which Commissioner Medha Patkar is associated, and several other NGOs held four public hearings on large dams. As a national convenor of the larger National Alliance of People’s Movements in India, Ms. Patkar was connected to a formidable network of community organisers, grassroots development workers, dam-affected people, and NGOs.

The network organised hearings in the states of Maharashtra, West Bengal, and Uttar Pradesh that covered a range of issues around flood management and irrigation dams and their impacts.^e The events generated submissions that were sent directly to the WCD. NGOs and peoples’ movements in India also translated the WCD newsletter, *Dams*, into Hindi and disseminated it. The NBA also sent out a regular e-mail update to a wide cross-section of people in India and abroad. Additionally, the South Asian Network of Dams, Rivers and People (SANDRP), based in Delhi, maintained regular communication with different stakeholders and facilitated the participation of civil society groups in the WCD process.

a. “Once There Was a Community: Southern African Hearing for Communities Affected by Large Dams: Final Report.” Compiled and edited by Noel Stott, Karen Sack, and Liane Greef, Environmental Monitoring Group, March 2000. b. Interview with dam-affected community representative presenting at the Cairo consultation, December 1999. c. Summarised from Elena Petkova, World Resources Institute, trip report on attendance at “Dammed at Home, Damming Abroad.” d. The letter is reproduced publicly on the European Rivers Network website, www.rivernet.org/nconf99.htm (28 September 2001). e. E-mail communication by Commissioner to the WCD assessment team, 15 February 2001

upon a selection process. This effort levelled the playing field for different actors. However, observers (as opposed to presenters) at the regional consultations had to pay their own way; therefore, issues of economic inequality affected participation in the meetings. Civil society groups could not afford to stay at some of the more expensive meeting venues. This experience, combined with concerns around communications media and

language discussed in Chapter 5, raises accessibility concerns for multi-stakeholder processes that seek credibility through broad inclusiveness.²⁰

Political Balance in the Consultations

Consultations constituted, above all, a public face for the Commission. Most Commissioners attended the regional consultations. Importantly, the

appearance of the Commission as a group promoted the image of political balance, thus strengthening broad legitimacy.²¹

By contrast, it was impossible for all the Commissioners to attend the various additional country consultations. Only one or two Commissioners and Secretariat members attended each of these. This situation increased the risk that stakeholders would receive a biased impression of the Commission's political bent.²² At country meetings, Commissioners had to make a greater effort to explain the diversity of views and experience in their larger group.

Achieving political balance in the consultations was important for many reasons.

In terms of content, at the regional hearings the Secretariat made efforts to project a neutral image by selecting a range of political views and topics for presentation. Each event lasted only two days so it was not possible to be exhaustive; instead, the Commission sought to hear a balance of experiences from the region as a whole.

A core group of Forum members, mostly from advocacy NGOs, monitored political balance on the agenda and were quick to chide the Secretariat when they felt diversity had been sacrificed. For instance, the Secretariat initially passed over a prominent domestic critic to choose a Chinese government speaker and foreign consultant to present information about China's dams experience at the East Asia meeting. Civil society groups staged an uproar.²³ In this case, although the Secretariat had sought political balance in its presentations from the region as a whole, China was such a large and significant dam-building country that to allow only pro-dam voices from that country to speak appeared overly biased. This issue was later resolved by allowing the domestic critic to address a closed-door session of the Commissioners. Aside from this example, in most cases the WCD assembled a sufficiently diverse set of presentations to satisfy Forum members monitoring the process.

The effort to create balanced presentations at the regional meetings was important for both Com-

missioners and participants. The Secretariat processed most of the numerous papers, studies, and submissions sent to the Commission. For Commissioners, the consultations provided a rare opportunity to receive information directly. Presentations by representatives of dam-affected communities about their experiences appear to have had a more profound effect on Commissioners than technical studies on the same topics. For example, during the closed-door meetings of the Commission that followed regional consultations, Commissioners would frequently invoke the previous day's stakeholder evidence in their discussions.²⁴

For many observers, balance was important because regional consultations were their only direct experience with the Commission's work. They not only obtained their primary impression of the Commission's independence from the two-day meeting, but it was possible they would learn more from the meeting than from the Commission's final report. For example, interviews with government officials at the Egypt and Vietnam meetings revealed that they attended the two-day meeting to gather information about state-of-the-art dam-building or alternatives. Few were conscious of, or looking forward to, the WCD's final guidelines. Moreover, language interpretation at the meetings made the content accessible to a local audience, whereas ongoing news of the Commission's activities posted in English on the WCD's website was less accessible.

Participation versus Consultation

The WCD followed emergent international norms by undertaking a consultative process. At the same time, the Commission determined that the contentious nature of the topic and the history of struggle required strict rules of participation. Far from allowing free-flowing public dialogue at its consultations, the Commission carefully handpicked presenters for the regional consultations and timed the speeches strictly. The result was a consultation that was structured around a series of testimonies, lending the Commissioners the air of judges who would weigh the evidence in an independent manner.

This somewhat rigid approach did vary according to who held the chair. For example, in all cases only Commissioners were permitted to question the speakers. However, at some consultations,

observers were allowed to comment from the floor. Personal access to Commissioners during lunches and coffee breaks varied widely from meeting to meeting. Indeed, as one Commissioner noted, the style of the hearings changed in a kind of “action-reaction” process of learning.²⁵ After the enthusiastic participation of hundreds of displaced people took the Commission by surprise in São Paulo and drew criticism from members of the dam establishment, the following regional consultation in Cairo was managed on a much tighter rein. Observers in Cairo had no chance to comment in the public proceeding but were, instead, urged to provide submissions in writing.²⁶ In retrospect, the Commission could have done a better job of clarifying the scope for participation before the meetings, in order to manage expectations.

Consultations were structured as opportunities for public testimonies, rather than for stakeholder dialogue.

The highly structured meetings surprised many participants who had hoped for a more open exchange of views on large dams. Early WCD publicity materials that called for a consensus-building approach raised expectations of a free-flowing exchange at meetings and lively dialogue with Commissioners.²⁷ The assessment team found this expectation to be particularly strong at the São Paulo meeting.²⁸ The emphasis on testimony rather than debate was a potent example of how the process was weighted more toward Commissioner findings and less toward promoting a broad debate among stakeholders.

By contrast, the country meetings, which were designed to provide focussed feedback to the WCD on thematic and case study papers, had less the flavour of hearings. These events provided greater opportunity for spontaneous debate than did the tightly organised regional consultations, but their geographic scope was also narrower.

Overall, the WCD’s decision to manage the large, regional hearings tightly was a reasonable decision because it prevented partisan voices from dominating. However, the consultative process also highlights the trade-offs faced by the organisers of these and future events. There is not necessarily

one correct way of facilitating public meetings for diverse participation. On the one hand, facilitating direct dialogue between broader stakeholder groups offers the possibility of advancing mutual understanding; the WCD accomplished this only in a modest sense. On the other hand, structuring stakeholder meetings so that they deny more substantive debate among participants helps keep the events politically balanced; this was the WCD’s choice.

The Public Face of the WCD: The Media Strategy

The Commission’s media strategy focussed on gaining coverage for meetings after they occurred and for the overall work of the Commission. The Commission may have missed an opportunity by failing to integrate its media strategy with its strategy for mobilising submissions and attendance at the consultations.

The primary tools deployed by the WCD to foster inclusion were its newsletters and website. The effectiveness of these vehicles for information was enhanced by arrangements with specialised publications and institutions to amplify the WCD’s call for input. For example, the WCD inserted information on its process in industry publications, such as *Hydro Review Worldwide* and *International Water, Power and Dam Construction*, to reach industry groups. Similarly, various civil society groups and networks circulated information about the WCD through their own electronic networks. As with efforts to broaden participation at the regional consultations, the willingness of outside actors to play a constructive role was of considerable benefit to the WCD process.

Local media was not a central element of the WCD’s outreach strategy, particularly in its early days. Although media packets were put together at the time of regional consultations, these were assembled by local consultants who adapted and translated WCD information, without much WCD control over the final outcome.²⁹

By the time of the East and Southeast Asia consultation in Hanoi in February 2000, the last regional meeting, the WCD had refined its outreach model somewhat. In this case, the Secretariat hired a member of IUCN-Hanoi to work full-time on Vietnamese language outreach for the six months leading up to the event. This model solicited

substantial input from a cross-section of Vietnamese stakeholders (within the framework of a small NGO sector), and generated some media announcements about the meeting before it happened.³⁰ This model of an integrated outreach strategy that incorporates both presswork and a call for submissions to general stakeholders would have applied well to the entire WCD process and provides a lesson for future processes.

*Sustaining high profile
media attention proved to be
an uphill battle.*

For the most part, the central goal of the media strategy was to achieve a high profile with national and international media. This was particularly true in the early days when media attention was perceived as a useful way to attract financing for the WCD's process. However, because of the absence of consistently interesting newsworthy events during the life of the WCD, sustaining high profile media attention proved to be an uphill battle. Other than the launch event itself, the most newsworthy stories during the WCD's tenure proved to be controversies surrounding the regional consultations, in particular the cancellation of the Indian consultation.

The media strategy was only partly successful at shaping the Commission's public image. The media's filters significantly influenced its portrayals of the WCD. The Secretariat tried to focus media attention on the uniqueness of the process itself, but this theme did not get off the ground.³¹ Press releases prominently noted the Commission's adherence to principles of good governance,³² but the media did not pick up on the importance of good process to good outcomes. Similarly, only 3 percent of WCD press releases focussed on negative stories about dam-related displacement and environmental problems, but a substantial 32 percent of media reports sampled for this study focussed on such negative stories.

The voices of stakeholder groups were also important in shaping media coverage and, by extension, the WCD's public image. Twenty-nine percent of quotes in the media were attributed to Commissioners or Secretariat staff, but NGOs also accounted for a sizeable 21 percent of WCD-related

quotes—more than either governments (12 percent) or the private sector (6 percent). These figures suggest that NGOs were more effective in getting their messages heard in the media than were other stakeholders.

During the latter half of the WCD's tenure, attempts to attract media attention focussed on sustaining interest in the WCD as a source of credible information on dams. Specifically, the WCD sought to raise media and public interest by putting out issue-specific and geographically-focussed press releases. However, this strategy ran the risk of alienating stakeholder groups who felt that the WCD was prematurely declaring conclusions and violating its self-imposed stricture against arbitrating ongoing controversies. In the words of a Secretariat member, "The distinction between [the WCD's] input and output was blurred."³³ For example, some groups interpreted a press release on the Pak Mun Dam (Thailand) as a judgement by the WCD on the dam, while the release was intended to raise the relevance of the WCD for Thailand. In another example, industry groups questioned the credibility of a press release that estimated the number of people displaced by dams and deemed the release premature.³⁴

*The media strategy was
only partly successful in
shaping the WCD's image.*

These examples suggest a more general problem faced by the WCD in attracting and sustaining media attention—media attention and maintenance of stakeholder trust in the process were often at odds. To attract media attention, the WCD had to release newsworthy information, which, for example, shed new light on a heated debate or addressed an ongoing controversy. However, the sharper and more newsworthy the release, the more likely it was to alienate stakeholders, and thereby undermine attempts at sustaining the multi-stakeholder dialogue.

Conclusions

Public consultations are an emerging norm for development decision-making, especially international multi-stakeholder processes. As with the

LESSONS FOR BUILDING CREDIBLE MULTI-STAKEHOLDER PROCESSES

- Hold public hearings to foster inclusion of diverse viewpoints.
- Establish early the objectives of public consultation and make sure to communicate these clearly to participants, including how their contributions will be used.
- Consider providing modest financial resources to selected local groups to reach out to communities and other relevant groups who would not otherwise hear about the process.
- Provide financial support to community representatives and other less-resourced groups to enable them to travel to meetings, so that the scope of their participation is equivalent to that of government, business, and better-resourced groups.
- Use international networks to disseminate information about events, but also exploit country and regional networks and the mass media, where possible, to reach popular audiences.
- Integrate media and general outreach strategies fully.

WCD, they can provide an important opportunity for otherwise disenfranchised voices to have their say. Moreover, in-person presentations at consultations provide a directness and immediacy to commission deliberations that cannot be substituted for by other forms of knowledge gathering. Finally, consultations can contribute greatly to the reality and perception of inclusiveness, which buttresses the legitimacy of a commission. However, consultations can also be counter-productive, if the tremendous political weight of a global commission comes to bear inappropriately on a local or national controversy and the commission is seen as unbalanced or taking sides.

To ensure that consultations are inclusive and balanced, commissions will have to shoulder

considerable logistical costs. As was the case with the WCD, the use of organisational nodes to disseminate information and mobilise participation can help ease this burden. However, in the future, a conscious strategy of collaboration with stakeholder groups may require that a commission build in more funds to assist stakeholders—particularly under-resourced NGOs—in outreach. Such a strategy also has its limits and can at best be a complement to, and not substitute for, a secretariat's outreach.

Much of the credibility fostered by public consultation derives from providing equal opportunity to all major stakeholder groups to participate. The WCD did this well: by pre-selecting speakers for its regional meetings for political, geographical, and topical balance. The WCD levelled the playing field for participation by offering travel stipends to all speakers to attend the regional event. Such enabling mechanisms for less affluent stakeholders will be essential to the credibility of future processes. The disadvantage of the carefully constructed and controlled meetings was that they lost the Commission some credibility as a forum for exchange. Participants were not able to debate directly in the WCD consultations; this confused those who thought the objective of the process was a broader consensus-building. As the meetings progressed, the Commission became increasingly explicit about the scope of participation it allowed. Such clarity about the way people can participate, and how their contributions will be used, is essential to the legitimacy of any multi-stakeholder or broader policy process.

The WCD may have raised greater popular awareness of its work and increased meeting attendance had it tied its media strategy more explicitly to the publicity for consultations. It accomplished this only late in its process. This experience suggests the importance of multi-pronged outreach strategies that use country- and region-specific networks and the mass media to promote diverse participation.

Endnotes

1. *Dams: Official Newsletter of the World Commission on Dams*, No. 6, April 2000.
2. Interview with senior Secretariat staff, December 1999.
3. The Commission was forced to cut back on some of its original plans in developing regions; for instance, the Commission had to drop the idea of a South African regional hearing. In that particular case, NGOs arranged a hearing with private foundation funding as a direct input to the Commission's work instead. The history is documented in the Environmental Monitoring Group's record of the proceedings.
4. Based on a comprehensive survey of Indian press articles on the WCD, 1997-2000, by Ramananda Wangkheirakpam.
5. Virendra Kumar reporting for the *Indian Express*, Ahmedabad, 9 September 1998.
6. Special correspondent reporting in *The Hindu*, 5 September 1998.
7. Interview with Commissioner, 27 February 2000.
8. Interview with senior Secretariat staff, December 1999.
9. Commissioners' contextual remarks to the meeting participants in Hanoi, February 2000. Vietnam is expected to install a further 11,000MW in hydropower capacity in the period 2001-2020.
10. Interview with Commissioner, 19 November 2000.
11. Interview with staff of Egyptian human rights group, 8 December 1999.
12. For example, the Egyptian NGO presentation to the WCD at the regional consultation concerned this NGO's efforts to help the government rehabilitate irrigation infrastructure. Also, interview with independent Egyptian academic and environmental consultant, 10 December 1999; interview with director of Egyptian environmental NGO, 11 December 1999.
13. One local government official, whose participation was supported by the NGO, was also present.
14. Interview with presenter at the regional consultation, February 2000.
15. Interview with official from the Egyptian Department of Irrigation, 8 December 1999.
16. WCD Secretariat, "Call for Submissions," announcements to WCD Forum members, July 1999-January 2000.
17. Interview with senior Secretariat staff, February 2000.
18. Information drawn from Flávia Braga Vieira, "Brazil's Dam-Affected People's Movement and the World Commission on Dams." Background paper prepared for the WCD Assessment, January 2001.
19. Interview with NGO activist, MAB's IV National Congress, November 1999.
20. In Cairo, however, the meeting took place at a deluxe hotel. According to NGO participants who sought more modest alternatives, the hotel was not located near other, lower priced accommodation. International NGO observers were able to muster the funds to share rooms and attend the proceedings, but the cost of rooms remained contentious. The second stakeholder meeting for the Tarbela case study in Pakistan was held in a five-star hotel, at which local NGO representatives refused to meet. Similar constraints forced community or NGO stakeholders to turn away from the Oregon (U.S.) and Oslo (Norway) meetings.
21. Exceptions were the Commissioners from international business and government backgrounds, who attended relatively fewer consultations. As a result, their sectors may have appeared partly under-represented to observers.
22. Interview with Commissioner, 20 January 2000.
23. International Rivers Network wrote to the Secretary-General to protest the exclusion of Dai Qing, the Three Gorges Dam's most outspoken critic, from the agenda. The only Chinese presenter scheduled to speak came from the Institute of Agricultural Economics in China, and his paper was solidly pro-government and pro-dam. The other presenter on Chinese dams was the WCD's own foreign consultant, who had written a stock overview based on government statistics.
24. Interview with senior Secretariat staff, 6 November 2000.
25. Interview with Commissioner, December 1999.
26. Attendance at the Cairo consultation, December 1999.
27. Manuel Pulgar-Vidal, background paper to the WCD assessment on the Latin America regional consultation, August 1999; Braga Vieira, 2001.
28. Braga Vieira, 2001; Pulgar, 1999.
29. The result was some tragi-comic lapses. For example, the early publicity materials for the WCD in Egyptian referred to the World Commission on Cisterns, an error that was fortunately captured and corrected before the Cairo consultation.
30. Such as an announcement on Vietnamese state television.
31. Interview with WCD media staff, 7 April 2000.
32. Independence, openness and transparency, knowledge-driven, accessible, representing a spectrum of views, and informed on issues and alternatives. All six of these principles were highlighted in 60 percent of WCD press releases.
33. Interview with senior Secretariat staff, 6 November 2000.
34. Interview with industry representative, 17 November 2000.