

## Chapter 7

# *Commission Dynamics: Narrow versus Broad Consensus*

**T**wo key features of the WCD that we explore in the previous chapters—breadth of representation on the Commission and a work programme based upon good governance principles—enabled the Commission to produce its report. The Commission’s diversity enhanced the legitimacy of its deliberations, even as it made producing a consensus report particularly challenging. At the same time, an open and inclusive work programme was necessary to build and maintain trust among Commissioners and to allow each Commissioner and the Commission as a whole to maintain connections with stakeholders.

This chapter examines the dynamics within the Commission that led to consensus, and the degree to which these interactions can be planned for and structured into future multi-stakeholder processes. This chapter also foreshadows international reactions to the final report, which are discussed in Chapter 8. The broad representation on the Commission and its attempts to achieve good process were intended to build constituencies for adoption and implementation of its final report in the greater stakeholder community. However, the Commission’s choices about where to seek consensus led it toward consensus-finding among its own members, rather than consensus-building or even the evolution of shared understandings among Forum members and larger networks. We look at the choices that led the WCD in this direction, as a precursor to the discussion about adoption and compliance in Chapter 8.

### **Toward Commissioner Consensus**

For the Commission to be successful, the diverse Commissioners had to develop a shared interest in achieving consensus. This was not a small task.

Commissioners brought very different perspectives and histories, and in some cases considerable wariness of the process and of each other. In this context, Commissioners have emphasised the central role of a balanced and strong Chairperson in steering Commission deliberations.

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*Commissioners put  
aside difficult issues  
for discussion later.*

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As a government minister and an academic with a history of political struggle, Chairperson Kader Asmal brought considerable authority to his stewardship of the WCD. In chairing the Commission, he drew on the idea of “sufficient consensus,” an approach used by the African National Congress during anti-apartheid days to bind coalitions in the party and to build relations with other parties. He encouraged Commission members to focus first on issues around which they could forge rough consensus and to table difficult issues for later discussion.<sup>1</sup> The exercise of veto by one member over the entire process was not an option. This approach was meant to decrease the likelihood of dissenting reports and cultivate a sense of individual and shared investment in the final principles. By persuading Commissioners to invest incrementally in the process of mutual learning and relationship-building, Professor Asmal intended to make it ever more difficult for a Commissioner to walk away from the process. He told Commissioners that their enemies were no longer each other, but the sceptics who said they could not finish their work.<sup>2</sup>

The first meeting of the Commission was reportedly fraught with tension. Each member of the Commission introduced him or herself to the others, laying out his or her professional and personal experiences. A Commissioner who worked with displaced people showed pictures of terrible resettlement conditions to the Commissioner whose corporation was supplying engineering equipment to that dam.<sup>3</sup> Although this beginning did not augur well for conciliation, one Commissioner noted that it was necessary to “get this out of the way.”<sup>4</sup> Once these introductions were made, the Commissioners could shift their focus to the mandate and the work ahead. Over time, there developed within the Commission what Commissioners describe as a remarkable climate of mutual respect on a personal level,<sup>5</sup> and a growing willingness to listen to the others.<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Jan Veltrop, a former President of the International Commission on Large Dams (ICOLD), was commended by all of his colleagues for wedding a lifetime of experience in dam building with an extraordinary willingness to listen to different viewpoints and seek out new information. He was also tireless in his work during the life of the Commission and attended almost every field visit and consultation. Dr. Veltrop was a replacement for another former president of ICOLD who had originally been appointed to the Commission.<sup>7</sup> Whether the original Commissioner from this key constituency would have played an equally positive role can only be a matter of speculation. However, at least some Commissioners suggested that had he stayed on, the Commission as a whole would not have progressed toward the final framework. These observations highlight the importance of individuals and, to some extent, serendipity in the success of the Commission.<sup>8</sup>

At the other end of the political spectrum, Medha Patkar, the social movement activist from India, is credited with retaining her convictions while maintaining enough flexibility to allow the Commission to move forward. Some of the Commission’s early difficulties with the India consultation have been attributed to Ms. Patkar’s pushing her interests too strongly.<sup>9</sup> However, her subsequent willingness to negotiate in the framework of the overall Commission’s goals enabled the body to accomplish more than many thought possible.<sup>10</sup> Ms. Patkar did append a “comment” to complement her signature on the final report, in which she argued that the report’s scope was

inadequate and did not address the broader structural problems with associated development, of which dams were but one symptom. However, her “comment” was couched in the context of endorsing the process and its outcomes.

The most significant change in the Commission itself occurred halfway through the process when Commissioner Shen Guoyi, of China’s Ministry of Water Resources, abruptly resigned.<sup>11</sup> Ms. Shen’s departure certainly held implications for the Commission’s external image, for she was at once a senior government official, a Southern voice, and the only woman who was not from an NGO or community background. Her presence on the Commission had also signified co-operation from the world’s most prolific dam-building nation. Although the WCD Chairperson requested a replacement Commissioner, the Chinese government did not respond. Ms. Shen’s absence would later amplify criticisms that the Commission received after the launch of its report—that it was biased toward the North and that it had failed to consult Southern governments adequately.

Although one can only guess the effect of Ms. Shen’s departure on Commission negotiations (after all, the Commission had not even begun to prepare the final report when she left), it is likely that her resignation influenced the Commissioners’ ability to reach consensus—as well as the nature of the final report. While the Chinese government did not make any formal statement of disagreement regarding the substance of the Commission’s work at the time of Ms. Shen’s departure, a later memo from the Chinese government to the World Bank indicated that it disagreed with the positions of most Commission members.<sup>12</sup> (See Chapter 5, Box 5.4.)

### *Toward Consensus: The Process of Shared Learning*

The Commission’s success in completing a consensus report was largely a result of a two-year shared learning process. Had the Commissioners sought to establish common ground early, their debates would have been based on prior experience rather than shared evidence. Hence, they decided to cast the net wide and avoid discussion of development effectiveness criteria up front. A focus on gathering different views enabled the Commissioners, quite simply, to get on with each other.<sup>13</sup>

“I think the decision not to dive into the work programme was a smart one,” said one Commissioner. “A joint fact-finding, with a common knowledge base...allowed us to build trust. It’s been very collegial, congenial.”<sup>14</sup> The Commission’s focus on listening and learning was intended to bring the members toward a consensus of the highest common denominator.<sup>15</sup>

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*The process of shared learning  
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more determined to  
complete their mandate.*

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As we documented in Chapter 5, the process of negotiating the Commission’s work programme democratised, or opened up, knowledge creation to go beyond scientific sources and provide a space for grassroots voices. This would not have been possible without the presence of community and indigenous peoples’ activists on the Commission itself. Meanwhile, the presence of practitioner Commissioners with extensive fieldwork experience also broadened the whole Commission’s view. Joji Cariño is often cited as having made a notable contribution to the Commission’s collective accomplishment in addressing indigenous and tribal peoples’ issues. Deborah Moore’s background in environmental flows, Thayer Scudder’s in resettlement issues, and José Goldemberg’s in the energy sector are cited as having compelled and advanced collective thinking.<sup>16</sup> Commissioners prepared special briefing papers on their areas of expertise and presented these at Commission meetings. They took special responsibility for commenting, on an ongoing basis, on parts of the work programme in which they had a particular interest. Later in the process, they formed sub-committees to consider focal issues in depth.

The unfolding work programme provided the opportunity for Commissioners to absorb and debate new material together, via common readings, public consultations, and shared experiences with engineers, activists, communities, and decision-makers. At times, Commissioners had first-hand experiences that broadened their perspectives. For instance, the engineer on the Commission who had not been exposed to the conditions of resettled communities was reportedly much moved by observing and hearing from these

affected communities.<sup>17</sup> This gradual process of learning, organised around grappling with the same set of material and processing the same experiences, equipped the Commissioners to confront difficult decisions in the last few months of their work.

“Why did I sign off?” said one Commissioner, on the eve of the report’s launch. “Because of an early desire on my part, and I know on the part of others as well, to succeed. Later, among all of us there was a determination to complete our mandate. Surely the final report represents some measure of compromise for many of the Commissioners, if indeed not for all of them. We realised what would be at stake if no agreement would be reached.”<sup>18</sup>

### *Commissioner Consensus versus Stakeholder Consensus*

A “consensus driven approach” was one of the WCD’s guiding principles and indeed, part of the Gland mandate. But the Commissioners interpreted consensus-building as focussing on interactions with each other. Building consensus in the broader stakeholder community was a longer-term objective for which the Commission’s work would lay the foundation. As principal advisor Anthony Dorsey had observed in the early days of the Commission’s formation:

“It is proposed in the Gland report that from inception to conclusion the full diversity of stakeholders should be involved in a process that is transparent and designed to reach consensus to the greatest extent possible. While this reflects a growing trend in new collaborative models of governance for sustainability, putting those principles into practice raises immense challenges for the commission. Practical considerations of time and resources will generally make it impossible to go much beyond achieving goals of transparency to build consensus in its multi-stakeholder consultation processes.

*Recommendation:* The terms of reference document should make clear that while the immediate goal of the commission focuses on building consensus among the commissioners on conclusions and recommendations, the longer term goal is to provide a foundation for building consensus in large dam decision-making processes.”<sup>19</sup>

The Commission's work programme reflected this emphasis. For instance, as we described in Chapter 6, the public consultations were designed and presented as information-gathering opportunities for the Commission, not occasions for exchange, dialogue, or consensus-building among stakeholders in the broader community.

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*The Commissioners focussed  
on building consensus  
among themselves, not among  
stakeholders at large.*

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Because there were few opportunities for direct exchange among a broader number of interest groups under WCD auspices (Forum meetings provided one such opportunity), many interest group efforts were directed toward influencing the Commissioners themselves or lobbying members of the Secretariat who were involved in the day-to-day management of the work programme. Thus, for those stakeholders who were actively engaged in monitoring and providing input to the work programme, the Secretariat and Commission acted as mediators. Because it was involved in the day-to-day implementation of the work programme, the Secretariat felt much more of this pressure than the Commission did.

*Constituency Ties, Constituency Drift<sup>20</sup>*

As explored in Chapter 4, the Commission's legitimacy derived from the range of networks, views, and positions collectively represented on the Commission. Individually, for many Commissioners, credibility rested on continued ties with and support from networks. At the same time, each was empowered to act in his or her personal capacity, to negotiate freely toward consensus. This simultaneous need for connection and freedom established a tension for many Commissioners.

In some cases, the ties to constituents were particularly strong and were reinforced throughout the life of the Commission. This was especially evident in the case of Commissioners from non-governmental backgrounds, who consulted with international NGOs and dam-affected peoples' representatives before each Commission meeting. These informal consultations allowed them "to

keep in touch," and ensure that they didn't "sign off on things people aren't comfortable with," in the words of one Commissioner.<sup>21</sup> "I have a responsibility to represent the point of view of a particular constituency," said another, who noted that peoples' movements had "expressed faith" in her nomination and provided much support.<sup>22</sup>

Other Commissioners maintained loose networks of associates and advisors whom they used as sounding boards for issues raised in the Commission. Jan Veltrop, the past President of ICOLD, turned to colleagues in the ICOLD network. Göran Lindahl, the CEO of a large private company, formed a loose network with the industry representatives on the WCD Forum. This industry group held a meeting to analyse the WCD's thematic papers in-depth prior to channelling input to Lindahl. However, this effort at co-ordination developed late in the process, long after NGOs and social movements had established well functioning mechanisms of co-ordination and feedback. This difference in mobilisation indicated the private sector's general slowness to engage with the WCD.

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Some members of the Commission, perhaps because of their academic or multi-sectoral backgrounds, did not consider themselves to have a defined or mobilised constituency. At least one such Commissioner constituted a "kitchen cabinet" of advisors, "all of whom have a totally different viewpoint" to act as a sounding board for WCD issues.<sup>23</sup>

Despite various efforts at communication and co-ordination between Commissioners and constituencies, the two-year process of shared learning and moving toward consensus inevitably required some flexibility in Commissioners' thinking. If the Commission were to produce a consensus final report at all, they had to give some ground. This

raised the danger of Commissioners drifting away from their interest group networks.

For example, once the Commission had released its report, a dedicated anti-dam activist opined that “some of the WCD Commissioners were not as strong [‘anti-dam’] as we thought them to be.”<sup>24</sup> A World Bank official expressed his disappointment that a Commissioner from government agreed on a report that, in his opinion, was so far-reaching in its call for reform that it circumscribed the role of governments.<sup>25</sup> In the case of the representative from the private sector, Göran Lindahl, this drift was particularly strong, but largely because of his company’s withdrawal from the dams business, rather than because of shifts in his position to accommodate consensus. (See Box 7.1.)

### *Commissioners’ Varying Involvement*

Having a commission composed of active and engaged individuals, such as the WCD, presents a host of benefits, although some commissioners face the pressures of competing responsibilities. In the WCD’s case, Commissioners differed in the amount of time they were able to dedicate to Commission work. Where Commissions of the past had been stacked with eminent retirees, this Commission had only one retired person: Dr. Jan Veltrop. Although retired, he maintained an active interest in ICOLD affairs and attended almost all ICOLD meetings.<sup>26</sup> Some Commissioners from NGOs and community-based organisations were able to scale back other commitments so that they could devote more time to the WCD.<sup>27</sup> Others, such as Göran Lindahl, the CEO of a multinational corporation; Donald Blackmore, the CEO of a major river basin authority; and Kader Asmal, a sitting government minister, were limited in how much time they could make for WCD affairs.

According to Secretariat members, the varying levels of engagement of the Commissioners did not materially affect the outcome of the final report. The Secretariat members who drafted the text, as well as the other Commissioners, were highly attuned to each person’s bottom line. “It’s not necessarily the length of time or number of Commissioners that matters,” said one senior advisor. “As long as you have the range of views there, you’ll get essentially the same product. You can’t move forward with something, if one major group doesn’t agree.”<sup>28</sup>

#### Box 7.1

### **Industry representation on the Commission: the case of ABB**

Asea Brown Boveri (ABB), a Swiss-based international engineering company, had been closely involved in the WCD process from the days of the Gland meeting. When Commissioners were selected, the CEO of ABB, Göran Lindahl, was given a slot.

Over the life of the Commission, ABB’s stake in hydropower diminished considerably. For example, ABB was a major contractor for Malaysia’s controversial Bakun Dam. For a variety of reasons, including mounting NGO pressure, the company withdrew from the project.<sup>a</sup> Following this episode, ABB announced it would shift its focus away from traditional large-scale power plants and increase investments in alternative energy, such as wind power.<sup>b</sup>

By late 1999, much of ABB’s stake in hydropower was gone. Other industry representatives on the WCD Forum began to feel that Mr. Lindahl was no longer the best spokesman for their interests. Mr. Lindahl offered to resign in favour of another industry representative, such as a senior representative of the Canadian company Hydro-Quebec.<sup>c</sup> However, given the late stage of the Commission, the Chairperson and the other Commissioners were unwilling to consider a replacement, keeping in mind the dynamic of interpersonal relations and shared learning that had evolved among the Commissioners by then.

Mr. Lindahl remained on the Commission, but with limited involvement. Indeed, the head of ABB’s environment division took his place at the last Commission meeting, to sign off on the final report. In an indication of ABB’s detachment from the process, no representative of the company attended the final Forum meeting, where stakeholders shared plans for charting a course forward.

<sup>a</sup> See “High Risk, Low Return,” an NGO report on ABB’s Hydropower Strategy by Nicholas Hildyard, February 1998.

<sup>b</sup> ABB website, [www.abb.com](http://www.abb.com); also Network for Alternative Technology and Technology Assessment, Open University, Renew newsletter, September–October 2000.

<sup>c</sup> Interview with hydropower industry representatives on the Forum, 17 November 2000.

### **The WCD Forum: Promise Unfulfilled?**

The role of the WCD Forum was to act as a sounding board for the Commission’s work and to perform an outreach function for the final report. The Commissioners intended to use the Forum to ensure that their discussions did not drift too far from the concerns and positions of stakeholders and to sustain the interest and engagement of

stakeholders throughout the process. In reality, realising the full potential of the Forum proved to be a challenge, one that often foundered against the practicalities of meaningful engagement with large numbers of stakeholders in a time-bound process.

### *Forum Members' Varying Involvement*

Forum members' involvement in the work programme depended much upon their own initiative and perseverance. Some Forum members were deeply involved in developing the WCD's knowledge base. They generated comments on terms of reference and drafts of papers, served on formal review panels, and disseminated and promoted information on the WCD to their professional networks and constituents.<sup>29</sup> Others were far less engaged.

A network of NGOs and social movement groups acted as constant critics and monitors of the WCD work programme. Later in the process, a dams industry group forged a similar network, which, over time, substantially increased its scrutiny of and its voice in the process. These three broad categories of stakeholders tended to be motivated by strategic concerns. Social movements and NGOs were partly driven by a concern to prevent industry from dominating the agenda. Some members of the dams establishment openly admitted that their motivation for involvement was to "limit the damage" by the WCD to industry interests.<sup>30</sup>

By contrast, other Forum members, such as the Inter-American Development Bank, did not attend any Forum meetings, but were active behind the scenes and between meetings in arranging consultant input to the WCD's work programme.<sup>31</sup> Many of the policy research and academic institutions on the Forum largely limited their engagement to participation in Forum meetings. As a general observation, those Forum members who had a direct stake in the outcome of the Commission—public and private industry engaged in dam building and operation, and social movements of affected communities and their allies—tended to put the most effort into the process.

Forum members' inputs into the work programme occupied countless hours of Secretariat time. Secretariat staff members were required to respond

to requests while remaining completely even-handed toward the diverse groups on the Forum. Initially, the Secretariat arranged a system by which staff members were tasked with contacting Forum members on a regular basis. This system did not work, because the Secretariat was too busy "to engage them on issues they didn't bring up."<sup>32</sup> Instead, the Secretariat designed review processes for thematic and case study papers for multi-stakeholder input and responded to specific Forum requests as they came up.

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### *Communicating with the Forum occupied countless hours of Secretariat time.*

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Secretariat staff found active Forum members to be helpful, because such members knew the work programme well. They provided "very targeted" comments to the Secretariat's work, thus acting as an effective sounding board.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, the staff's role as mediators between the various interest groups was a high-pressure vocation that gave staff "the feeling of living in a fishbowl."<sup>34</sup> As they recall, it was hard for outsiders to appreciate the degree of consultation that took place within the Secretariat and between the Secretariat and key opinion-shapers on the Forum before decisions were made about activities that would influence public perceptions.<sup>35</sup>

"All they see is a letter of invitation, a meeting agenda and assume it's top-down. They never see the discussions we have about who should be invited, and in what order. To get to a letter of invitation and an agenda is often the result of five or six meetings, informal phone conversations with key people... In the back of our minds there's always: What will the Commissioners think? What will the stakeholders think? We're very aware of the boundaries."<sup>36</sup> The intense pressure upon the Secretariat holds lessons for future multi-stakeholder processes that seek to gather new data on contentious issues. The WCD's experience suggests that the personal qualities of Secretariat members, such as diplomacy, tact, and fairness, are critical to the legitimacy of such processes.

### *The Commission's Use of the Forum*

The composition of the WCD Forum well illustrated the Commission's efforts at inclusiveness. The Forum included organisations that had been engaged in pitch battles over the preceding years about specific dam projects. Dam financiers, builders, opponents, and affected communities all had a seat at the Forum's table. Bringing these groups together over a sustained two and a half year period was a notable accomplishment.

Yet, although this gathering was unique, the scope for stakeholder dialogue during structured Forum meetings was limited. The Forum only met three times, including one meeting after the release of the WCD report. Of the three meetings, only the second provided an opportunity for Forum members to review the expanding knowledge base together and use these discussions to further collective understanding. As described earlier, the focus of the Commission's design was to promote consensus in the Commission itself, as the first hurdle for a legitimate report. To serve this overarching objective, practical considerations of Secretariat time and resources required that Forum meetings be limited. Although this choice is understandable, the opportunity for more direct dialogue within the Forum was lost.

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*Forum members  
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Commissioners and Secretariat staff both praised Forum meetings for providing valuable reality checks to the Commission's evolving views on large dams and alternatives.<sup>37</sup> Commission members emphasised the Forum's helpfulness in providing feedback on the Commission's ideas as it prepared to debate the final report. However, the utility of the Forum was not as evident to Forum members as it was to the Commissioners and Secretariat. Both in confidential interviews and in open meetings after the launch of the WCD report, Forum members complained that the opportunity for feedback presented by Forum meetings was largely wasted. They criticised the Commission for not producing and sharing a set of interim synthe-

sis findings with the Forum, which could have served as a concrete basis for soliciting their feedback. Given the WCD's focus on a Commissioner consensus, rather than a stakeholder consensus, sharing interim findings raised several thorny issues for the process. We turn to these issues next.

### *From Workplan to Final Report*

#### *Transparency in Preparation of the Commission's Report*

In pulling together the many and disparate strands of the knowledge base, the Secretariat was under enormous time pressure. The Commission's original plan was for the Secretariat to produce synthesis outputs from the knowledge base corresponding to the three objectives of the WCD: a review of development effectiveness; a framework for options assessment; and a framework for criteria and guidelines around dams. The intent was that the Commission would use these to formulate its final assessment of dams' performance and forward-looking guidelines.

In the end, it took longer than the Secretariat and Commission expected to finalise the knowledge base studies. In fact, some commissioned papers were not available in final form for use in the Commission's deliberations. Moreover, although available on request, relevant submissions from the public were still being appended to thematic papers as the Commission's final report was released, suggesting that they were not readily accessible to the Commissioners. As a result of these time delays, synthesis outputs were not circulated to the Forum. Instead, much of the material that would have gone into these outputs was wrapped into the final report.

There was much confusion as to whether the Commission's failure to circulate synthesis outputs represented a breach of faith. Some industry stakeholders and World Bank staff, in interviews conducted after the report was released, said they had expected that the synthesis product would be open to public review and comment.<sup>38</sup> The Secretariat noted that their work programme never stated that the outputs would be circulated, merely that they would be produced. However, given the Commission's commitment to transparency and the willingness to circulate drafts of commissioned papers, it was reasonable for Forum members to

expect that synthesis outputs would be shared with them. The trade-offs involved in additional consultation are reflected in WCD participants' comments in Box 7.2.

The value of producing and disseminating an interim report would have been to show stakeholders, particularly Forum members with their ability to influence public opinion, the direction of the Commission's thinking, and would have presented an opportunity to make constructive criticisms to increase the acceptability of the final product. For example, industry stakeholders insist that review of synthesis outputs would have enhanced the technical quality of the final report.

### *An interim report would have revealed the direction of the Commission's thinking.*

Ultimately, the Commission's choice not to devote time to preparing and soliciting feedback on synthesis outputs was a choice to prioritise Commissioner consensus over stakeholder consensus. To defend the integrity of the Commissioners' deliberations, the Commissioners chose to pay the price of reduced Forum engagement because several members of the Commission and Secretariat feared sharing even interim products with the Forum would stall the Commissioners' negotiation process.<sup>39</sup> This option carried a price. The decision diminished the Forum within the process, cost the Commission a measure of goodwill and credibility, and lost some potential ambassadors for its message.

Some Forum members raised similar arguments about preparation of the final report, as distinct from the interim synthesis outputs. Indeed, there was intense secrecy around the Commission's final report once it was completed, with no opportunity for review outside of Secretariat staff and Commission members. Faced with this lack of access, some Forum members charged that in the interests of transparency the Commissioners should have shared a draft of the report with Forum members for comment prior to finalising it.

The case for opening the final report to broader stakeholder negotiation is weak. In a multi-stakeholder advisory commission, such as the

#### Box 7.2

#### **Participation and transparency versus time**

"If you open up the planning too much so everyone has a say in every point of the process, it's all going to bog down. It's a better idea to get everyone to agree on who should undertake the process, and make sure it's transparent, etc...."

—a Commissioner, commenting on whether the WCD should have put out an interim report for public review<sup>a</sup>

"I'm a big fan of time-limited processes, they force you to grapple. They are massive challenges to processes that want to be participatory. Participation is where it falls out."

—a Commissioner, commenting on the overall time frame of the WCD process<sup>b</sup>

"They were supposed to bring together three synthesis reports. We never saw some of the most important knowledge base products for peer review. I believe the Secretariat could have had a peer review or hearings. Couldn't a synthesis step have helped a bit? It would've been a shorter, much more concise report. Two years was a break-your-neck kind of exercise."

—a Forum member, commenting on the final synthesis and report-writing process<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Interview with Commissioner, 19 March 2001.

<sup>b</sup> Interview with Commissioner, 10 April 2000.

<sup>c</sup> Interview with Forum member, 22 January 2001.

WCD, it is entirely appropriate for a commission to close the doors at some point. The Commissioners had to reach and formulate their own final conclusions, based on their best judgement and on the trust placed in them during the process. Had they held the final report open to review and comment, it is likely that they would never have completed it.

Indeed, the pressure on Commissioners and the Secretariat was considerable, even without considering additional last minute views from Forum members. Given the volume of material, few Commissioners were able to read and digest the entire compilation. Instead, late in the process, Commissioners signed up for issues on which they had to concentrate to draw implications and recommendations. In the final meeting of the Commission, members "formed groups to go over, revise, then reject whole chapters."<sup>40</sup>

Commissioners also relied heavily on the Secretariat for support and preparation of drafts. In contrast to former Commission reports that have been authored primarily by a Secretary-General, many people wrote this report. “Drafts went around about 30 times, marked up by everyone,” noted one senior advisor.<sup>41</sup> According to staff, they re-created debates among themselves that mirrored the debates on the Commission itself.<sup>42</sup> Because Secretariat members were together in one location and were responsible for day-to-day handling of material, they had discussed more material together than the Commissioners had. The Secretariat did much of the writing, and it was helpful that Secretariat members represented sectoral diversity when they took on this task. This practical contribution toward forging commissioner consensus reinforces the importance of a diverse Secretariat in building a commission’s legitimacy in the eyes of stakeholders. (See Chapter 4.)

### *Cultivation and Undermining of Stakeholder Support*

Once the report was completed, Secretariat and Commissioners stepped up their outreach efforts to constituents who appeared particularly sceptical of the WCD process. In the four months before the report’s release, Commission members made presentations at major congresses of ICOLD,<sup>43</sup> the International Hydropower Association (IHA),<sup>44</sup> the International Commission on Irrigation and Drainage (ICID),<sup>45</sup> and the World Conservation Union (IUCN).<sup>46</sup>

Despite these efforts, stakeholder buy-in to the report was compromised during the lead-up to the launch by leaks of the final report. It is standard practice for agencies to release official documents to the media ahead of the official launch date. In this case, some members of the Forum, particularly those from industry, were distressed to receive calls from the press requesting comment before they had seen the report themselves.<sup>47</sup> This frustration was enhanced by the tenor of the media’s questions, which focussed on a perceived negative tone in the report with regard to large dams. By contrast, the NGO advocacy community was well prepared for the launch and had managed to obtain a copy of the report through a leak, much to the displeasure of industry groups. Industry groups grumbled publicly about what they perceived as a breach of faith, although some also privately said they had simply been out-flanked by the more media-savvy NGOs.<sup>48</sup>

## Conclusions

### LESSONS FOR BUILDING CREDIBLE MULTI-STAKEHOLDER PROCESSES

- Build a process around shared learning and relationship building among commissioners to enable them to transcend initial differences in perspective and experience.
- Use advisory forums to create structured opportunities for multi-stakeholder input to the process. If forum members are to be used as ambassadors, they must be briefed regularly on the substance of the developing product to gain their support.
- Respect stakeholder expectations to comment on work products, given current norms of transparency. Weigh stakeholder expectations for comment against the risks of disrupting a fragile consensus.

Organising the work of a commission around a process of shared learning helps build the basis for commissioner consensus. Shared learning allows individuals to develop personal relationships and invest collectively in a process, thereby raising the personal and professional costs of withdrawal. Skilful management within the Commission along these lines was an important contribution to the WCD process. At the same time, this approach by no means guarantees that all commissioners will stay with the process. The withdrawal of a WCD Commissioner from China, under circumstances that remain ambiguous, illustrates the political trade-offs that global commissions must manage.

Efforts toward consensus can place considerable strain on commissioners’ time and on their ties with their constituents. To invest sufficiently in the shared learning process, commissioners must be able to devote time to digest materials and work with colleagues on the commission. An effective and engaged secretariat can mitigate some demands on commissioners’ time. Commissioners also face the challenge of retaining their flexibility to compromise in the interests of a consensus, even while maintaining their credibility with their networks and constituents.

Establishing an advisory board, such as the WCD’s Forum, is an idea with great potential. In the WCD, this potential was only partially realised. The limited opportunity for dialogue between Commissioners and the Forum and among Forum

members constrained the Forum's ability to act both as a sounding board and as a mechanism for building stakeholder consensus. At the same time, given the trade-offs between investing time and resources in developing a Commissioner consensus and making incremental progress toward a consensus among all stakeholders, the WCD likely made the right choice in focussing on Commissioners.

Commissions and other policy processes face questions about when is the best time to consult the public. The Commission did not release an interim document that revealed the direction of its

thinking and likely emphasis of its final report. Many Forum members saw this as a lack of transparency and openness. Significantly, this decision prevented the Commission from advancing the debate over key issues further within the Forum. This decision was to have ramifications for reception of the final report—which was more hostile than it might have been had an interim product been shared and debated in the Forum. The experience suggests that future multi-stakeholder processes, while respecting the importance of commissioners as final arbiters, should consider the value of circulating interim, not final, findings to an advisory forum for comment.<sup>49</sup>

## Endnotes

1. Interview with advisor to Professor Asmal, April 2000.
2. Interview with Commissioner, 8 December 1999.
3. Interview with senior Secretariat staff, 8 December 1999.
4. Interview with senior Secretariat staff, 8 December 1999.
5. Interview with Commissioner, 8 December 1999.
6. E-mail interview with Commissioner, 12 November 2000.
7. The reasons given for the resignation of the original Commissioner had to do with questions of compensation.
8. Interview with Commissioner, 19 March 2001.
9. Interview with former Secretariat staff, 13 December 2000.
10. Interview with former Secretariat staff, 13 December 2000. Also, Professor Asmal singled out both Dr. Veltrop and Ms. Patkar for special praise and gratitude at the closure of the WCD process at the third Forum meeting in February 2001.
11. Ms. Shen became less engaged in Commission business in the latter half of 1999 according to an interview with a senior Secretariat member in December 1999. Her resignation was not official until early 2000.
12. World Bank, "Talking points from Government of China discussion with World Bank," internal document, 15 January 2001."
13. Interview with Commissioners, December 1999 and January 2000.
14. Interview with Commissioner, 9 December 1999.
15. Interview with Commissioner, 19 November 2000.
16. Interview with senior Secretariat staff, 6 November 2000.
17. Interview with Commissioner, 19 March 2000.
18. E-mail communication with Commissioner, 12 November 2000.
19. Anthony Dorsey, "Institutional Design and Operational Modalities for the Proposed Large Dams Commission," Stockholm Draft, 6 August 1997 (mimeo).
20. Dr. Minu Hemmati helpfully suggested the term "constituency drift" in personal communication to the authors as part of the review process.
21. Interview with Commissioner, 9 December 1999.
22. Interview with Commissioner, 27 February 2000.
23. Interview with Commissioner, 9 December 2000.
24. Interview with anti-dam activist, January 2001.
25. Interview with World Bank official, 8 March 2001.
26. Interview with Commissioner, December 1999.
27. An exception was Medha Patkar. She was often highly engaged, but at one point took eight months off WCD business to concentrate on the ongoing struggle in the Narmada Valley. This included a brief spell in jail.
28. Interview with senior Secretariat staff, 6 November 2000.
29. International Rivers Network is one such example.
30. Interview with industry representative on the Forum, 6 April 2000.
31. Interview with IADB official, 1 December 2000.
32. Interview with senior Secretariat staff, 6 November 2000.
33. Interview with IADB official, 1 December 2000.
34. Interview with senior Secretariat staff, 3 November 2000.
35. Telephone interview with senior Secretariat staff, 17 August 2000.
36. Telephone interview with senior Secretariat staff, 17 August 2000.
37. For example, interviews with Commissioners, 10 April 2000 and 19 March 2001.
38. Interview with World Bank official, 22 January 2001.
39. Interview with former Commissioner, 19 March 2001.
40. Interview with former Commissioner, 19 March 2001.
41. Interview with former Secretariat staff, 28 February 2001.
42. Interview with senior Secretariat staff, 6 November 2000.
43. Beijing, China, September 2000.
44. Berne, Switzerland, 2 October 2000.
45. Cape Town, South Africa, 24 October 2000.
46. Amman, Jordan, 4-11 October 2000.
47. Interview with Forum member, 15 November 2000.
48. Interview with Forum member, 27 February 2001.