

SYMPOSIUM ON

THE WORLD COMMISSION ON DAMS REPORT ON DAMS AND DEVELOPMENT: A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR DECISIONMAKING

OPENING ADDRESS

By

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Water is life. It is indispensable to survival and there can be no livelihood, no growth, and no economic development in its absence.

Our Bill of Rights guarantees several rights including two which are relevant to the discussions at this Symposium. They are:

- The right of access to sufficient food and water; and
- the right to have the environment protected while promoting justifiable economic and social development.

All over the world civilisations have used reservoirs to assist them in providing this life-sustaining commodity. Dams have been built to store water in times of surplus to allow releases in times of scarcity. Dams prevent or mitigate devastating floods and catastrophic droughts. They adjust natural runoff with its seasonal variations and climatic irregularities to meet the pattern of demand for irrigated agriculture, power generation, domestic and industrial supply. They provide recreation, attract tourism, promote aquaculture and fisheries and can enhance environmental conditions. Thus dams and reservoirs have become an integral part of our engineered infrastructure, of our man-made basis of survival.

More and more however we also recognise an urgent need to protect and conserve our natural environment, our endangered ecological diversity which is the basis of all life. There is a similar need to protect the social environment: the people, their land and settlements, their economy and cultural heritage. The impacts of dams and reservoirs on this environment is undeniable; land is flooded, people are resettled, the continuity of aquatic life along a river is interrupted, and its flows often reduced significantly.

The development of dams requires a multi-disciplinary approach if these issues are to be addressed. Unfortunately, in many instances there has been a seriously unbalanced approach. Technology related to **dam engineering** has for many decades been very advanced. Appropriate methodologies for assessing and managing the **impacts on the natural environment** are still relatively new. Similarly, current best practise for the **resettlement of affected people**, particularly focusing on development interventions to ensure that they are at least as well off as well as before, has mainly been formulated and put into practise during the past decade.

Our gathering here is thus of historic significance. It is the first time in this country that we have such a large group of representatives from the various interest groups together to debate various aspects associated with the development of dams. We have persons from various communities that have been affected by dams, representatives of non-governmental organisations with an interest in social as well as the natural environment, local and central government, bulk water suppliers, project developers, dam consultants and contractors and also financial institutions. We also have several participants from our neighbouring countries: Lesotho, Swaziland and Namibia. In the spirit of our new democracy, the organisers have created a platform for open debate and wish to establish a common understanding among you as delegates on the way forward with the development of dams.

The World Commission on Dams (WCD) report entitled: **Dams and Development – a new framework for decision-making** has catalysed considerable interest and debate throughout the world. This was to be expected. The WCD had tackled and reported on a complex and in many instances controversial subject and Mr Jeremy Bird will be elaborating on their work.

It is very easy to read what you want to when dealing with a document that deals with such complex issues. To avoid falling in this trap I wish to read to you what my colleague, Prof Kader Asmal, who chaired the WCD said about the report at the closure of the Third and Final Forum meeting in Cape Town in February 2001.

Quote:

“Our report offers a framework for decision-making – not a decision.

Despite talk of a negative or bleak tone, nowhere in the Report will you read “large dams are bad.” Or “good.” Large dams simply are. The Report shows how, where, when and why certain aspects of those dams have performed for better or for worse and how we can improve decisions to develop resources for all.

The Report does not call for a moratorium. Dams should be judged on a case by case basis, and pass or fail according to the criteria and guidelines societies set for them.

To that end, our guidelines offer guidance – not a regulatory framework. They are not laws to be obeyed rigidly. They are guidelines, with a small “g” that illustrate best practice and show all nations how they can move forward. But guide us they should, as we cannot ignore the lessons of the past and because they can best reduce the risks and costs for all parties involved.

Some blame the messenger for a decline in dam construction – a situation it did not create. Others invest the messenger with powers to stop or govern dam decisions – a mandate it did not have or seek.

What is the WCD message? That in response to growing development needs, dams remain one important option, but to turn that option into an ideological crusade – by either side and for whatever reason – would not only fail, but pre-empt whole societies from making an informed choice, which is their sovereign and human right.

We, the former Commission, cannot and do not make that informed choice. You can, and I hope you will.”

From the foregoing it is clear that this report is presented as **a tool for making informed choices**. Judgement will be required for the use of this tool in specific circumstances and these may vary from region to region.

I noted that the organisers of this symposium indicated that the impact of the Report on Southern Africa will be discussed. Last month I attended a meeting of the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) Water Sector Ministers in Harare where we had a brief discussion on the WCD report. I was asked by my fellow Ministers to present a SADC perspective at this occasion and to highlight the specific context of Southern Africa.

Some of the SADC regional realities (excluding the Democratic Republic of the Congo) are as follows:

- A total land area of 6,8 million square kilometres of which
 - : 43% receives more than 1 200 mm of rain per annum
 - : 19% receives between 600 and 1 200 mm of rain
 - : 16% is semi-arid with 400 – 600 mm per annum
 - : 22% is arid or desert with less than 400 mm of rain
- Renewable freshwater resources is estimated at an annual average of 650 billion cubic metres (56 billion m³ for South Africa), an average of 5 100 m³ per capita in 1995.
- The highest level of renewable water resource per capita is for Namibia (when its shared northern rivers are included), the lowest for South Africa and Malawi.
- The region faces a crisis of pervasive underdevelopment and endemic poverty with economic growth rates during the past 20 years well below world averages.
- Relatively little of the resource is currently used - only 7% of the estimated renewable resource was abstracted in the period 1980 – 1989 (equivalent to 159 m³ per capita).
- In 1993 only 7% of the arable land area was irrigated. Nevertheless agriculture is the largest user of water.
- Africa has the lowest total water supply coverage of any region, with only 62% of the population having access to improved water supply.
- Both floods and droughts impact on the people in the region, most acutely on the poor.

Clearly, reliable access to water resources is a precondition for industrial and urban development. Water resources can also help to provide a clean renewable source of power to support such development. The effective use of water is essential not only for food security but also to ensure that agriculture in the region becomes globally competitive.

Considering the above, there is substantial potential for water to contribute to development in the SADC region as has already occurred in the better developed parts of the world where, it should be noted, the resource was developed without the benefit of the WCD Report and its guidelines.

At the World Water Forum in the Hague in 2000 African States presented their vision for water in Africa, one in which there is an:

“equitable and sustainable use of Africa’s water resources for poverty alleviation, socio-economic development, regional co-operation, and for the environment.”

The main problem most countries face in achieving this vision is a lack of financial resources to develop and manage the water resources available to them. While it is recognised that the development of any dam will need to reconcile the needs and entitlements of interested parties, including the environment, the SADC Water Sector Ministers find the suggestions that the WCD guidelines should be made compulsory are unacceptable.

There is certainly a danger that an injudicious application of the guidelines would make the development of water resources far more expensive or even unaffordable. The result could be to block the development so urgently needed by the people of the region to improve their quality of life.

The achievement of a sustainable balance between the development needs of the world’s people and the protection of our common environment is indeed the challenge at the heart of the global agenda which will be discussed at next year’s Johannesburg Summit on Sustainable Development. As hosts of this important event, we need to ensure that the approaches taken address the needs of the overwhelming number of poor people in an unequal world.

It is against this context that I will now address the implications of the WCD Report for South Africa.

The core values for decision-making adopted by the WCD are not new. The values of equity, efficiency, participatory decision-making, sustainability and accountability are embedded in South Africa’s National Water Act and reflect the values of our Constitution. Similarly, many of the recommended approaches and guidelines are already to a large degree acknowledged in our broader planning and environmental policy and legislation.

Your programme for the next two days will provide an opportunity for various stakeholder groups to voice their opinions on the perceived implications of the recommendations for development of dams in South Africa and our neighbouring countries. There will be presentations of case studies, which will highlight both successes and failures. A reflection on the impacts resulting from the apartheid era resettlement policy at Gariep Dam will clearly illustrate the changes that have occurred over time and indeed the extent to which dam development must be seen within the broader political and social context.

But in your deliberations I urge you to be cognisant of the specific circumstances that pertain in South Africa. I am sure you would be listening to presentations describing the fact that we are classified as a **water stressed country** with resources that are poorly distributed.

From a Government perspective, there are some points which I need to make with about the topics addressed by the WCD report.

Yes, we want a better life for all of our people ! To achieve this we will need to ensure that there is water available to support our basic water supply programme and sustain our communities. We will have to harness our natural resources to drive the wheels of industry, to support agriculture, feed our people and create jobs. We do this knowing that our groundwater resources are limited and can at best only supplement the needs of our growing economy.

We have to protect our people against devastating floods and the dreadful consequences of drought. So, yes, we will seek to maintain ecological diversity and to preserve the natural beauty of all our rivers and valleys. In doing this however, we will recognise the existing natural variability of our rivers and streams as a result of our erratic rainfall – it is not by coincidence that we have so many “Sand rivers” in the country !

Yes, we agree that people directly affected by dam development should benefit from the process. They should be resettled in a way that allows them to be better off than before.

It is clear that we will need carefully planned and managed processes to achieve and indeed to reconcile all these objectives. That after all is the job of Governments which are expected to act in the public interest and in support of society’s core values.

The WCD report seeks to provide guidance on how to proceed. The challenge before us is to consider the recommendations, to compare them with the current policies and practices of this government, to identify areas in which improvement is possible because no process is ever perfect. I look forward to hearing your views and considering your comments.

Thank you

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