

Protecting Rivers and Rights: Ten Years after the World Commission on Dams Report

We are committed to meeting the world's water and energy needs in an equitable way while preserving healthy rivers and the livelihoods that depend on them. We have ongoing concerns about large dams and the ways in which they are being planned, implemented and operated.

A decade after the World Commission on Dams (WCD) issued its groundbreaking report, the evidence continues to mount that large dams – unless they are developed with the strictest environmental and social standards – bring significant costs to people and the planet:

- The UN's *Third Global Biodiversity Outlook* (May 2010) finds that freshwater species are being lost at an alarming rate and that freshwater ecosystems are even more threatened than other ecosystems, thanks in part to the damage caused by dams.
- A recent scientific paper in the journal *Water Alternatives* reveals that 472 million people have likely been negatively affected downstream of large dams. The authors state that this situation “lends urgency to the need for more comprehensive assessments of dam costs and benefits.”
- Indigenous and tribal peoples have been disproportionately affected by large dams, losing the land and resources upon which they depend physically, culturally and spiritually. According to a new report from Survival International, hundreds of thousands of tribal peoples from Brazil to Ethiopia are currently threatened by planned dams.
- Climate change will exacerbate the problems caused by large dams. Changing precipitation patterns and increased flooding and droughts will threaten dam safety, cause greater social and environmental damages, and undermine the viability of large-dam hydropower generation. Furthermore, the emission of greenhouse gases from reservoirs is emerging as a significant issue in some regions, as noted in another recent *Water Alternatives* paper.
- Large dams have repeatedly failed to meet their production targets, with the WCD finding that more than half of the hydropower and nearly half of the irrigation projects it studied had under-performed.

In 2000, following an independent global and participatory process, the WCD proposed a comprehensive rights-based framework for decision-making on water and energy projects.

The principles espoused by the WCD represent core values of human rights and sustainability. They include: conducting comprehensive options assessments; respecting the rights of affected communities by negotiating legally binding agreements and ensuring the free, prior and informed consent of indigenous peoples; guaranteeing that affected communities are the first to benefit; fixing problems with existing projects before building new ones; providing for environmental flows to maintain downstream ecosystems and livelihoods; and requiring funded, enforceable compliance plans from developers.

Although there has been debate about the WCD report, its fundamental principles have been reiterated in a growing number of legal norms. WCD principles are reflected in, for example, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Asian Development Bank Safeguard Policies, and the EU Water Framework Directive, as well as in national legislation and policies in China, Colombia, Nepal, Norway, Vietnam and other countries. However, effective implementation of these standards is far from complete in these and other countries. As documented in International Rivers' recent publication, *Protecting Rivers and Rights: The World Commission on Dams Recommendations in Action*, WCD principles have also proven their value in specific dam projects.

There are often better alternatives to large dams, particularly for meeting the energy and water needs of the poor or other vulnerable communities. These alternatives are increasingly economically viable and some are outpacing new dam developments. In 2009, for example, more wind than hydropower capacity was created globally, according to REN21's *Renewables 2010 Global Status Report*. A recent article in *Scientific American* argues that it is entirely possible to meet all the world's energy needs with wind, water and solar energy sources by 2030. Less than 9% of this energy would come from hydropower, most of which is already built. Similarly, numerous examples from around the world have shown that it is possible to meet water needs with decentralized, small-scale approaches to water conservation, storage and supply at low cost and without destructive dams.

When a dam has been identified as the best solution through a comprehensive, transparent and participatory options assessment process, it is important that the strongest standards are followed to guarantee the rights of affected communities and protect the environment.

The dam industry, through the International Hydropower Association and the Hydropower Sustainability Assessment Forum (HSAF), has just completed the preparation of its own assessment tool for hydro projects. This process has excluded affected people and Southern civil society networks from the negotiating table. The resulting Protocol does not include any minimum requirements to protect people's rights and the environment. It does not even require projects to comply with national laws and international conventions. Although the HSAF Protocol may offer a useful checklist for dam builders, a limited and voluntary approach cannot replace the rights-based approach proposed by the WCD.

On the 10th anniversary of the World Commission on Dams, we reassert the rights-based principles espoused by the WCD report and numerous conventions, laws, policies and regulations. We call on governments around the world to uphold the principles they have endorsed through various norms and standards when they plan, build and commission dam projects. At the same time, we remain open to a dialogue with all actors – governments, the dam industry, financiers and other civil society groups – about protecting our rivers and the rights of those who most depend upon them.

Endorsed by:

1. Center for Human Rights and Environment (CEDHA), Argentina
2. Fundación PROTEGER, Argentina
3. CDM Watch, Belgium
4. Núcleo de Assessoria às Comunidades Atingidas por Barragens (NACAB), Brazil
5. Burma Rivers Network, Burma
6. Cameroon Gender and Environment Watch, Cameroon
7. Friends of the Earth Canada, Canada
8. Coalición Ciudadana por Aisen Reserva de Vida, Chile
9. ECOSISTEMAS, Chile
10. Etica en los Bosques, Chile
11. Jovenes Tehuelches Valdivia, Chile
12. Green Watershed, China
13. ILSA, Colombia
14. COECOCEIBA - Friends of the Earth Costa Rica, Costa Rica
15. Friends of the Earth Cyprus, Cyprus
16. Friends of the Earth Finland, Finland
17. Urgewald, Germany
18. The Institute for Ecology and Action Anthropology (INFOE), Germany
19. CounterCurrent - GegenStroemung, Germany
20. Volta Basin Development Foundation, Ghana
21. Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña (OFRANEH), Honduras
22. Alternatives Asia, India
23. Manthan Adhyayan Kendra, India
24. South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers & People (SANDRP), India
25. Indian Social Action Forum (INSAF), India
26. River Basin Friends, (NE) India
27. Kuki Students Democratic Front, India
28. National Forum of Forest People & Forest Workers, India
29. Himalayan Peoples Forum, India
30. Kriti Team, India
31. CAPP, Indonesia
32. Sawit Watch, Indonesia
33. Campagna Per La Riforma Della Banca Mondiale, Italy
34. Japan Center for a Sustainable Environment and Society (JACSES), Japan
35. Friends of the Earth Japan, Japan
36. Friends of Lake Turkana, Kenya
37. MAUDESCO/Friends of the Earth Mauritius, Mauritius
38. Fundar, Center for Analysis and Research, Mexico
39. JA! Justica Ambiental, Mozambique
40. Water and Energy Users' Federation-Nepal, Nepal
41. Himalayan and Peninsular Hydro-Ecological Network (HYPHEN), Nepal
42. Anti Pancheshwar-Purnagiri Dam Struggle Committee, Nepal
43. Koshi Victim Society, Nepal
44. Saptakoshi High Dam Watch Group, Nepal
45. Arun Concerned Group, Nepal
46. Both ENDS, The Netherlands

47. Hadejia Jama'are Kumadugu Yobe Basin (HJKYB), Nigeria
48. SWAPHEP, Nigeria
49. FIVAS, Norway
50. SOBREVIVENCIA - Friends of the Earth Paraguay, Paraguay
51. Tebtebba, Philippines
52. Klub Gaja, Poland
53. International Socio-Ecological Union, Russia
54. Rwanda NGOs Forum on Water, Sanitation and Environment (RWASEF), Rwanda
55. Friends of the Earth Sierra Leone, Sierra Leone
56. Matoti Forum, South Africa
57. Climate Justice Now, South Africa
58. Earthlife Africa eThekweni, South Africa
59. EcoDoc Africa, South Africa
60. South African Water Caucus (SAWC), South Africa
61. Rural Support Services, South Africa
62. Centre for Civil Society, South Africa
63. Concerned KwaDinabakubo Women's Group, South Africa
64. Centre for Environmental Justice, Sri Lanka
65. Emandla Ekuphila Water User District, Swaziland
66. Berne Declaration, Switzerland
67. Focus on the Global South, Thailand
68. Jeunes Volontaires pour l'Environnement, Togo
69. Initiative to Keep Hasankeyf Alive, Turkey
70. National Association of Professional Environmentalists (NAPE), Uganda
71. International Rivers, USA
72. Friends of the Earth US, USA
73. National Wildlife Federation, USA
74. International Accountability Project, USA
75. Kaluli Development Foundation, Zambia
76. African Rivers Network (ARN)
77. Asociación Interamericana para la Defensa del Ambiente, AIDA
78. European Rivers Network (ERN)