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## *Preface*

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Ten years ago the World Commission on Dams signed off with the words "We have told our story. What happens next is up to you".

So what did happen? Judging by this special ten-year anniversary issue of *Water Alternatives*, there is continued interest in the Commission's recommendations, and the report remains a benchmark. As the Commission's former Secretary-General, this is rewarding, but even more so is the evidence of the report's impact on real world decision-making provided by some of the contributions in this journal. However, many more of the papers describe a resurgence of traditional approaches to dam development and operation, with little account taken of the lessons available from the past.

Ten years is not much time to transform water and energy governance, and it is clear that the issues which led to the establishment of the Commission in 1998 are still current. In addition, new issues such as climate change have emerged to drive the demand for renewable energy. The debate on large water infrastructure continues.

Are the Commission's recommendations still relevant in a world faced with climate change, the need for low-carbon energy, the rise of new world powers and sources of finance, and economic crises?

In considering this question it is important to recall that although the Commission's global review of large dams confirmed their many benefits, it also found a systemic pattern of physical and economic underperformance and severe adverse effects on rivers, watersheds, aquatic ecosystems and affected communities, especially the 40-80 million people found to have been displaced by dams worldwide.

The Commission traced these shortcomings to inadequate incorporation of stakeholder interests and ecosystem values at a sufficiently early stage of project planning, and equally importantly to a failure to consider all options for provision of the desired water and energy services *before* deciding to build a dam – a reflection of where power lies in many societies. Further shortcomings were found in project implementation, especially the lack of a developmental approach to resettlement, and in dam operation, such as lost opportunities to maintain downstream ecosystem services and livelihoods. Indeed, it is noteworthy that at least 472 million river-dependent people, some 8% of the world's population, are estimated to live downstream of large dams and be affected by dam-induced changes in river flows and ecosystem conditions (Richter et al., this issue).

The WCD's major output – a new framework for decision making – was aimed directly at these challenges. It was intended to increase the chances of win-win solutions through more comprehensive and inclusive planning processes, and to formalise these solutions and the distribution of project benefits through contracts resulting from a rights and risks approach.

Let me emphasise: the Commission's recommendations were a framework on how best to capture diverse interests, but not a prescription. Given the uniqueness of each dam, not only in terms of design but also in terms of socio-economic and environmental benefits and costs, the WCD refrained from developing a generic consensus as to what constitutes a good or a bad dam.

While some had hoped for a summary judgement or an 'end to the dams conflict', the WCD recognised that there is no magic formula. Instead it focused on choices and the process by which these choices would be made – and by whom – thereby seeking to ensure that a transparent and equitable

decision-making process could be secured. And that such agreements negotiated among the key parties would be complied with, honoured, and implemented, helping to improve results and development outcomes.

The final recommendations were based on a universally agreed set of core values – equity, sustainability, efficiency, participatory decision making and accountability – and strategic priorities.

How far these values and priorities have been translated into changed policies and procedures by nation states and financiers, and in turn how far these changes have made differences in the real world, are the subject of an ongoing UNEP survey.<sup>1</sup> The findings of the survey will be presented during the World Water Week in Stockholm in September.

In the decade since the release of the Commission's Report a number of major studies, such as the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, have underlined the urgency of improved management of the world's freshwater resources. Meanwhile, The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB) – an international initiative funded by the European Commission and governments, including Norway, Germany and the UK – is shedding new light on the economic value of nature-based assets including freshwater ones.

In addition, the legal framework for global governance has continued to evolve, especially in relation to multilateral environmental agreements (218 between 1998 and 2009). There is a move towards a Universal Declaration for Planetary Rights to complement advances in the international legal frameworks governing human rights and the rights of indigenous peoples to free, prior and informed consent. Social accountability is becoming the new ethical and social norm in the private sector. Civil society, both rural and urban, is increasingly empowered by digital media. And new tools are becoming available to assist better decision making, for example innovative multi-stakeholder processes and methods for accurately valuing ecosystem services – at the same time as the economic implications of damaging or enhancing those ecosystem services has grown.

As the world considers how best to transition to a Green Economy, it is worth recalling the Commission's view that the 'end' that any project achieves must be the sustainable improvement of human welfare. This means a significant advance of human development on a basis that is economically viable, socially equitable and environmentally sustainable. Looking forward, decisions about whether a dam should be built and how it should be operated, or whether better alternatives exist, must reflect the multiple impacts and risks and benefits that such projects imply for different stakeholders. Achieving this goal requires new ways of decision making. There are many lessons from the past. The message of the Commission is still fresh and relevant in the run-up to the Rio+20 meeting scheduled to take place in Brazil in 2012 – 20 years after the landmark Rio Earth Summit of 1992.

I am pleased that this special issue of *Water Alternatives* offers an opportunity ten years after the WCD to take stock of the evolution in thinking about the complex and diverse issues that still surround decisions about dams and development. At UNEP, we welcome the prospect of new dialogues that can foster the continued innovation and implementation of policies and practices that will protect and restore global water resources for the benefit of humanity. We hope that the ideas in the papers and viewpoints offered here can help galvanise renewed interest in jointly creating effective solutions for water and energy development that can be widely supported.

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<sup>1</sup> Refer to <http://fluidsurveys.com/surveys/dam/wcd/langen/>