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WCD+10: Revisiting the Large Dam Controversy

Special issue: WCD+10: Revisiting the Large Dam Controversy

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Why revisit the World Commission on Dams? The answer, in one simple phrase: because the issues of contention around dams have not gone away!

The World Commission on Dams (WCD) was an experiment in multi-stakeholder dialogue and global governance concerned with a subject area — large dams — that was fraught with conflict and controversy. The WCD Report, *Dams and Development: A New Framework for Decision-Making*, was published in 2000 and accompanied by hopes that broad-based agreements would be forged on how to better manage water and energy development. Ten years later, this special issue of *Water Alternatives* revisits the WCD and its impacts, exploring the question: Is the WCD still relevant?

The editorial team and the Guest Editors of this special issue of *Water Alternatives* have selected a range of 20 papers, 6 viewpoints, and 4 book reviews that help to illustrate the evolution in the dams debate. The goal of this special issue is to examine the influence and the impacts of the WCD on the dam enterprise, in general, and on the policies and practices of key stakeholders and institutions, and on the development outcomes for affected communities and environments, in particular. In this introduction, the Guest Editors provide an overview of the special issue, exploring the new drivers of dam development that have emerged during the last decade, including climate change and new financiers of dams, and describing the themes emerging from this diverse set of papers and viewpoints.

Despite the WCD process, the legacies and controversies of the world's 45,000 large dams continue to cause conflict. Few rivers remain that have been untouched by some type of dam. Displaced populations, estimated between 40-80 million, have frequently been resettled with minimal or no compensation, often in marginal lands, and in the majority of cases have become and remained poorer. Large-scale alteration of natural hydrologic regimes has had massive impacts on fisheries, water-based livelihoods, aquatic ecosystems and environmental services as a whole. Some scientists also believe that many reservoirs emit large amounts of greenhouse gases, up to 4% of all human-induced GHG emissions, as reviewed in this volume by Mäkinen and Khan. Indeed, the first-ever global estimate of the

number of river-dependent people potentially affected by dam-induced changes in river flows and other ecosystem conditions is presented in this volume by Richter et al.: that 472 million river-dependent people have had their livelihoods negatively affected by dams.

Several papers explore new tools and approaches – the Hydropower Sustainability Assessment Forum, economic risk analysis, non-dam alternatives, community referenda as a means of participatory decision making – and others examine specific cases, including dams in the Mekong, Amazon, Klamath, Tigris-Euphrates, and Chixoy river basins. Viewpoints from many individuals and organisations with direct involvement during the WCD process provide perspectives on the roles of the state, non-government organisations (NGOs), and multilateral agencies in developing and enforcing policies, and on the evolution of principles of ‘free, prior, and informed consent’ in international law.

This special issue demonstrates the need for a renewed multi-stakeholder dialogue at multiple levels. This would not be a redo of the WCD, but rather a rekindling and redesigning of processes and forums where mutual understanding, information-sharing, and norm-setting can occur. One of the most promising developments of the last decade is the further demonstration, in case studies described here, that true partnership amongst key stakeholders can produce transformative resource-sharing agreements, showing that many of the WCD recommendations around negotiated decision making are working in practice. We hope that this special issue sparks a dialogue to recommit ourselves to finding effective, just, and lasting solutions for water, energy and ecosystem management. It is a testament to the continued relevance of the WCD Report that ten years later it is still a topic of intense interest and debate, as illustrated by the papers presented in this special issue.

[Click here to read the preface by Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary General and Executive Director UN Environment Programme \(UNEP\)](#)

7th issue available

Water Alternatives is published three times each year. The inaugural issue has been released on the 1st of June 2008. The 7th issue (Vol. 3 Issue 2) is the last issue available: [Click here to access the table of contents](#) and [pdf of articles](#).

Journal focus

Why this journal?

WaA is an interdisciplinary journal addressing the full range of issues that water raises in contemporary societies. Its ambition is to provide space for alternative and critical thinking on such issues (see our manifesto for more details).

WaA welcomes contributions that address any dimension of water resources development, management and use, and

their relations with society and the environment. Subject coverage includes (but is not limited to):

- Water policy at global and national levels
- Water governance and water reforms
- The politics of everyday water management (irrigation, watershed, etc.)
- Water knowledge systems, concepts and discourses
- Water and economics
- The politics of water provision and use
- Water, environment and society
- Water, technology and society
- Water, globalization and geopolitics
- Water, power and social divisions: gender, class, ethnicity

WaA offers four distinct rubrics:

- Scholarly articles (Articles)
- Short articles that are not academic in scope and may reflect some opinion (Viewpoints)
- Book reviews (Reviews)
- Responses to earlier articles (Responses).

As a worldwide high-quality peer-reviewed eJournal, WaA offers the following advantages:

- Full and free access to articles, ensuring worldwide outreach and intellectual multiplier effect.
- Reduced time interval between acceptance of articles and their publication online: WaA will propose new articles three times per year, time lag between approval of articles and publication will in most cases not exceed 4 months. In addition, articles will be made available as soon as they reach the final stage of production to registered users, who may access articles (preview).