Technical Applicability of the Recommendation of the World Commission on Dams

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The World Commission on Dams (WCD) was established as an international and independent body "to develop decision-making criteria and policy and regulatory frameworks for assessing alternatives for energy and water resources development" and "to develop and promote internationally acceptable standards for the planning, assessment, design, construction, operation and monitoring of large dam projects." The WCD was initially supposed to develop a globally acceptable code of conduct, or a set of guidelines, for planning and implementing dam construction projects. In November 2000, the WCD finally published "Dams and Development" ("the WCD report" hereinafter) as its only and final report (WCD, 2000).

In the WCD report, the WCD recommended several issues identifying five core values: equity, efficiency, participatory decision-making sustainability and accountability. They proposed seven strategic priorities in order to "equitable and sustainable development of water and energy resources". They are (1) gaining public acceptance, (2) comprehensive options assessment, (3) addressing existing dams, (4) sustaining rivers and livelihoods, (5) recognizing entitlements and sharing benefits, (6) ensuring compliance, and (7) sharing rivers for peace, development, and security.

Then, the WCD built a "comprehensive and integrated framework for decision making on the provision of water and energy services" upon these seven strategic priorities. It identifies five key decision points along with a project cycle to realize the framework. They are (1) Stage 1. Needs assessment: validating the need for water and energy services. (2) Stage 2. Selecting alternatives: identifying the preferred development plan from among the full range of options, and Stage 2A. Investigative studies, (3) Stage 3. Project preparation: verifying agreements are in place before tender of the construction contract, (4) Stage 4. Project implementation: confirming compliance before commissioning, and (5) Stage 5. Project operation: adapting to changing context.

The WCD mentioned; "the five key decision points are supported by a set of criteria that describes the process required for compliance." The 77 criteria are proposed at each decision point based upon the seven strategic priorities. In order to meet the criteria, the WCD further proposed the 26 guidelines to assess the options and plans and to implement dam projects. Each guideline is proposed along with the seven strategic priorities. It recommended governments, professional organizations, financing agencies, civil society, and others to incorporate the guidelines into their relevant guidelines and policies.

The WCD recommendations, including core values, strategic priorities, key decision points, criteria and guidelines, were generally welcomed by NGOs and affected families by dam constructions. On the other hand, dam construction industries and developing countries including India are negative or skeptical toward the recommendations. The World Bank, which played a key role to establish the WCD, was reluctant to adopt the recommendation as its policy.

The WCD recommendations has a complex structure as shown in Figure 1, and this complexity hinder stakeholders to correctly understand the character of the recommendations. The executive
summary of the report, in fact, mentioned that the report was "not intended as a blueprint." At the final WCD Forum, former WCD chair, Professor Kadar Asmal, stated, "Our guidelines offer guidance - not a regulatory framework. They are not laws to be obeyed rigidly. They are guidelines, with a small 'g'." However, many organizations regarded the recommendations as an established policy of dam development.

Fig. 1. Structure of the WCD recommendations

The criteria and the guidelines have some technical problems, and there is much room for further elaboration;
(1) relations between criteria and guidelines are not clear;
(2) regional aspect of the dam sites are not addressed;
(3) ownership of the dam project is not considered;
(4) how to certify compliance is not mentioned;
(5) public acceptance is not clearly defined; and
(6) technical applicability of the guidelines has not been examined.

The WCD should have adopted a two step approach and have recommended only core values and strategic priorities, which seemed to be widely accepted, as the first step. Then, further discussion should have been made to make criteria and guidelines more widely acceptable at the next step.

UNEP established a follow-up mechanism, the Dams and Development Project (DDP) with a two-year mandate. It defined the objectives of the DDP as supporting dialogues, strengthening interaction, supporting the dissemination of the report, and facilitating the flow of information and advice. However, making the report and the guidelines widely acceptable international policy and/or code of conduct is excluded from the UNEP objectives. As DDP did not deal with the issues, another mechanism will be required to conduct the work. Re-organizing the WCD itself might be one possible option.

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