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International Workshop on Impacts of Large Dams Istanbul, Turkey, October 25-27, 2004

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*International Workshop on Impacts of Large Dams
Istanbul, Turkey, October 25-27, 2004*

One of the most controversial issues of the water sector in recent years has been the impacts of large dams. Proponents of large dams have claimed that such structures are essential to meet the increasing water demands of the world and that their overall societal benefits far outweigh the costs. In contrast, opponents claim that social and environmental costs of large dams far exceed their benefits and that the era of construction of large dams is over. The World Commission on Dams was expected to give definitive answers to many of these complex issues, but its report did not satisfy many countries and water professionals.

The Third World Centre for Water Management, the International Hydropower Association, and the Nippon Foundation, in collaboration with the International Water Resources Association, the International Commission of Irrigation and Drainage, and the International Commission on Large Dams, organized a workshop in Istanbul, Turkey, October 25 to 27, 2004, where 25 of the leading experts were invited to very specifically assess the impacts of large dams. A very unusual participant was President Suleyman Demirel of Turkey, a water expert, who presented his overall view on large dams and also a case study of the Seyhan Dam in Turkey.

The main objective of the meeting was to debate impartially, comprehensively, and objectively the positive and negative impacts of large dams based on facts, figures, and authoritative analyses. These in-depth case studies were expected to promote a healthy and balanced debate on the needs, impacts and relevance of large dams. The impacts of the following large dams were analyzed: Aswan High Dam, Egypt; Shahid Rajee (Tajan) Dam, Iran; Sobradinho Dam and Salto Caxias Hydropower Project, Brazil; Sierre-Poncon Dam, France; and all large dams in Switzerland. The Bhakra Nangal Project and Koyna and Kangsabati dams in India were analyzed, as were the Ataturk, Altinkaya, Gezende, and Hasan Ugurlu dams in Turkey. The indirect economic impacts of dams, with examples of different parts of the world, were assessed. There was also a most thought-provoking and comprehensive discussion of the global experiences on resettlement.

It was agreed that social and environmental impacts of all large dams should receive adequate emphasis at all stages of planning, construction, and operation. In addition to reliably assessing the benefits and costs of large dams, it is essential to analyze the nature of beneficiaries, as well as to identify the people who may have to pay some costs, for example in terms of involuntary resettlement due to the creation of the reservoirs. These people must be explicitly made beneficiaries of the project. Resettle-

ment should be viewed as a development opportunity and not as a price some people may have to pay in the name of progress. While resettlement practices have improved significantly during the past decade, these should be improved even further in the future.

It was noted that indirect impacts of the large dams were mostly ignored in the past. Ex-post analyses of the Bhakra Nangal project in India and the Ataturk Dam in Turkey indicated that their indirect impacts have been very significant, and thus these impacts should be included in the benefit-cost calculations of such projects in the future. A methodological study by the World Bank on estimation of indirect impacts of several large dams from different parts of the world also came to the identical conclusion.

It was agreed that it is important to increase the existing knowledge base on the impacts of large dams through reliable collection of social, economic, environmental, and technical data from different projects. Only through collection of reliable data and their objective analyses can the extent and magnitudes of different impacts be reliably estimated. Methodological studies are also needed to determine which impacts, or what percentages of specific impacts, should be attributed to large dams and/or to other development factors.

While commitments from governments are needed for proper project planning and implementation, commitments are also necessary from the opponents of the large dams in terms of reconsidering their views on the basis of observed facts and figures and rigorous scientific analyses. Discussions in terms of water development should be based on the specific water needs of a specific region, and how societal needs can be met within a reasonable timeframe, and in a cost-effective, socially-acceptable, and environmentally-friendly way. Such a logical approach will invariably lead to the conclusion that large dams are necessary for some regions, and in other places, alternatives like rain-water harvesting or small dams may be appropriate. These are not necessarily "either-or" issues.

It is essential that authoritative studies on the impacts of large dams from different parts of the world be urgently carried out so that the existing knowledge-base can be vastly improved. The case studies that were specially prepared for the Istanbul workshop are a right step in this direction, but many more such studies are needed. The case studies presented at the Istanbul Workshop will be published shortly as a book by Springer-Verlag, Germany.

Submitted by: Cecilia Tortajada, Vice-President, Third World Centre for Water Management, Atizapán, Mexico, and Vice President (The Americas), International Water Resources Association.