



## United Nations Environment Programme DAMS AND DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

Information Sheet No 6.1

### Promoting Dialogue

# Defining Comprehensive Options Assessment and Identifying Challenges and Opportunities

The first Issue-Based Workshops convened within the context of the DDP work program component on supporting global dialogues focused on WCD's second strategic priority: Comprehensive Options Assessments of Dams and their Alternatives. The workshop identified the characteristics of comprehensive options assessments, the challenges and opportunities involved in conducting comprehensive options assessments, other considerations that decision-makers should take into account when embarking on comprehensive options assessments, and possible ways in which the Dams and Development Project can facilitate comprehensive options assessments. These outputs are presented below.



#### Why should decision-makers perform comprehensive options assessments?

Decision-makers would benefit from performing comprehensive options assessments because these processes:

- improve development outcomes and ensure that these outcomes are responsive to needs;
- achieve wider legitimacy for selected options and reduce controversy; and
- create a sense of ownership by the stakeholders and facilitate their buy-in to the results.

#### Why did the DD Forum decide to convene the workshop?

Achieving these development outcomes requires closing the gap between aspiration and reality in the present-day implementation of options assessment. The DDP provided an unique opportunity at a global level to bring stakeholders from diverse backgrounds together with a common aim of building on the direction provided by the WCDs strategic priority and developing guidance for those involved in dams and development issues at national, sub-national and local levels.

#### What is an options assessment?

An options assessment is part of a decision-making process that works towards identifying the most appropriate options to satisfy defined needs. These processes are conducted at policy, strategic planning and project levels

#### What are the characteristics of comprehensive options assessments?

*Comprehensive options assessments:*

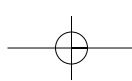
- are driven by a needs assessment that reflects local, sub-national and national goals and is influenced by international commitments.
- are transparent; they are built on explicit assumptions and result in documented decisions.
- include the full range of alternatives relevant to the articulated need, such as demand-side and supply-side measures; structural and non-structural alternatives; and conventional and non-conventional options.
- are participatory involving, among others, project-affected groups at local levels; and representatives of interest groups at the strategic planning and policy levels.
- recognize and address limitations of knowledge base and available resources.
- are iterative processes with time-bound outcomes designed to meet both short- and long-term needs.
- integrate consideration of environmental and social factors together with technical, economic and financial factors.

#### Who is responsible for conducting comprehensive options assessments?

At policy and strategic planning levels, options assessment is a government-led, decision-making process. At the project level, the project proponent is responsible for conducting the options assessment and government provides the enabling environment.

#### What are the implications of comprehensive options assessments?

- Comprehensive options assessments provide an instrument for more inclusive consideration of all alternatives earlier in the planning cycle.
- Comprehensive options assessment requires an enabling planning environment, particularly at policy and strategic planning levels. To be implemented, there is a need for capacity building, including more information on alternatives, inter-sectoral co-operation, participatory processes, and ranking and screening tools.



- The implications for funding and budgets are that comprehensive options assessments increase up-front costs in order to reduce longer term costs associated with delays and conflict; that small-scale, dispersed options require access to micro-credit for implementation; and that public resources will need to be devoted to options assessments at planning levels within and across each sector.
- The comprehensive options assessment process will also need to be formalized in legal and regulatory frameworks.

### Challenges and Opportunities

The following key issues, which may be both obstacles for comprehensive options assessment implementation and triggering factors need to be addressed:

- governance systems, in terms of transparency and accountability;
- extent that country legal systems enable effective consultation procedures;
- influence of donor policies and access to funding;
- regulatory structures and reforms as regards the participation of private sector;
- NGOs as regards their ability to analyse and contribute to OA, facilitate debate and promote community options;
- the physical context that can limit some options but trigger other creative initiatives
- compartmentalized knowledge that reduces understanding of options, introduces bias and impairs transparency of process; and
- the needs and problems of indigenous communities acting as options promoters.
- lack of information or incomplete information on one option compared to others;
- influence of models that are either overly complex or too simple to convince stakeholders to accept their results;
- cost and time required for data collection; and
- assessment tools, such as models, that can facilitate better and deeper understanding of the comprehensive options assessment process and pave the way to incorporate and disseminate the methodology or, because of lack of familiarity with models and tools, and of willingness to apply them, generate the reverse reaction.

### Other considerations relevant to comprehensive options assessments include:

**Linkages between levels:** it is recognized that there are many interactions between the policy, strategic planning and project levels.

**Data needs:** A knowledge base is required as a reference tool to raise awareness on what each of the various options can deliver, including the opportunities they present and their limitations.

**Funding requirements:** Financial assistance may be required at an early stage to improve the knowledge base on traditional initiatives. Where external support is required, the importance of strategic options assessment needs to be reflected in country assistance programmes.

**Timeframes and short-term needs:** The needs assessment process should be recognised as a discrete step in the process. Planning processes are dynamic and there should be a recognition that policies and strategies are updated periodically along different timeframes to strategic and project planning processes. Projects that satisfy agreed immediate short term needs can be implemented in parallel to longer-term strategy development.



**The need for institutional and capacity building:** To remove any bias created by imbalances in political and financial influence, there is a need to level the playing field by creating a transparent process where all stakeholders have an equal opportunity to influence the decision. This may require:

- Building the capacity of weaker stakeholders so that they are empowered to participate in the process.
- Reducing the institutional disincentives for government officials to engage in cross-sectoral exchanges.
- Enabling multi-stakeholder participation upstream in the decision-making process, and bringing policy-making closer to grass roots level.
- Moving from a single sector approach to planning to an options assessment process that reflects cross-sectoral realities will require new approaches and institutional capacity. As part of this learning process, research and feedback on traditional and new options needs to be enhanced.

#### What can DDP do?

Some suggestions from the workshop include informing national processes on dams and development about comprehensive options assessments, promoting pilot projects, comparing existing with proposed processes, and disseminating case studies.



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