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Transparency International

David Harrison
The Nature Conservancy

Michael Simon
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Dear NGO members of the Hydropower Sustainability Assessment Forum,

We are writing to express grave concern about the forthcoming IHA Hydropower Sustainability Assessment Protocol and your potential endorsement of the document. The IHA Protocol represents a major step backward from existing social, human rights and environmental standards and is likely to be used by industry and others to greenwash destructive dams.

The IHA Protocol is supposed to measure and improve the sustainability of hydropower projects. Yet in spite of its lofty goals, it does not require respect for human rights, international standards or national law. The Protocol defines “sustainable projects” as those which are “broadly consistent” with the IHA’s weak existing sustainability guidelines. Even the top scores of the IHA Protocol require less than what hydropower projects have to attain under existing standards.

The UN, many governments, international banks and the independent World Commission on Dams have successively strengthened environmental standards and the recognition of the rights of communities affected by large dam projects during the past decade. These rights and standards have proven their value in projects on the ground.

The IHA Protocol is a voluntary scorecard for dam builders without any obligatory bottom-lines or minimum standards for their hydropower projects. It lacks objectivity and independence. Worst of all, it legitimizes unsustainable practices in the dam industry, against which local communities continue to struggle.

The following are some examples, according to the last draft (May 2010) that has been shared, of how the IHA Protocol undermines existing standards and obligations:

- International norms – including the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples – require that indigenous peoples give or withhold their free, prior and informed consent *to projects* that affect their traditional lands. Even the IHA Protocol’s top score on indigenous peoples does not require this.
- Some multilateral development banks, such as the World Bank and the International Finance Corporation in its draft revised Performance Standards, prioritize land-for-land compensation for resettled communities. The IHA Protocol does not even reference this.

- Many governments and financial institutions, including the Asian Development Bank and the Equator Banks, require that the cumulative environmental impacts of projects be evaluated. The IHA Protocol only references cumulative impacts under “Assessment Guidance” as a point that might be considered.
- Many anti-corruption policies, including the World Bank’s, require that contracts for large infrastructure projects be awarded through international competitive bidding. The IHA Protocol does not require this.

The IHA Protocol overlooks other important aspects of dam building almost completely. It fails to deal with the impacts of climate change on rivers and dams and the emission of greenhouse gases from reservoirs in any meaningful way. In the same way, it fails to adequately address potential conflicts over transboundary rivers, or the risk that dams may trigger earthquakes, for example.

The IHA claims that the new Protocol will allow an objective assessment of hydropower projects. Yet the document’s language is often subjective and vague. Furthermore, the Protocol does not require that projects be assessed by independent auditors. It does, however, state that information from external sources (such as media reports or presumably information from civil society groups) is only admissible as evidence if it has been “verified” by the project representative.

We understand that the IHA is also trying to control who is allowed to carry out public assessments under the Protocol. While this point is still under negotiation, such an outcome would effectively prohibit independent assessments.

Affected communities, indigenous peoples and Southern civil society organizations have been excluded from the negotiating table during the Protocol’s development. We expect that the lack of independence in the Protocol’s use will further bias the outcome of the assessments.

The IHA Protocol undermines standards for which we have fought for many years, and threatens to weaken the position of affected communities in future projects. In turn, this will weaken respect for human rights and the environment worldwide. We urge you to support the rights of indigenous peoples and affected communities by not endorsing the IHA Protocol.

Sincerely,



Patrick McCully
International Rivers

Endorsed by:

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