

FOREWORD



Nicolas Renard - Director of Foresight, Veolia Institute

“Faced with the confrontation of opposing views, the secret of making major projects accepted lies in a shared creation of value. Although this is never easy, it is nevertheless possible.”

“Forests precede civilizations and deserts follow them”¹. Railways, highways, dams, navigable canals: major infrastructure inflicts deep wounds on the natural environment. In the 21st century projects are no longer conceived as they were three decades ago: thanks to environmental standards and the rising power of civil society, the era of forced wholesale landscape modifications is dead. But how to avoid damage, and how to make up for it when it cannot be avoided?

Taking us from India to the Congo, from Belgium to the United States, this issue of FACTS uses concrete cases to give us an overview of the way in which major projects are designed, conducted, accepted or refused. Each of them stands at the crossroads of multiple legitimate, but divergent, interests. This makes it difficult to reach a consensus among all stakeholders. This also makes it important to turn to mediators who can help to find this consensus.

The criteria of technical feasibility, economic viability and preservation of the environment are now supplemented by that of social acceptability, which has become as important as the first three. This brings us to the issue of governance. Although essential, this question is difficult to address because for projects that cross vast territories, there is no preexistent governance structure. Creating one is therefore necessary, although its very newness will make it that much more fragile.

Do we want a sincere and balanced dialogue, or do we seek to impose a *fait accompli*? Many developers submit projects that are completely tied up in advance and are reluctant to adjust them, except marginally. But the more a project is designed on the sly, the less the decision to

implement it will be judged legitimate, and the higher the risk that it will be vigorously challenged. However, because they are big, these projects have a major advantage: they have the support of the governments, who wield enormous power in relation to the other stakeholders, including the power of changing the legislation to make it compatible with the planned infrastructure. Nevertheless, the NGO community can play a crucial role in these projects, forcing them to be altered and promoting their adoption by local populations.

Is it still possible to build heavy infrastructure, and if so, under what conditions? How do we make this necessary evil acceptable? The answer lies first in identifying the value created and second in distributing it fairly. Faced with the confrontation of opposing views, the secret of making major projects accepted lies in a shared creation of value. Although this is never easy, it is nevertheless possible.

In 2004, WWF summed up its position on dams as follows: *“Dams are both a blessing and a curse.”* One could say the same of many other infrastructures. At national level, they present many advantages but at local level, they chiefly show disadvantages. There is a clear conflict between two kinds of general interest: the one that emanates from the national level and the one that is local.

How, then, can we facilitate the dialogue between these interests, to prevent both paralyzing public action and having it forced through? The conditions for the success of major projects are well-known: a logic of partnership; bringing in the various stakeholders early on in the process; providing complete information; reducing environmental damage and population displacement; ensuring appropriate compensatory measures, fair compensation, consultations in good faith and not just for show, independent audits, and openness to alternatives; paying attention to vulnerable groups; contractualizing the commitments, etc. The more collaborative the practices, the greater the chance of success for new infrastructure.

1. François-René de Chateaubriand