

Planning and Implementing Sustainable Infrastructure Projects

DECISION MEMO ASSIGNMENT

For this assignment, you will draft a memo, receive feedback (see last page of this document), and then revise and submit your final memo.

The context: The President of the World Bank has appointed you to serve on the World Energy Council, which is a high-level body tasked with making recommendations about securing a future where energy needs are met in a socially and environmentally sustainable manner. As a major project funder, the Bank can play a central role in this—or do a great deal more damage.

The problem: Energy projects in the world are increasingly beset by political risks and public opposition, such as that seen in the Narmada case and many others where developing major infrastructure frequent involves land “takings” and costly displacement as well as environmental impacts. As a major funder and regulator of energy projects and other infrastructure development, the World Bank wants to play a lead role in designing better, more legitimate projects. Toward this end, you are to identify lessons of the Narmada project and of recent takings controversies for the Bank’s future policies and projects.

The task. You have been invited to prepare a decision memo, of no more than 1,000 words, explaining (a) to what degree the Narmada case is an illustration of effective and fair planning; (b) in general, what criteria the Bank can use to judge successes and failures (or shortcomings) in big infrastructure projects; and (c) in brief, what key actions by the Bank might prevent or mitigate the failures and promote success as much as possible.

Yes, this is a good deal to cover in 1,000 words or less, but this kind of scope is not uncommon for a professional memorandum, and the well-organized memo can have a big impact in spite of its short form vis-à-vis the big, complex issues—in part because it will be more widely read than long reports or academic treatments of the issues, especially by the key decisionmakers.

Based in part on your memo, the Bank intends to make a public statement about what successful large infrastructure projects should include and how the Bank’s policies and programs will promote that ideal.

Soon after you are invited to prepare your memo, you find yourself in discussion with the Bank President’s senior staff, one of whom says to you by phone:

We know that displacing people from their land was a central issue in Narmada and that “takings” have become increasingly controversial in many corners of the globe. If you can draw on your knowledge of those controversies and the ethical dilemmas involved, that will be very helpful.

You won't have room, in the memo, to detail those other cases, of course. And you'll need to remind the President of the most salient features of the Narmada project and its context—whatever is essential to make your analysis clear ... Also, the President is aware of the criticisms of the Bank's role, but be sure your memo is aimed at us: Like it or not, we're lenders, primarily, and we have leverage over outcomes as financiers, not as governments. The Narmada case showed us how extensive that leverage is in some ways and how limited in others. Also, it's not as though we're going to abandon big projects altogether. That's a non-starter. The question is: How to make them as fair and effective as possible?

Format. Double-space your memo, and use ample margins (at least an inch on all sides). As always, no micro-print, please: Assume a busy reader, and stick with a 12-point typeface. Use your word processing software to count the number of words in your memo, and place that number below the text, i.e. on the last page (e.g. "Word count = 997").

As with any professional workproduct, spell check and proofread your work carefully before submitting, be concise and clear, avoid needless jargon or dense academic arguments, and provide an effective summary up front—i.e., your main messages, not just a preview of topics you will cover. Remember that we don't need a conclusion at the end (it should be at the beginning, in the summary, supported by the body of the memo). Don't formally cite sources unless you use a direct quote, in which case make it brief, and simply footnote the source. Do not use footnotes, endnotes or other "extras" to make additional substantive points. Present all of your ideas in the memo itself.

Also, be sure to briefly define any specialized terms, if any, that you find it absolutely necessary to use, such as "project-affected persons." For a professional memo, unlike an academic exam, you can't assume that the reader has read what you have or knows the specialized terminology.

Address the memo:

9 November 2007

TO: President, The World Bank

FR: **[Your name here]**, World Energy Council

RE: Planning and implementing sustainable infrastructure
(11.201 Gateway Decision Memo)

You may not ask a fellow planning student to proofread your document, but it's OK to ask a writing tutor, or a friend or roommate, who is not in planning to do so. Direct any questions to Prof. Briggs. See next page, and good luck.

Here's a preview of the kind of feedback we give on the DRAFT (it's therefore a guide to the most common pitfalls in drafting a memo of this kind and a guide for self-assessment if you so choose):

DECISION MEMO: FEEDBACK ON DRAFT

Below, we assess your draft memo and summarize the changes needed. All of the memos would be much stronger if revised.

FEEDBACK

CONTENT

_____ **Summary:** incomplete, wordy, vague or unclear, slow to get to the main ideas, doesn't summarize your main ideas, Other: _____

_____ **Body:** Incomplete (major omissions), given the task, specifically:

_____ Priorities off, given task: too much case narrative relative to recommended criteria and actions

_____ Language inappropriate for a professional memorandum (**circle**): too academic, too casual, too preachy, too jargon-laden, other

_____ Analysis lacks clarity or persuasiveness (**circle**): diagnosis and prescriptions are loosely coupled, evidence lacking or inaccurate, counter-arguments or feasibility not considered, timid about major problems in the case

_____ Impolitic: Risks political costs if the memo is leaked

ORGANIZATION

_____ Structure does not suit a decision memo (circle): subheadings vague or missing, main ideas come late, other: _____

_____ Not "skim-able": points buried and/or text dense

Other: