



Press Release by CUTS International

Project Launch Meeting

Expanding Tradable Benefits of Trans-boundary Water: Promoting Navigational Usage of Inland Waterways in Ganga and Brahmaputra Basins

The Lily Hotel, Guwahati, India

Monday, 24th October, 2016

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On 24 October 2016, experts, practitioners, and government officials joined CUTS International and its national and international partners in Guwahati, India to launch an initiative funded by The Asia Foundation on promoting navigational usage of inland waterways in the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) region.

“Environmental considerations of inland waterways are as important as the tradable benefits since rivers have their own rights” said Bharat Bhushan Dev Chaudhary, Director, Inland Water Transport, Department of Transport, Government of Assam. Emphasising the enormous potential and challenge for developing inland waterways, Mr Choudhury noted that Assam only has three bridges across the Brahmaputra river while lacking fixed terminals and night navigation, weak banks, and insufficient vessels. However, despite these challenges, the government is encouraged by initiatives like the one launched today, as the Government of Assam is also conducting its own project to study to improve accessibility and institutional frameworks.

He was delivering the opening address at the project launch meeting titled “Expanding tradable benefits of trans-boundary water: Promoting navigational usage of inland waterways in Ganga and Brahmaputra basins” by CUTS International with the support from The Asia Foundation.

The project aims to study the policies, laws, and regulations of inland waterways in the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) region for transportation and livelihoods of communities in order to promote an alternative policy discourse at multiple levels in and across the region.

The meeting opened with a welcome address by Bipul Chatterjee, Executive Director, CUTS International noting the importance of waterways in the region for economic, cultural, and religious purposes. He added that to improve water governance, it will not suffice to merely have an analytical approach, but an inclusive approach that captures the “feelings” while flagging mutual benefits that can accrue to people in the region, through such improved governance.

Aditya Pillai, Programme Officer, The Asia Foundation provided an overview of the initiative, which aims to improve the inclusiveness and quality of policy dialogue by providing inclusive spaces and mechanisms that bring together communities, civil society organisations and governments. In areas such as inland waterways, fisheries, and sustainable livelihood of hill areas with the ultimate aim of improving governance and institutions. This will also address how policies are discussed and created, noting the specific initiative by CUTS that aims to promoting an constructive alternative policy discourse. In fact, the political timing of this project is encouraging as governments are giving greater attention to inland waterway transportation.

Arup Kumar Dutta, a prominent author and journalist from Guwahati elaborated on the history of the Brahmaputra and the significance of the river and its tributaries the communities in the basin, in his keynote address. He stressed that there exists great potential for not only economic development, but also holistic benefit for the people who have historically gained a great deal from the region's rivers. He also highlighted the monumental importance of this kind of work to revive the river-based livelihood.

The first session described the project work plan and activities by CUTS International. The stakeholders brainstormed on effective methodology for studying the gender and livelihood aspects with respect to the institutions governing inland waterways on Ganga and Brahmaputra. The second session discussed the country-specific institutional analysis of governing inland waterways. It came to light that while Bhutan and Nepal lack the necessary infrastructure and framework for promoting inland waterways, Bangladesh and India have made more progress towards creating vibrant waterways, though much more needs to be achieved. There are gaps in the functioning among state-level and national-level bodies in both the countries. There were discussions about the importance of inland waterways for navigation as well as creation of changing livelihood options. The third session covered the scope of cooperation in water governance and diplomacy in BBIN region. Civil Society Fund organisations presented their specific initiatives as well as the potential for collaboration with other Civil Society Fund partners.

The final session talked about the monitoring and evaluation aspects of the project by CUTS International. Chairing the session, Ratnesh Jha, Management Specialist, UNDP said that the discussions throughout the day had coincidentally covered seven out of the 17 SDGs. The monitoring and evaluation stressed on the importance of measuring the alternate policy dialogue and progressing it in a sustainable manner. The event concluded with closing remarks by Aditya Pillai and Bipul Chatterjee stressing on the need for cooperation among different stakeholders under the Civil Society Fund as well as in the BBIN region and importance of taking the initiative forward towards achieving the sustainable development goals.

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