

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

Background Note

Objectives

1. Discussion and validation of activities, outputs and desired/expected outcomes
2. Explore possible collaborations with other Civil Society Fund partners

Expected Outputs

1. Revision of work plan, including key outcomes (if required)
2. A detailed plan for each collaborating organisation
3. Finalisation of a monitoring and evaluation plan

Background and Context

Eastern South Asia, consisting of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN region), is fed by two of the mightiest Himalayan rivers, viz. the Ganges and the Brahmaputra. Historically, the inland waterways created by these river systems have supported human activities over the centuries; be it livelihood, culture or transport.

However, political boundaries had divided the region and with that came decades-long tussles over water resources resulting in mistrust and standalone planning and management of these rivers and associated inland waterways. Over time, the management of these rivers and associated inland waterways became highly politicised and the discourse for cross-border cooperation dwindled as national organisations and agencies tried to maximize national interest at the cost of regional interest.

It is also noteworthy that inland water bodies have the potential to be an alternative mode of transportation, particularly for trade and transportation towards enhancing the cooperation and connectivity in the region. It is envisaged that this might and should ideally lead to a renewed interest in the navigability of inland waterways with the result that water flow within and across borders will get higher policy focus. Inland waterways trade can also function as a bridge for trans-boundary water cooperation.

In recent times, however, there are palpable shifts in political will towards higher cooperation among the countries of this region. This is apparent in some of the bilateral and regional

agreements that were renewed and/or signed like the India-Bangladesh Inland Waterways Transit Treaty and the BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement.

Along with these developments, India, the biggest and arguably the most important player in the region, has started initiating progressive actions on improving its domestic inland waterways.

Similarly, Bangladesh is making investments to improve its domestic connectivity via inland waterways. Bhutan is interested to revive its connectivity with India and Bangladesh via inland waterways in the Brahmaputra basin. Nepal is taking steps to improve navigation along the Kosi and the Gandak rivers, which are part of the Ganges basin.

Therefore, the present time is just right to push the agenda for cooperation on inland waterways among the countries of this region and making this discourse more participatory with the involvement of civil society organisations and their engagement with policy-makers.

Given this background, this project will be implemented by CUTS International in partnership with Unnayan Shamannay, Bangladesh; Royal Society for Protection of Nature (RSPN), Bhutan; and South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment (SAWTEE), Nepal.

Way Forward

1. Create an alternative policy discourse between policy-makers, civil society, and communities for enabling reform measures and better governance of inland waterways
2. Share knowledge between governments and CSOs on governance of inland waterways