

Promoting Navigational Usage of Inland Waterways in Bangladesh

Poverty, Livelihood, Gender and Environmental Concerns

In terms of intra-regional trade and investment, the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) sub-region appears to be lagging way behind the global trend. New hopes about regional trade have emerged as BBIN governments are now emphasising on trade facilitation through bilateral and multilateral agreements. Major positive changes are expected as both government and non-government stakeholders are striving hard to facilitate inter-country trade through land and waterways.

Livelihood, culture and civilisation of this sub-region have an intrinsic relationship with the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna river basin. Nevertheless, waterways connectivity situation has deteriorated over the years due to deterioration of the rivers as well as political reasons. The Government of Bangladesh has laid renewed emphasis on developing internal waterways in its Seventh Five-Year Plan, and aims to increase the length of navigable waterways within the country from 4,000 km to 5,750 km by 2021. It has to be noted that promoting navigational usage of inland waterways (IWs) is not just about construction of new projects solely focussed on trade facilitation. Poverty, livelihood, gender and environmental concerns have also to be built-in in any IW development plan.

Bangladesh Diagnostic Study

Locations of study:

- ✓ Shivalaya, Manikganj
- ✓ Ashuganj, Brahmanbaria
- ✓ Chandpur Sadar, Chandpur

Stakeholders: Government Officials, Parishad Personnel, Fishermen, Ferry Operators, River Port Authority, Vessel Owners, Freight Handlers and Cargo Company

Methodology: Field survey, focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews (KIIs), multi-layered stakeholder consultations

Existing Policy Discourse

Generally, the policy discourse in Bangladesh regarding the utilisation of IWs lacks focus on livelihoods of the riverine

communities. The major Acts, Ordinances and Orders, which are currently in place along with the identified gaps, are represented in the table given next page.

Acts/Ordinances/Orders

Issues

<p>National River Protection Commission Act, 2013</p>	<p>Lack of cooperation and coordination among the different bodies related to IWs, namely- BIWTA, DoE, Water Development Board, Department of Fisheries, Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Shipping etc.</p>
<p>Inland Water Transport Authority Ordinance, 1958</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possible damage to smaller vessels results from collision with larger vessels not being addressed properly • Inadequate facilities for women passengers
<p>Bangladesh Inland Transport Corporation Order</p>	<p>Absence of proper provision to acquire compensation from oil carrying vessels in case of oil leakage due to accidents</p>
<p>Fisheries (Protection) Ordinance, 1959</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fishing community is against licensing requirements (for fishing) • However, there is over exploitation due to lax implementation of licensing requirements.
<p>Pilotage Ordinance, 1960</p>	<p>Provision of operating passenger vessels with masters instead of trained pilot should be revoked. Nevertheless, there is lack of training facilities for pilots</p>
<p>Bangladesh Water Act, 2013</p>	<p>Damage caused to cage fish farming due to increased river traffic not taken into consideration properly</p>
<p>Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act, 1995</p>	<p>Restrictions/regulations regarding vessels – causing damage to environment not being implemented effectively. Besides, lack of resources and lack of coordination are the contributing factors working behind.</p>

Navigability and River Dredging

Maintaining navigability of the routes, especially during the dry seasons is a major challenge faced by the respective authorities. Siltation and river erosion also pose threats. While the government has

recently initiated massive country-wide dredging initiative, there remain concerns about the pace of implementation of the projects. Stakeholders have expressed the need of obtaining enhanced and sustainable remedies to navigation problems. In addition, there is lack of

logistical capacity of the project implementing authority.

Concerns of the Fishing Community

Over the years, fish availability has decreased considerably. While some perceive increased river traffic to be the cause for this decline, others opine that fish availability can be maintained despite increasing river traffic if the rivers and canals remain deep enough. However, siltation remains as a major challenge in this regard. Stakeholders demand that livelihood concerns of the fishing community have to be incorporated into IW development policies. Security for the fishermen from anti-social elements as well as rent seeking attitude of the local elites are other critical concerns, which are commonly observed here.

Key Concerns of Fishing Community
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Maintaining navigability (siltation and river erosion)</i> • <i>Livelihood of fishing community and Char people</i> • <i>Creating IGAs for local people</i> • <i>Addressing gender concerns</i> • <i>Increased pressure on rivers due to trans-boundary trade</i> • <i>Slow pace in implementing policies</i> • <i>Promoting local MSMEs</i> • <i>Promoting tourism</i>

IGAs for Local People

There is a general perception that trans-boundary trade through IWs will create new income generating activities (IGAs) for local people. However, lack of required skills among the local people might become a serious challenge for the fishermen to overcome. Trans-boundary trade will definitely bring further institutionalisation,

and the local community needs much preparation and support to adapt to the same. For example, international vessels coming to local ports will definitely create greater need for support services, but without having access to finance; the local community will not be able to tap the opportunity.

Gender Concerns

There is insignificant participation of women in IGAs related to IWs in Bangladesh. Very few of them provide informal support services. For example, setting roadside food stalls for low-income customers is one such service. While gender concerns are prioritised in national policies, in practice such concerns are hardly addressed. However, some recent developments in this direction have been observed. For instance, breast feeding compartments in new passenger vessels, separate waiting rooms for women at the ports are some services. Stakeholders have recommended that instead of addressing gender concerns after developing infrastructure and other facilities, implementers should incorporate these concerns into their blueprints right from the beginning.

Environmental Concerns

Stakeholders are concerned about potential deterioration of river conditions due to rapidly increasing traffic (once there is increased trans-boundary trade through IWs). Increased use of IW might induce the development of industrial infrastructure along the river. However, this in turn might cause serious threat to the rivers. Moreover, increased number of larger vessels plying on the river might also results in increased river erosion. Special emphasis

has been laid by many experts for protecting the Hilsa Sanctuary, which is located near the IW hub at Chandpur.

Other Issues

While people generally welcome developing the port facilities, at times delays in implementation of port development/expansion projects affect them adversely. For example, it has been more than seven years since the Government declared its plan of expanding the port at Ashuganj in Brahmanbaria district. But till date, no land has been acquired. However, people living in these areas have not been developing their houses, shops, mills, etc. assuming that the Government will be acquiring their land soon. Some have alleged that there has been a fall in the value of land in the area due to the delays in implementation of the policy decision.

To facilitate trans-boundary trade IWs are to be improved significantly. It has been

recommended that once the IWs are improved, they might also be utilised in promoting local Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). This is because there will be increased access to the market place and new customers. Similarly, enhanced connectivity through IW will also create scope for promotion of tourism via IWs and trans-boundary passenger movement.

Conclusion

Increasing trans-boundary trade through IWs will definitely contribute towards achieving macro-economic objectives of Bangladesh as an economy. However, to ensure that the poor and marginal communities living along the rivers benefit equally, their concerns should be incorporated in the overall development plans. At the same time, focus should also be there on the sustainability concerns, so that the benefits of IW-based trade remain significantly higher than their costs.

The project 'Expanding tradable benefits of trans-boundary water: Promoting navigational usage of inland waterways in Ganga and Brahmaputra basins' is being implemented by CUTS International and its strategic partners – Royal Society for Protection of Nature (RSPN), South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics & Environment (SAWTEE) and Unnayan Shamannay. More details are available at: www.cuts-citee.org/IW/

This publication is made possible with by the support of The Asia Foundation. The views and opinions expressed in this publication is that of CUTS International and partners and not of The Asia Foundation.

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