



**Report on Advocacy meeting on**

**“Building Civil Society Voice for Use of Cross Border Inland Waterways (IWWs)”**

**20<sup>th</sup> April, 2016 at Guwahati, Assam**

An Advocacy meeting on **“Building Civil Society Voice for Use of Cross Border Inland Waterways”** was organized by Rashtriya Gramin Vikas Nidhi (RGVN) on 20<sup>th</sup> April, 2016 at Hotel Cygnett Inn, Guwahati under SDIP Project. This discussion was an effort to disseminate information on Inland waterways and its effective use in playing significant role in the development of regional trade and commerce and how equally it is important for the contribution to national economies and people’s daily lives. This meeting has also thrown light upon how Inland Waterways aims in increasing social and economic welfare for the local population constrained by natural disaster and to rejuvenate traditional informal trade links.

There were 27 participants which included professionals from NABARD, Centre for Microfinance & Livelihood, Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research, Brahmaputra Cruise Private Ltd., Officials from Inland Waterways Transport, Govt. of Assam, Inland Waterways Authority of India, members of the leading Media Houses like “The Telegraph”, “The Assam Tribune”, “Amar Asom”, “ The Tribune”, Mr. Sumanta Biswas and Mr. Sayantan Sengupta from CUTS International and some expert officials from RGVN itself.

There were two Speakers for the day –

1. **Mr. Arup Kr. Dutta**, a renowned writer, who has extensively written on Brahmaputra Valley. His book on the “Brahmaputra” won him international recognition. He is a fulltime, award winning Indian writer who has attained a name far and wide. He has so far authored 14 books for adults and 17 adventure novels for young people. He has also penned short stories, articles, columns, satiric pieces, editorials and other forms of journalistic writing published in various magazines and newspapers.
2. **Mr. Musfiqur Rahman**, who is the Joint Director of Inland Waterways Transport, Govt. of Assam. He has worked extensively in the sectors of administration, maintenance, construction of vessels and barges, training of crews and project works for more than 27 years in Inland Waterways.

The agenda of the advocacy meeting were as follows:-

1. The Meeting started with the opening remarks of the Executive Director of RGVN, Dr. Amiya Kr. Sharma. He insisted on the proper utilization of Waterways because from the entire angle Livelihood for the poor, Environment, Cooperation with neighbours etc. can be a good opportunity for the civil society organization to take up. Waterways are one of the sectors which have been pushed to the backyard but there is a need of deliberation on the issue of Inland Waterways and in the development sector of North East Region along with cooperation with our neighbours.
2. Followed by this, was a presentation on “Building Civil Society Voice for use of Cross-Border Inland Waterways in the Brahmaputra Basin - under Sustainable Development Investment Portfolio (SDIP) Project” by Aneeta Dutta, Assistant Director (Special Projects), RGVN. She started with her presentation by a brief introduction on the background and rationale and mentioning the objectives of the project. She further advocates how the three river basins of South Asia namely the Indus, the Ganges and the Brahmaputra contributes to food, water and energy securities of the inhabitants residing on the bank of these river basins. She further briefs about the issues of Inland Water Transport due to which not many entrepreneurs are willing to invest in inland vessels, resulting in underutilisation. She also addresses the key problems like lack of awareness on the advantage of using Inland Waterways and lack of Regulatory and Policy Network. However she urges the need for opportunities to break North- Eastern Region isolation.
3. Next was a presentation by Mr. Sumanta Biswas , Project Coordinator (CUTS International, Kolkata) who shares a brief introduction of CUTS International which is ) is an international research, public education and networking organisation working in various fields that include **international trade, competition policy and law, economic regulation, consumer protection, and sustainable development, energy** etc.
4. Followed by this, was a presentation by Sayantan Sengupta, Programme Officer (CUTS International, Kolkata) who gives a brief Introduction of Sustainable Development Investment Portfolio (SDIP) Project, mentioning its objectives and goals. He has also shared about the activities carried out under SDIP Project such as Regional Energy Cooperation, Renewable Energy, Sustainable Agricultural Value Chain, Sustainable Agricultural Practices, Ground Water and Inland Waterways and its expected outcomes.
5. A presentation by the Resource Persons – Mr. Musfiqur Rahman, Joint Director, and Inland Water Transport on “**Development of Inland Waterways for Trade and**

**Transit on the river Brahmaputra” threw light on the present condition of the Inland waterways in Assam.** He started his presentation by giving a brief Introduction of Inland Waterways in Assam and explaining how Assam has largest inland waterways network in India. He then gave a background on how in 1839 a fleet of Country Boats for carrying goods between Assam and Bengal were introduced by British administration and in 1841, the first steamboat “THE ASSAM” was introduced for navigation on the river Brahmaputra by Assam Tea Company.

He next focused on the effective role of Brahmaputra for the purpose of trade and transit. Talking of River Tourism, he said that it is also becoming a booming sector. Assam and the North Eastern States are blessed with so many perennial rivers and operation of Cruise vessel is a good possibility. Inland Water Transport which is considered as Environment Friendly and economical is not much into effective implementation in North – East Region because of poor transport infrastructure facility. However he shared the present Infrastructure available for Inland Waterways in Assam which includes 212 vessels/ boats/barge/ terminal / pontoons out of which only 73 passenger and 39 commercial vessels are in service on NW 1 and NW 2. At present a few luxury liners were operating on the Brahmaputra which mainly catered to foreign tourists. Some local cruise vessels were available in Guwahati and Tinsukia and some other places of Assam.

Then he shared his ideas on how Inland Waterways can be used to contribute to National Economy by giving a helping hand to stakeholders like: -

**FCI** - FCI can move part of total cargo by Inland waterway. With National Food Security Bill coming in, carriage of food grains from other states to Assam will increase considerably.

**Coal India limited** -can send coal from coalfields of upper Assam to various projects of NTPC by Inland Water Transport.

**Inland Container Depot:** at Guwahati found where direct dispatch of export cargo by river and sea route can take place.

**REFINERIES & Thermal Plants** – Over Dimensional Cargoes (ODC) for refineries and power plants can be carried by Inland Waterway.

He also talked about various difficulties and problems faced by IWT such as heavy silting on riverbed, Heavy erosion on bank for which construction of permanent Terminals is difficult and Lack of proper navigational channel and night navigation.

6. The second speaker- Mr. Arup Kr. Dutta, a renowned Indian Writer, gave a “Historical Appraisal of Water Communication in Assam”. He emphasized on the fact

how history can be used as an effective source of learning about the river and its tributaries. Earlier River systems used to be the routes to link different cultures and media of economic development. Livelihood of the poor people and agrarian system are very much dependant on the rivers but today rivers have been reduced only to being sources of misery.

He strongly proposed the idea of building Ganga Brahmaputra Channel and Mastering of river routes necessary for strong and stable governance. However he said that bureaucratic apathy and lack of political consciousness have led to the present deplorable state of the Brahmaputra as a waterway. This is despite the fact that the river routes requires the lowest operating cost compared to the railways and the road transport network. It could be developed at a lesser cost and transportation charges were also the lowest compared to those of the railways and the road transport sector.

7. There was an Open House Discussion where the following aspects were put forward:

(a) The waterways sector should be provided with locally available modernisation facilities. The discussion also laid stress on research and development works to develop the sector. The participants also called for steps to improve night navigation on the Brahmaputra \

(b) Navigation channel is usually affected by heavy siltation and the river is usable only for a few months per year. Sophisticated machinery required to deal with siltation. However a joint project with IIT and IWT was going on.

(c) An Indo-Bangladesh Protocol on Inland Water Transit & Trade exists between India and Bangladesh under which inland vessels of one country can transit through the specified routes of the other country. The existing protocol routes are:

- Kolkata-Pandu-Kolkata
- Kolkata-Karimganj - Kolkata
- Rajshahi-Dhulian-Rajshahi
- Pandu-Karimganj-Pandu

Under the Protocol, 50:50 cargos sharing by Indian and Bangladeshi vessels are permitted both for transit and inter-country trade. Inland Waterways Authority of India is the Competent Authority on Indian side with effect from 8th September 2003 with Ministry of Shipping's Order No. WTC-15014/2/2001-IWT dated 29.08.03. The Protocol is presently renewed up to 31st March, 2012.

Participants felt that the protocol should be for a longer duration so as to attract private entrepreneurs.

- (d) The plying of boats by boatmen falls under the unorganised sector. This sector should be regulated as a huge number of livelihoods are linked with the sector.
  - (e) The Padma – Ganga – Brahmaputra route should be reopened. Opening up of waterways would not only facilitate trade and transport routes; it would help in putting the North East in a centric position which it earlier occupied due to the water routes. The systems had been set since times immemorial and only needed to be built upon.
  - (f) Presently with the Act East Policy, the opening up of roadways should be complimented with the opening up of waterways. Multi modal methods of connectivity need to be explored.
  - (g) The issue of the dams over the Brahmaputra and its tributaries was also discussed.
8. The meeting ended with a formal Vote of Thanks delivered by Sanjukta Bhargav who currently working under the Sustainable Development Investment Portfolio (SDIP) Project.

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***Acknowledgement:***

***This document has been produced by RGVN, Assam with the financial assistance from CUTS International, Jaipur under the project entitled Sustainable Development Investment Portfolio (SDIP) funded by Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), Government of Australia. The views expressed here are those of RGVN and can therefore in no way be taken to reflect the positions of CUTS International or DFAT.***

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Table 1: List of Participants

Sl.No.	Name	Organisation	Signature
1	ABHISHEK MAZUMDER	CML-TARA TRUSTS	
2	Manik Ch. Boruah	C-NES, Guwahati	
3	A REP K. Dille	-	
4	Ms. E. Terriant	NABARD	
5	D. S. Barman	Intand Water Promotort, Assam.	
6	Musfique Rahman	I.W.T. Assam	
7	Priny Borket-hora	The Tribune	
P	Krupak Jaisankar	The Telegraph	
9	Anurama Deka	Aman Assam	
10	Shanti Doley	Brahmaputra Cruise	
11	Arbi Patowary	The Assam Tribune	
12	Karuna Dreyer Thapa	International Waterways Authority of India	
13	Sumanta Barua	CUTS	
14	Sayantan Sengupta	CUTS	
15	Jaideep Das	RGVN	
16	Ujjal Ch. Janta	RGVN	
17	Janki Kr. Fagan	RGVN	
18	Amiya Sharma	RGVN	
19	Indrani Chandra	RGVN	
20	Gayatri Borah	RGVN	
21	Chhili p. Goswami	RGVN	
22	Kidmit Bisaje Das	RGVN	
23	Sourakta Bhuyan	RGVN	
24	Debasmita Borah	Brahmaputra Cruise P. Ltd	
25	Amrita Goswami	CDPS	
26	B. Borahjini	RGVN	