



Public Private Dialogue

On

Cross-border Tourism, Cruise Operations and Community Concerns between India and Bangladesh

Thursday, April 29th, 2021

Time: 09:30 to 14:30 (IST)

The Lily Hotel, Guwahati, Assam, India
(also on Zoom/virtually from Bangladesh)

Background Note

Themes:

- *How cross-border tourism and cruise operations can be increased, what are gaps in current policies and standard operating procedures and how those gaps can be filled with sustainable interventions?*
- *How sustainable and inclusive practices can be implemented with cruise operators in India and Bangladesh with an objective of improving the livelihood options of local communities so that conflicts on access to water resources can be reduced?*

Transboundary-rivers based trade, tourism and cruise operations between India and Bangladesh have immense socio-economic and cultural potential for the region. Such cross-border trade and tourism related activities offer wonderful potential for nature, culture, adventure and religion in addition to the economic benefits for the local communities.

Given that the networking links rely heavily on local agricultural goods, locally produced products, natural resources, culture, cuisine, art, and history, the cross-border trade and tourism on smaller stretches through local country boats can lead to inclusive and sustainable development in both the countries. This promises enhanced economic opportunities for local communities such as boatman along with a large number of women through enhanced access to markets on the other side of the border with lower transportation costs.

A significant way to improve the local transportation is use of local country boats that can carry goods at smaller stretches. This has gained importance post the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) and a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for the movement of small boats and cruise vessels on the routes of Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (PIWTT). However, the existing set of river routes via multiple ports of calls in Bangladesh, under the PIWTT, currently, are being used for transshipment of bulk cargo to India's north-eastern states.

Thus, there is a need to connect and acknowledge such routes and rivers for small scale trade. For instance, Hatsinghimari/Dhubri in Assam to Kurigram in Bangladesh is an essential link for the nearby town and villages and for further utilisation of the increased gains from cross-border navigation.

In 2018, there was a trial cargo movement to Bangladesh through the inland waterways protocol route. This trial became successful and it was decided by the Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI) to commence cruise movement between Kolkata and Dhaka through the Sunderbans and Guwahati, from March, 2019. Furthermore, in 2019-20 CUTS efforts resulted in including the Dhuri-Chilmari route as part of PIWTT.

But these smaller steps have not translated to creating enough momentum for the cross-border trade, tourism and cruise operations between both the countries. Needless to say, there are a number of gaps in SOP and MOU and a critical review of several other linked issues is required (for example, infrastructure, marketing, price, availability of water, visa and customs issues etc. among others).

Given this backdrop, CUTS International is organizing a Public Private Dialogue in Guwahati emphasising on the importance of the cross-border trade, tourism and cruise operations between India and Bangladesh. This dialogue is being organized under a regional programme titled “Trans-boundary Rivers of South Asia” (TROSAs), which is supported by the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) and managed by Oxfam Novib. The project aims to reduce poverty of marginalized and vulnerable river basin communities through increased access to, and control over, water resources, over which their livelihoods depend. The details of the project can be accessed [here](#).

Objectives of the dialogue:

1. Critical discussion and deliberations on concerns of the private sector, cruise operators, local communities and other actors with respect to the sustainable use of trans-boundary water resources;
2. Private sector should start engaging with/providing dialogue spaces to the communities on the issues of water governance (special focus on women and indigenous community);
3. Increased awareness among relevant stakeholders about potential benefits and challenges of cross-border tourism and cruise operations between India and Bangladesh;

Expected outcomes of the dialogue:

1. A precise actionable guideline for sustainable cruise operations so that cruise operations and trans-boundary water resources can be made more inclusive of community concerns and meet national and international standards;
2. Enhanced understanding on the practices of private sector and cruise operators with respect to the community concerns and for the maximization of benefits from trans-boundary waterways;
3. Practices of private sector respect community access to water resources actively contributing to reduce conflict.