

Moving Towards Inclusivity

Promoting Trade and Tourism in Transboundary Rivers

Public-private collaborations are vital for developing resilient infrastructure through sustained investments and technological innovations. While feasibility studies, cost-benefit analysis and market intelligence are important for better engagement of the private sector, consultations and Track 3 dialogues would ensure inclusive policy-making for cross-border trade and river cruise tourism in the transboundary waterways of the Brahmaputra and Meghna basins.



Background

The Transboundary Rivers of South Asia (TROSA) is a five-year (2016-2021) regional programme supported by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and managed by Oxfam.

The project's ultimate goal is to reduce the poverty of marginalised and vulnerable river basin communities through increased access to and control over water resources.

The project attempts to understand and address challenges related to transboundary rivers and work together

to create conditions to eradicate the poverty of communities living in the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) and the Salween river basins. CUTS International's intervention under TROSA is to promote cross-border trade and tourism through transboundary waterways in the Brahmaputra and Meghna basins.

As part of year-4 activities (2020-21), CUTS organised multi-stakeholder dialogues for the Meghna and Brahmaputra basins. The first dialogue was organised virtually in June 2021 as a side event of the International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) Meghna Knowledge Forum. The second dialogue was organised at Guwahati in September 2021 for the Brahmaputra basin.

These dialogues aimed to build consensus among stakeholders in Bangladesh and India to have an inclusive approach in cross-border trade and tourism via transboundary waterways, thereby contributing to enhanced sub-regional socio-economic cooperation.

This Outcome Statement captures the key messages that emerged from these multi-stakeholder dialogues for its wider dissemination among relevant ministries, the private sector, financial institutions, including multilateral development banks (MDBs) and other key stakeholders in India and Bangladesh.

Key messages & Recommendations

1. Capacity Building and Skill Development:

Development: There is a lack of awareness among traders (and producers) about the potential benefits of inland waterways connectivity. A clear understanding of tradable goods between India (especially northeast India) and Bangladesh is essential to attract local traders.

Producers and traders engaged in fisheries, tourism and cross-border trade through waterways require skills to undertake their activities effectively and efficiently. Youth and women have to be trained to utilise the emerging employment opportunities in the tourism sector.

2. Increased Participation of Women and Youth:

and Youth: Given the low participation of women and youth in trade and tourism-related activities, there is a need for a local-level campaign involving stakeholders comprising government authorities, vessel operators and local media.

Dialogue on river-based trade and tourism should include the grassroots communities, youth and women in the discussion for their better participation in these activities. Track 3 dialogues would ensure participation and contribution of communities, youth and women in inclusive policymaking.

3. **Public-Private Collaboration:** Public and private sector collaborations should be facilitated and utilised to address the challenges emerging from suboptimal jetty conditions, navigational challenges and inadequately trained and equipped staff operators. There is a need for collaboration between artisans of India and Bangladesh as this would promote cross-border trade and entrepreneurship.

4. **Hard and Soft Infrastructure Development:** Inadequate infrastructure at the ports, absence of quarantine facilities and cold storage are some of the challenges that hinder the trading of perishable goods. For using small vessels (of 20- 25 tonne capacities), lockable chambers of varying capacities are to be built in the boat to carry multiple commodities of varying quantities.

Improving navigability conditions and setting up all-weather inland ports at the Ports of Call also require immediate attention.

5. **Digitalisation and Data Management:** Technology upgradation, digitalisation and paperless

trade are required to promote river-based trade and tourism. Each promotional website should provide authentic and reliable information to tourists about travel regulations and places to be visited. Also, there should be proper dissemination of such information at the ground level.

6. **Technical Studies:** Market analysis and research need to be undertaken to identify tradable commodities and analyse the critical gaps in key policies and regulations. The development of traffic routes is vital to prevent unforeseen circumstances, and travel norms and regulations should be liberal to encourage tourism.

7. **Change in Perception:** For river transport, there should be some amount of certainty, efficiency, and predictability, which is only possible with the active participation of the private sector. But public thinking and media engagement are also necessary to raise the issue of cross-border trade on different platforms, especially about ease of doing business through inland waterways.





"For river transport, it is important that there should be some amount of certainty, efficiency and predictability. That can only happen when there is the active participation of the private sector."

Biswajit Chakraborty

Director, North-East Advisory Council, Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry

"There are some rivers where cross-border trade and transportation can be started taking into account the environmental, social and economic viabilities."



Mohammad Rafiqul Islam

Director, Marine Safety and Traffic, Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority



"Connectivity cannot be implemented all of a sudden thus first important ports and major trading centres needs to be linked."

Shah Mohammad Tanvir Monsur

Bangladesh Assistant High Commissioner, Guwahati, Assam

"Water transport is not only cheap mode but also environmental friendly if a correct approach for its development is adopted."



Dipak Gyawali

Former Minister of Water Resources of Nepal, and Chair, Nepal Water Conservation Foundation



"India-Bangladesh relation remains critical and depends on how well infrastructure and connectivity are developed and how issues are dealt with at the local and national levels."

Subimal Bhattacharjee

Director, Jookto

"Bringing small-scale industries, entrepreneurs and traders on board will ensure sustainable and efficient cross-border river-based trade and tourism."



Bipul Chatterjee

Executive Director, CUTS International



"There are several trade routes which were functional before independence now needs to be revived for the transportation purpose."

Ashutosh Gautam

Member (Technical, Logistics and Traffic), Inland Waterways Authority of India

"Trade through waterways is the survival of the residents in this region and the governments on both sides of the border have always been supportive of the same. There is a need to put this support on paper and implement coordinated strategies to enhance the movement through waterways."



Selima Ahmed

Member of Parliament, Bangladesh

Supported by



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