

## Enabling a Political Economy Discourse for Multi-modal Connectivity in the BBIN Sub-region (M-Connect)

### Background

It is a frequently reiterated statement that South Asia is one of the least integrated and connected regions of the world. However, of late, there has been both movement and investment of political capital behind regional integration, particularly among the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) group of countries. It is increasingly felt that a more integrated BBIN sub-region is critical for regional and global economic growth, balance and also political stability for shared prosperity with security.

The political push behind sub-regional and regional blocs like BBIN and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) also aptly indicates the increasing buzz and consensus around regional cooperation and integration. The two biggest nations in Asia – China and India – have been making strong strides in terms of promoting cross-border and regional connectivity.

China's Belt and Road initiative has, in many ways, changed the discourse around connectivity in the region. India and Bangladesh are together pushing some of the most ambitious bilateral cooperation in the two nation's history, including those on multi-modal physical, institutional and people-to-people connectivity. India and Japan have come together on the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor. In short, the time is just right to push for more action towards fostering connectivity in this sub-region.

All this intent and political consensus will, however, need tangible tools and vehicles on the ground to be able to implement the plans and proposals. It is reasonably quick implementation, realisation of expected benefits and effective addressing of possible losses, which will hold the key to effective demonstration of political intent and will to enhance connectivity.

That, in turn, will require clear understanding of ground level challenges in terms of infrastructure, policy and regulatory gaps and also the extent of ownership at the sub-national and national levels for larger connectivity plans.

In short, for the BBIN group of countries to embark upon large-scale multi-modal connectivity initiatives, it is necessary for them to create an enabling environment for a well-informed political economy discourse towards that end. In that context, the key is to understand the conditions and factors responsible for successful regional/sub-regional/bilateral connectivity initiatives in Central, South and Southeast Asian countries.

That will help positioning advocacy messages towards addressing implementation challenges of the BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA) and, through multi-stakeholder discourse mapping by particularly involving those at the grassroots, will set the stage for multi-modal connectivity initiatives in this sub-region, combining roadways with inland waterways, coastal shipping and railways.

*In Partnership with*

## Objectives

- Addressing implementation challenges of the BBIN MVA
  - Identification of gaps in infrastructure policy and regulations, which can pose hurdles to multi-modal connectivity in this sub-region
  - Understanding the possible impact of multi-modal transport and transit facilitation on local economic development parameters with an emphasis on how it can enhance women's economic empowerment
  - Identification of possible livelihood generation opportunities that can be gained through the development of regional/sub-regional/bilateral value chains and their facilitation through multi-modal connectivity
  - Contribution towards formulating an inclusive transport and transit protocols for an effective multi-modal connectivity in this sub-region through a participatory approach
  - Organising multi-level, multi-stakeholder advocacy and awareness generation to push for identified infrastructure development and policy, regulatory and procedural changes
- existing and future connectivity initiatives of the BBIN sub-region
  - Field research covering six rail heads, six river ports, and three sea ports capable of being nodes of multi-modal connectivity in Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal
  - Qualitative data analysis through discourse mapping and field visits to prepare recommendations through corridor-specific case studies
  - Video documentary highlighting aspirations and concerns of grassroots level stakeholders from multi-modal connectivity in the BBIN sub-region
  - Policy dialogues among the relevant stakeholders to generate a better-informed political economy discourse and chart an action agenda for multi-modal connectivity in the BBIN sub-region

## Approach and Activities

The following activities will be conducted over a period of two years:

- Desk research and scoping visits to identify factors responsible for the success of connectivity initiatives in Central Asia (Ashgabat Agreement), GMS (Greater Mekong Sub-region) Railways Network and India-Bangladesh Coastal Shipping Agreement
  - Understand their approach towards addressing implementation challenges, and how these initiatives can be linked with
- Effective implementation of the BBIN MVA
  - Comprehensive understanding of political economy challenges of initiating multi-modal connectivity initiatives in the BBIN sub-region.
  - Identification of critical and prioritised infrastructure needs to enable multi-modal connectivity in the BBIN sub-region through linkages between and among roads, inland waterways including coastal shipping and railways
  - Mapping of national and regional policies, regulations, existing/proposed protocols and trade/transport processes and practices with regard to transport and transit using multi-modal connectivity system
  - Understanding of stakeholder concerns and benefits/costs of multi-modal connectivity initiatives, with a particular reference to local economic development parameters for better livelihood generations.

## Expected Outcomes