

Event Report

Bhutan National Reference Group Meeting

Project Name: Enabling a Political Economy Discourse for Multimodal Connectivity in the BBIN Sub-region (M-Connect)

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Bhutan NRG Meeting Report

“Enabling a Political Economy Discourse for Multi-modal Connectivity in the BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) Sub-region”

Bhutan Media & Communications Institute

Bhutan Media & Communications Institute in collaboration with CUTS International organised a webinar among the Bhutan NRG members and other stakeholders on “Enabling a Political economy discourse for multi-modal connectivity in the BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal) sub-region”. BMCI presented the findings from the field and also presented recommendations gathered from various stakeholders.

Representatives from government, Civil Society Organizations, Non Governmental Organizations, media, project partners and invitees from India & Nepal attended the meeting.

Welcome Remarks

Ms. Pushpa Chhetri, Director, Bhutan Media Communications Institute, welcomed all the participants to the virtual meeting. She highlighted that although the significance of regional transport and seamless connectivity in promoting trade practices in the region was recognised in the 1990s, our region remains the least integrated.



In order to have any substantive progress in this direction, it requires a clear understanding and perspective of ground realities and challenges in terms of infrastructure, policy, regulatory gaps and also the extent of ownership at national and sub-national levels for larger regional connectivity plans. She shared Bhutan’s transport vision and said that Regional Connectivity is a part of the vision. Bhutan is also exploring other modes of transport besides road transport, however the development on the ground has suffered due to local expertise. With the pandemic a need for well-coordinated transport and trade system for goods and services is strongly recommended. She requested the participants to help the project team disseminate the information as well as suggest strategies for effective dissemination.

Setting the tone

Mr. Suresh P. Singh, CUTS International, gave an overview of the goals and objectives of the project. He also highlighted the significant obstacles that are preventing connectivity among the four countries. He stated that initiatives such as multi-modal connectivity might contribute to achieving the economic and trade potential of these countries. He said that among the BBIN



countries lies a huge potential for trade and people to people contact, improve the lives of people through trade which can be acquired with projects like M-Connect and similar other projects in the region like SAARC Motor Vehicles Agreement, BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA) Etc. However, this hasn't been implemented because of various concerns from the member countries. He highlighted the purpose of the study is to come up with findings from the ground and initiate discussions and come up with suggestions and intervention at policy & infrastructure level. He also mentioned that priority should be given to primary transport and transit corridors and major locations that facilitate the majority of trade among these countries.

Presentation of the findings

Mr. Shiva Raj Chhetri, Project Director, BMCI gave a presentation on the finding of the survey in four selected survey areas namely Thimphu, Phuntsholing, Samdrup Jongkhar, Gelephu. He shared that about 40 stakeholders were surveyed from Government Organisations, Civil Society Organizations, Non Governmental Organisations and Private Sectors. He listed challenges faced in the trade related activities carried in these four survey areas. He also presented the recommendations made by the stakeholders. He concluded the presentation by sharing a case study from the field.



Discussions



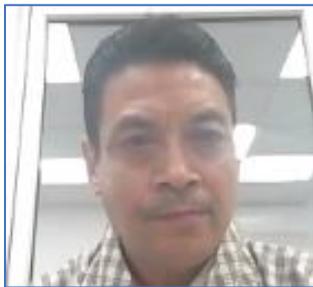
Mr. Bhimlal Suberi, a former bureaucrat pointed out that multimedia transport looks difficult for Bhutan when it comes to railway but he hopes that the railway connectivity among the border town in Bhutan and India is achieved soon. He also talked about the BBIN MVA ratification by Bhutan being at halt due to issues/challenges related to the size of the country, population, economic activity etc. He also pointed out that the implementation of MVA in Bangladesh, Nepal, and India will also help Bhutan to observe and decide on the ratification.

Responding to one query on rope way transport in Bhutan, Mr. Bhimlal said that apart from a modest desk research done in 2006-2007 by an Indian institute based in Pune without any specific visits to potential sites, there has been no formal study done on ropeways for public transport.

Mr. Bhimlal pointed out trade and transport needs to be given equal focus. In terms of economics and development, COVID-19 has created a disparity among the nations. He believes

multi-modal connectivity can help all nations to thrive in this pandemic situation. A comprehensive ecosystem should be a top concern to integrate the supply chains and develop a sustainable trade system.

Dr. Didar Singh, Former Secretary to Govt of India and Ex Secretary General FICCI, India, suggested to have specific recommendations for all the recommendations gathered in the presentation. He cited an example that Digital Signature is not only related to Multi Model Connectivity but for all other e-commerce and digital transactions which needs act from the parliament on the legalization of E Signatures. Similar to that, he suggests all other recommendations to have specific way forward.



Mr. Binai Lama, NRG member currently working in WFP Bhutan, suggested reinforcement of the deployment and strengthening of Information & Communications Technology (ICT) in the times of pandemic for a seamless Multi Modal connectivity. He pointed that the infrastructure & logistics development should be an important part for Multi Modal Connectivity among regions. He mentioned that new infrastructures coming along at the borders in Bhutan due to pandemic has played crucial roles. There is a new dry-port, improved facilities for transaction and new protocols being followed (switching of truck drivers at entry and exit points). He pointed that these measures are to be made standard and not exception for the pandemic. He highlighted how important it is to take into account the cost and efficiency factor of infrastructure & logistics development and the single window services/facilities/clearances.

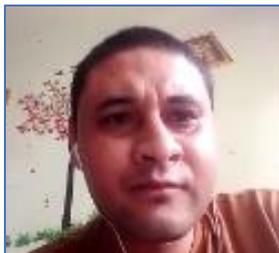
He pointed out that the export of Bhutanese Agriculture product to India has faced a lot of difficulties due to physical restrictions, and regulatory constraints like certification and quarantine issues despite the free trade agreement policy. Along with the formal trade, the informal trader, small holder farmers faced major challenges in the new normal.

Mr. Tshering Yeshe, General Secretary, Export Association of Bhutan suggested that instead of Pasakha to Hasimara railway link it would be better for Bhutan if there is access to the recently inaugurated Haldibari to Chilahati railway station given the proximity from the southern belt of Bhutan which will benefit the Bhutanese traders. He cited an example of how a 2.5 hrs drive from Phuentsholing to Burimari (Bangladesh border) takes 15-20 days due to challenges in the transit routes. He said there is lack of commitment from respective states to address these challenges which can only be overcome if all the concerned authorities and pertaining stakeholders come together to a common understanding.



He also mentioned that there is a need to develop infrastructure when it comes to Inland Waterways. He said that Dhubri which is the port of call for Bhutan in India is very congested and small and lacks facilities. While the other alternate port of call which is Jogighopa, has abundant land with no settlement and with the course remaining same throughout also lacks infrastructure.

He also mentioned that there has been very minimal support from the government in resolving the challenges at the ground level. He recommended that the Government must work with the stakeholders and the ground to address these challenges.



Dipta Timsina, business owner, pointed that while exporting boulders from Gelephu to Bangladesh, drivers face multiple challenges and most of which are with the motor vehicle inspectors. He said having a common forum between officials from two nations to discuss on the laws and acts would help immensely to the traders. He also pointed out that although there are discussions and decisions made at the highest level between the governments, the information doesn't seem to trickle down to the officials and administration on the ground.

Mr. Rajesh Rai, Reporter, Kuensel Corporation Limited, mentioned that there are delays in decision making when governments are involved and he recommended to have some sort of lobby group who could expedite decision making at the ground level.



Mr. Arnab Ganguly, CUTS International, mentioned that his team will be able to take up the various problems faced by Bhutanese while exporting or how to improve trade to the MLA for further discussion and assistance.

Conclusion

Ms. Pushpa Chhetri thanked all for the participations and their valuable time, feedback and comments adding that the valuable contributions are noted and would be incorporated in the findings. Such a discourse was a great sharing and learning experience for the project team. She further asked the participants to send any other recommendations by email for incorporation.