

Inclusion of Voices of Riparian Communities in Trans-boundary Rivers At

World Water Week 2021 Building Resilience Faster

24 August 2021
Tuesday

08:00 AM - 09:00 AM (CET)
11:30 AM - 12:30 PM (IST)
12:00 PM - 01:00 PM (BST)

Welcome remarks and session moderator:

- Veena Vidyadharan, CUTS International

Panel discussion:

- Archana Chatterjee, Programme Manager, International Union for Conservation of Nature
- Shanta Soheli Moyna, Project Officer, Centre for Natural Resource Studies, Bangladesh
- Atowar Rahman, President, Dhubri Water Ways International Traders Association
- Sharmila Khanam, Deputy Director, Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This webinar “Inclusion of Voices of Riparian Communities in Transboundary Rivers” was co-organised by CUTS International and Oxfam as part of a project entitled “Transboundary Rivers of South Asia.” CUTS International is implementing it with the support of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) through Oxfam. The project's objective is to reduce poverty and marginalisation of vulnerable river basin communities and women through increased access to and control of riverine water resources.
- 1.2 The webinar aimed to draw actionable messages from the discussion for a further push to enhance collaboration between small traders, producers, women, local marginalised communities, fishermen and boatmen whose livelihood depends on transboundary rivers of India and Bangladesh particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 1.3 Furthermore, it intended to enhance buy-in for small haul cross-border trade and navigation between India and Bangladesh through the trade of locally produced goods.

2. Discussion Highlights

- 2.1 Conventional framing of transboundary water governance marginalises the voices of the riparian communities and other marginalised communities which rely on the water resources. Thus, it is insufficient.
- 2.2 Involvement of local communities, women, youth, non-governmental organisations and academicians in policy dialogues (Track 3 Approach) will be beneficial in addressing the concerns of the affected communities and further contribute to the bilateral dialogues (Track 1 Approach) in the South Asian context.
- 2.3 Various forums conducted by civil societies and similar organisations have indicated that community inclusion increases the legitimacy of government decisions and improves transparency and accountability. Furthermore, the active and continuous participation of the local community in decisions involving cross-border cooperation on the water will help harness the traditional knowledge and ability of the riverine communities.
- 2.4 The riverine communities can benefit through the transboundary rivers as cross-border trade helps exchange goods at a cheaper rate. Being a cost effective mode of transportation, goods in large quantities can also be transported between countries through a multimodal system.
- 2.5 The inland waterways can be used for transportation as this mode of transportation is cost-effective and environment friendly. These routes would facilitate the transportation of locally-produced goods between India and Bangladesh. However, it is vital to mitigate the navigability issue in these rivers. Small mechanised boats can be used to transport goods through short stretches of waterways. This will facilitate the involvement of local communities.
- 2.6 Emphasis needs to be on the smaller and local boats as bigger vessels for bulk cargo can only be utilised for industrial products such as fly ash and will not contribute directly to the local people.
- 2.7 Thus, policies and projects should be implemented in a manner where the rights of these communities are respected and protected. Another suggestion was establishing river haats, similar to border haats, for enhanced livelihood generation in these regions.
- 2.8 During the pandemic, the water routes were used for trading between India and Bangladesh. This mode during the pandemic lockdown proved to be the best and effective mode of transportation. Additionally, the waterways promote regional connectivity.
- 2.9 India and Bangladesh share 54 transboundary rivers, but only a few river routes are used for trade and transportation. In 2015, India and Bangladesh signed a Protocol for Inland Water Transit and Trade (PIWTT). Under this protocol, eight main

corridors promote inter-country trade. In addition to this protocol, the two countries signed an addendum that included two new ports of call, namely- Dhubri and Pangaon.

- 2.10 In this context, the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) has connected three major ports of Bangladesh – Chittagong, Payra and Mongla through inland waterways. In the long term, inland waterways connectivity will provide linkages to the land-locked states of India in the North-East, Nepal and Bhutan. Ashuganj provides multimodal connectivity services to North-East India. Along with Ashuganj, Jogigopa is also emerging as a multimodal terminal.
- 2.11 The efforts in this regard have had the following impact: (i) since 2019, inter-country goods are being transported between India and Bangladesh through shallow-draft vessels. (ii) There has been a trial run for passenger cruise services between India and Bangladesh through the Kolkata-Dhubri route. It is highly expected that passenger movement between the two countries should commence soon. (iii) The new river route, Daudkandi-Sonamura route faces navigational issues. This route has scope for shallow-draft vessels to ply efficiently.
- 2.12 It has been highlighted that the commencement of inland waterways connectivity has benefited the local people, mainly traders and local producers. This has reduced the time and cost of transporting goods through waterways. Earlier, it took 7-8 days for a boat to complete its journey from Dhubri to Narayanganj, but it has been reduced to three to four days. Other region traders are also exploring opportunities to start cross-border trade on agricultural products such as mango, bamboo, etc.
- 2.13 However, there is still a need for the registration and documentation process for small mechanised boats to ply on the short stretches in the transboundary rivers between India and Bangladesh.

3. Conclusion

- 3.1 Rivers bind people together. Any intervention on the rivers will significantly impact the nearby ecosystem, including the riverine communities.
- 3.2 To utilise these rivers for cross-border trade and commerce, the identification of key commodities is imperative. It would be helpful for the economy on both sides of the river if these commodities are locally produced.
- 3.3 It is pivotal to upgrade the port infrastructure to ensure seamless and hassle-free transportation of these commodities.
- 3.4 Collaborative efforts from all the departments and ministries will be essential to address and deliver on the needs and concerns of the river-based communities.