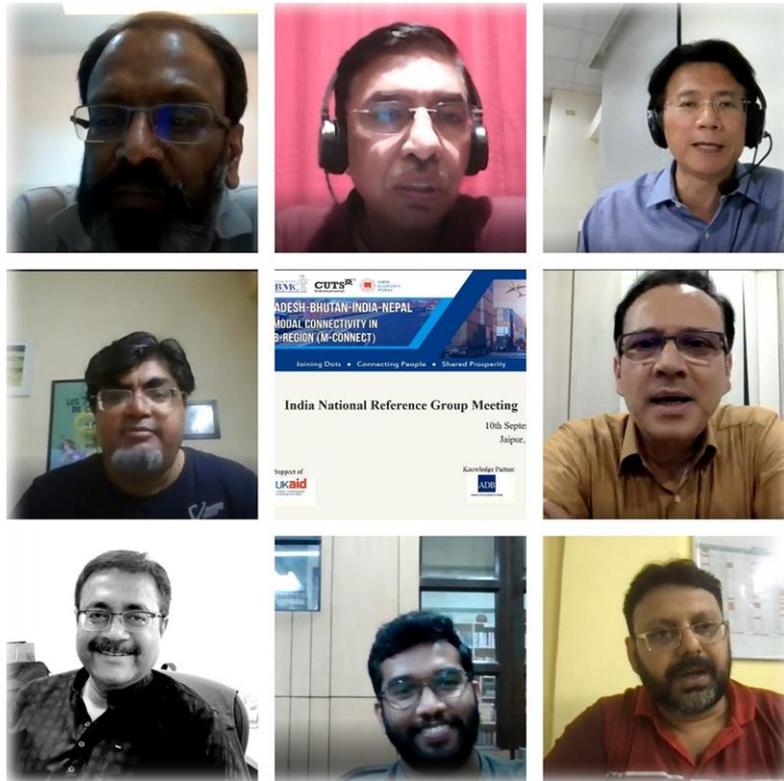


Event Report

India National Reference Group Meeting

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

September 10, 2021



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CUTS International organised a webinar among the India 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”. CUTS International presented the findings and observations derived from the field surveys and other project research outputs, such as Briefing Papers, Discussion Papers, Working Notes, Field Diaries, and Webinars conducted as a part of the project.

Representatives from government, Civil Society Organisations, Non-Governmental Organisations, media, academia, industry associations, project partners and invitees from the four BBIN countries attended the meeting.

Welcome Remarks

Bipul Chatterjee, Executive Director, CUTS International, welcomed all the participants to the virtual meeting. The project has covered more than 50 locations while looking at various aspects of multi-modal connectivity. The study explores the potential of some of the locations to be converted as multi-modal hubs. In the Indian context, special emphasis has been given to the North East region as it is very well connected to other BBIN sub-region countries. CUTS International’s work will complement technical studies done by various agencies like WTO, World Bank, etc. The study explores locations on four economic corridors identified by Asian Development Bank and other agencies in the BBIN sub-region.

Purpose of the meeting

Suresh P Singh of CUTS International gave an overview of the goals and objectives of the project. He highlighted the importance of multi-modal connectivity for boosting intra-regional trade. He emphasised that there is no substitute for good quality transport infrastructure. The project is premised on the evidence-based understanding that connectivity plays a crucial role in connecting and trading between nations. He also pointed out that although the BBIN sub-region has a large number of agreements, however, very few of them are related to transport and trade.

Keynote Presentations

Suresh P Singh, Jithin Sabu, and Kajal Sharda of CUTS International presented the findings and observations derived from the field surveys and other project research outputs, such as Briefing Papers, Discussion Papers, Working Notes, Field Diaries, and Webinars conducted as a part of the project. They discussed 37 locations in India relevant to the multi-modal connectivity in the BBIN sub-region. The presentation entailed a detailed overview of the aforementioned locations’ available, required, and ongoing infrastructure development. The potential opportunities for multi-modal connectivity for various locations were discussed.

Additionally, policy recommendations based on the insights from stakeholder consultations were also mentioned.

Open Discussion

Gopal Krishna, Former Shipping Secretary, Ministry of Shipping, Government of India, recommended that the study should integrate the learnings from the multi-modal connectivity initiatives in other regions of the world. He suggested that Visakhapatnam port should not be shown as an alternative location for Kolkata port as it is very far from other countries of the BBIN sub-region. He specified that decrease in congestion at Kolkata port will subsequently decrease the traffic at Visakhapatnam port.

Pritam Banerjee, Logistics Sector Specialist, Asian Development Bank, recommended that the cargo profile should determine the need for multi-modal logistics. One of the key challenges in ensuring multi-modal connectivity in the BBIN sub-region is involving private stakeholders in infrastructural development. However, the private sector would only invest if there is a balance in infrastructure development and cargo load. Therefore, there should be equilibrium in infrastructure and freight load.

Rajan Sudesh Ratna, Economic Affairs Officer, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, said that there is a tendency to work on conventional routes constantly. The trade costs associated with these routes have subsequently decreased the trade volume in the sub-region. A major issue plaguing the sub-region is, there is no alternative to the traditional routes due to lack of infrastructure development.

Harry T. Kriz, General Development Officer, Indo-Pacific Office, US Agency for International Development (AIDA), Embassy of the United States of America, reported that one of the primary concerns of AIDA is to increase the connectivity for intra-regional trade in the sub-region. He pointed out that AIDA is willing to support ideas emerging at the grassroots level to facilitate intra-regional trade.

Sudip Kumar Dey, Hon. Secretary, Calcutta Customs House Agents Association, pointed out that multi-modal hubs should be constructed near seaports or areas with water connectivity to make a seamless transfer from road, rail, and water transport feasible. He pointed out that one of the practical challenges that exporters face to avail or reimburse their subsidy or tax is the low level of soft skills in grassroots levels, such as truck drivers.

Biswajit Chakrabarty, Director, Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry, North-East Advisory Council, suggested that the study needs to have more updates on the recent developments in North-east India about the construction of multi-modal hubs. An example of one such development is a new multi-modal logistic park near Silchar, Assam. He

also reiterated that multi-modal hubs should be constructed near rivers to be successful. The private sector must be involved in the development and operational aspects.

Sambit Das Gupta, Assistant Director, Bengal Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said that the lack of private sector participation in the BBIN sub-region is one of the key obstacles that slow down the pace of intra-regional connectivity in the sub-region. He said that though there are many projects and initiatives in the sub-region, the pace of implementation is not satisfactory.

Arnab Ganguly, Policy Analyst, CUTS International, has emphasised the congestion at Dhubri. As the infrastructure at Jogighopa is not operational yet, the trucks from the Indian side and the Gelephu side of Bhutan are coming to Dhubri alone. He mentioned that specific traffic regulations had prevented trucks from entering the municipality town, and the upcoming Fulbari Bridge will decrease the congestion as it connects the bypass road. But a road connecting the bypass road of the Fulbari bridge with the Dhubri port is required. Moreover, he pointed out the need for a small jetty opposite the ICD Amingaon to decongest the Saraighat bridge in Guwahati.

Kuancheng Huang, Professor, Department of Transportation and Logistics Management, National Yang-Ming Chiao Tung University Academic Hub, emphasised on prioritising the investment in infrastructure while focusing on the limited resource availability. There should be a clear differentiation between investments that the private and public stakeholders should make. He highlighted the importance of developing a mechanism that harmonises cross-border investment and trade costs and benefits.

A. Didar Singh, Former Secretary, Government of India and a distinguished Fellow of CUTS International, suggested a consolidated recommendation framework which would contain the following elements: (i) Recommendation, (ii) Implications to recommend that recommendation and (iii) expected implications of the recommendation.

Conclusion

Bipul Chatterjee concluded the webinar by thanking all the participants for their active participation and insightful comments on the presentation. He briefed that while technical studies are there with their quantitative findings, studies are needed based on ground situations. The study has added to the existing literature on the creases of connectivity issues and believes that if some of these issues are ironed out, the trade will surely increase. Hence, CUTS International has worked upon addressing micro-level recommendations instead of general macro-level recommendations.