

## Event Report

# Bangladesh National Reference Group Meeting

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

**August 17, 2021 (11:00 am – 01:30 pm, BST)**



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## Introduction

International multi-modal transport is the carriage of goods by at least two different modes of transport based on a multi-modal transport contract from a place in one country at which the goods are taken in charge by the multi-modal transport operator a place designated for delivery situated in a different country. Multi-modal transport essentially facilitates door-to-door transport of goods.

Bangladesh has immense potential to implement an efficient multi-modal transport network, thereby facilitating seamless transport of goods between suppliers and receivers. Following an export-led growth model, Bangladesh plans to become a developed nation by 2041, which will invariably strain the already under-pressure transport infrastructure. In light of the reality, multi-modal transport system offers itself as a potential model to enhance the efficiency of the transport network for Bangladesh by domestic, regional and international integration.

Unnayan Shamannay, in association with CUTS International, India, Nepal Economic Forum, and Bhutan Media and Communication Forum, has undertaken research titled ‘**Enabling a Political Economy Discourse for Multi-modal Connectivity in the BBIN Sub-region (M-Connect)**’ supported by Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office of UK and with Asian Development Bank as a knowledge partner. The project aims to understand the challenges and opportunities of establishing an efficient multi-modal transport network in the BBIN Sub-region.

The online National Reference Group Meeting was organised by Unnayan Shamannay in collaboration with CUTS International and other partners, where representatives of multi-lateral bodies, think tanks, private sector, PSUs/Special Purpose Vehicles, government departments, chambers of commerce/business, and members from business associations were present. The findings from the field survey of the project in Bangladesh were presented in the meeting, based on which a discussion was held. All the participants acknowledged the importance of promoting multi-modal connectivity in the BBIN sub-region. The discussants agreed that established multi-modal connectivity in the BBIN sub-region would bring forth new opportunities in trade and accelerate both the national and international economy.

**Open discussion:** Key points that came from the discussants are-

- The need to focus on the infrastructural development of existing routes
- Importance of identifying new routes and including in the Motor Vehicles Agreement
- The safety and comfort of drivers should be ensured in the transportation process
- Pangaon ICT, Ashuganj IWT and Payra Sea Port should be used frequently to achieve the full potential of these ports
- Dredging of waterways should be done considering the return of the investment

- Private sectors can be involved in the administration and infrastructure of ports
- Different Indian ports should be used along with Kolkata
- Modification in vessel design should be considered to avoid bridge collisions
- Benapole port should be expanded as most of the passengers and large volume of cargo pass-through this route
- Treatment and lab facilities should be established in all ports

To make informed policy initiatives and infrastructural development decisions in the context of regional connectivity investment and facilitation, Unnayan Shamannay, a civil society think tank, in collaboration with CUTS International organised a National Reference Group Online Meeting on “**Enabling a Political Economy Discourse for Multi-modal Connectivity in the BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) Sub-region**”. The organisation disseminated its research findings on the challenges and possibilities of multi-modal connectivity in Bangladesh part.

The meeting was presided by Dr. Atiur Rahman, Chairman, Unnayan Shamannay and Former Governor, Bangladesh Bank. Abdullah Nadvi, Director Research, Unnayan Shamannay, moderated the whole meeting. Lead economist of Unnayan Shamannay, Robart Shuvro Guda, presented the findings of extensive research.

Khondker Golam Moazzem, Research Director of Centre for Policy Dialogue; Suresh P Singh, Fellow, CUTS International; Commodore Golam Sadeq, Chairman, BIWTA; Nilima Akther, Additional Secretary, Ministry of Road Transport and Bridges; Abdul Matlub Ahmad, President, India-Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry (IBCCI); Jewel Rana, Additional Deputy Director (Export) Plant Quarantine Wing; Kabir Ahmed, President, Bangladesh Freight Forward Association; Sudhir Chandra Nath, Advanced Chemical Industries; Mofizur Rahman Sazon, President, Benapole C& F Agent Association Bangladesh, among others, participated actively in the session.

Representatives from other government and private organisations, including Bangladesh Truck and Covered Van Sromik Union, Bangladesh Cargo Vessel Owners Association, BSTI, Plant Quarantine Wing, Bangladesh Land Port Authority, National Board of Revenue (NBR), participated in the discussion. Also, representatives from media, including the Financial Express, Riverine People, Somoy Media Ltd., Bangladesh Protidin, Channel-I, Ekattor Media Limited, participated in the meeting.

## Welcome Remarks

Atiur Rahman, Chairman of Unnayan Shamannay, started his welcome speech by welcoming all the participants. He mentioned that multi-modal connectivity could accelerate the export commerce of our country. 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.



## Purpose of the Meeting



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

He also mentioned that priority should be given to primary transport and transit corridors and major locations on these corridors that facilitate the majority of trade among these countries. For this purpose, the project has identified four corridors and 50 significant locations, he said. In addition, he highlighted that different modes of transportation should be given due weightage while developing the policy. According to him, the COVID-19 pandemic has made the trade situation more challenging, and it is high time the governments of these countries put the multi-modal connectivity into practice.

## Keynote Presentation

A PowerPoint presentation was presented by lead economist Robart Shuvro Guda of Unnayan Shamannay, focussing on the project. Four key corridors were proposed for multi-modal connectivity in the BBIN sub-region. Guda provided an overview of the activities taken to conduct the research and the following research findings. He discussed location-specific connectivity, challenges, stakeholder consideration, and ongoing infrastructural project of Bangladesh's land, river, and seaports. The updates on agreements of Bangladesh with the rest of the countries in the sub-region were mentioned, along with the location-wise summary of the survey findings conducted as part of the project. He concluded his presentation



by recommending required actions for policy support and emphasised the necessity of synchronised customs procedures and the Single Window Clearance System in BBIN.

## Open Discussion

**Hossain Ahmed Mojumder**, *Assistant General Secretary, Bangladesh Truck and Covered Van Owner Association*

Mojumder provided the accurate number of existing covered vans and registered trucks in Bangladesh. According to BRTA, the total registered number of vehicles is 46,49,186. He discussed the various tactics that might be used to ensure the safety and comfort of drivers. Mojumder suggested that every port and fuel station should have a restroom or facilities. An interpreter should be assigned to assist the foreign drivers. In an accident, clear instructions on what to do and whom to contact should be provided promptly. It must be stated whether or not a driver's license can be used in other connected nations.



**Abdul Matlub Ahmad**, *Chairman, IBCCI*

For the past 30 years, the chairman of the IBCCI has been working on connectivity. His expertise has allowed him to bring up certain specific difficulties. Ahmad stated that connectivity had assisted us to sustain during the pandemic. If multi-modal connectivity was in place, the Bangladesh government could address the difficulties more effectively. He has underlined the importance of incorporating the private sector in port administration and infrastructure development. He suggested that if the responsibilities of warehouse, cold chain, and load-unload were given to the private sector, it could yield speedier outcomes than the current system. He emphasised Pangaon's position while talking about ports. Pangaon, according to his discretion, does not have two-way cargo and is a slow-paced and less preferred port. The concept of Pangaon port can be successful if it is used for the northwest region. He prioritised finding solutions that can give outcomes within the next five years. As a result, in the long term, all the developments will add up.

**Khondaker Golam Moazzem**, *Research Director, CPD*

Khondaker Golam Moazzem of CPD has raised some issues existing in strategy that needs addressing before M-Connect is in action. He said that while Bangladesh has achieved some bilateral success, it still lacks regional success in connectivity.

In the case of Nepal, an additional route might be introduced in the MVA agreement. He also emphasised utilising different Indian



seaports other than Kolkata port. As per India's agreement, Bangladesh can gain greater benefits if it can connect with Myanmar and Thailand. Also, he brought out the necessity of ensuring a return on investment before dredging waterways. He mentioned that Payra port lost its importance compared to Mongla and Matarbari, though Payra was established to ensure more availability. Other discussants agreed with Khondaker when he specified the need for ownership in the regional countries. He ensured that all the participating countries use the ports equally and develop a sense of strong ownership.



**Commodore Golam Sadeq, *Chairman, BIWTA***

Chairman of BIWTA, Commodore Golam Sadeq, shed light on some critical updates. The government has been working to strengthen port infrastructures and overall connectivity. Inland ports are being connected to Payra port. In Khanpur, a bypass road is being constructed. In both Ashuganj and Pangaon, a cargo port is getting established. He assured the audience that Ashuganj's ICT project would run smoothly and quickly soon. He also said that the World Bank had provided funding for the construction of cargo ports. While speaking about Daudkandi, he proposed that the Gomti River be used for the export-import operations near the Tripura border.

Moreover, 24 trial shipments have been completed to begin direct Mongla-Pakshi transportation through the Padma River in the future. Extensive dredging would be done to access the CTG port in all weathers (at least 4m depth all year round). He also stated that a modification in vessel design would assist in resolving the lower bridge concerns.

**Neelima Akhter, *Additional Secretary, RTHD***

Neelima Akhter suggested working by keeping the geopolitical reality of the region in mind. She also suggested that NBR should be included as an essential stakeholder in this project. Besides NBR, the intra-country customs sub-group is a factor in the promotion of regional connectivity. She spoke about the necessity of a fixed rate of products across the country. The absence of any agreement among countries on the price of products is hampering the signing of MVA protocols. For overcoming this issue, initiatives should be taken from businesses in motivating all to come to terms. In addition to that, she commented on focusing on the insurance issue to promote connectivity in the BBIN sub-region.





**Mofizur Rahman Sazon**, *President, Benapole C&F Agent Association, Bangladesh*

The insufficiency of ports in Bangladesh was brought to view by Mofizur Rahman Sazon. He thought that congestion in land ports is an issue. According to the speaker, the situation will worsen when the Padma Bridge is in operation. Additionally, he complained about the altered implementation of development plans. Another issue which

he spoke about is the narrow Jessore-Benapole road.

**Ahsan Chowdhury**, *CEO, PRAN*

Ahsan Chowdhury thought that the most prominent issue for exporting in the future would be the absence of road infrastructure. He also suggested focusing on Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur, etc., as Bangladesh has a natural advantage in establishing connectivity. According to him, the cost of transshipment is more than the cost of trucks. The increase in distribution cost is directly linked with the cost of exports. He suggested establishing direct connectivity within BBIN countries where there will be no need to load and unload products from one truck to another on borders, saving time and cost.



**Sheikh Mahfuz Hamid**, *Managing Director, Golf Orient Seaways Ltd*

Mahfuz Hamid said that riverine transportation is the best mode of transportation due to being pollution-free and cost-effective. He spoke about the PRAN group exporting to Kolkata using barges and said the opportunity to use waterways for trade between India and Bangladesh has been in existence for quite some time while mentioning the Naval Agreement and Coastal Shipping Agreement between India and Bangladesh. In addition, he emphasised businesses targeting only Kolkata and Benapole because stakeholders face many issues while doing in international trade.

According to him, many products imported from Kolkata to Bangladesh via road can be imported on ships. Mentioning Neelima Akhter's comment on NBR being an important stakeholder, he talked about restrictions of the NBR. He said that only a few products (5-7 items) could be imported via Narayanganj port. He felt that if this issue can be addressed and solved by the cooperation among GOs and stakeholders, congestion in the road will decrease. Furthermore, he mentioned that the water vessels that are produced in Bangladesh usually have a draft of more than 4 meters when loaded and 2 meters when empty, which is not feasible for

using Brahmaputra and Jamuna as a route given their low navigability. Instead, the utilization of Dhubri and Chilmari ports has been suggested by him.

**Jahangir Kabir**, *Member Traffic (Joint Secretary) Bangladesh Land Port Authority*

Jahangir Kabir thought that increasing regional connectivity and regional trade would enrich the national economy. He raised the issue of Bangladeshi trucks not entering other countries and the need for an agreement between India-Bangladesh to let Bangladeshi trucks go to Kakarbhitta, Nepal. He also spoke about port facilities and informed that developing 12 ports worth almost 1200 crore BDT projects are ongoing. According to him, if the facilities in ports can be increased, businesses will enhance as well.



**Asjadul Kibria**, *Plan Editor, The Financial Express*

Asjadul Kibria urged to focus on the dissemination of the information of the presentation in national and regional newspapers. He also said that it would help persons interested in trade within the BBIN sub-region in decision-making.

**Jewel Rana**, *Additional Deputy Director (Export), Plant Quarantine Wing, Department of Agricultural Extension*

Jewel Rana informed that Bangladesh transforming into a developing nation will strip it off many facilities that it has enjoyed exporting agricultural products. In this situation, BBIN can be an important opportunity to promote and sustain agricultural exporting. He also thought that public-private partnership is necessary as Bangladesh has an insufficient number of labs required for quality assurance. In addition to that, he suggested, seven sisters should be targeted in exporting agricultural products. Likewise, he mentioned the potential of establishing trade between Bhutan and Bangladesh for importing citrus fruits and exporting agricultural goods. According to him, agricultural export can be increased if BBIN connectivity is implemented.

## **Vote of Thanks**

**Shaheen ul Alam**, *Project Coordinator, Unnayan Shamannay*

Shaheen ul Alam expressed his gratitude to the discussants and participants for the meaningful and effective discussion on multi-modal connectivity-related potential and challenges as a whole. He believed that this type of discussion creates a lot of scope for the decision-makers and other relevant stakeholders for future policy level inputs.









*Note: Event coverages in the national dailies and electronic media are given in the annex section of this report*



## Annex-I

### Events coverages in the national dailies and electronic media

| SL | News Paper Name   | News Title  | News Link   |
|----|---|---|---|
| 1. |                        | ভারত, নেপাল ও ভূটানে সরাসরি পণ্য রফতানি করতে চায় ব্যবসায়ীরা                   | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=odNZfyoogMk">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=odNZfyoogMk</a>   |
| 2. | <b>কালের কণ্ঠ</b>   | বাণিজ্য বাড়ানোর ইতিবাচক প্রভাব পড়বে কর্মসংস্থানে : ড. আতিউর রহমান             | <a href="https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.kalerkantho.com/amp/online/national/2021/08/17/1064345">https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.kalerkantho.com/amp/online/national/2021/08/17/1064345</a>   |
| 3. |                        | Push for integrated dev of road, rail, waterway                                 | <a href="https://today.thefinancialexpress.com.bd/metro-news/push-for-integrated-dev-of-road-rail-waterway-1629224817">https://today.thefinancialexpress.com.bd/metro-news/push-for-integrated-dev-of-road-rail-waterway-1629224817</a>   |
| 4. |                        | ‘Enhancing trade connectivity with BBIN countries a must for economic recovery’ | <a href="https://www.daily-sun.com/printversion/details/571202/%E2%80%98Enhancing-trade-connectivity-with-BBIN-countries-a-must-for-economic-recovery%E2%80%99">https://www.daily-sun.com/printversion/details/571202/%E2%80%98Enhancing-trade-connectivity-with-BBIN-countries-a-must-for-economic-recovery%E2%80%99</a>   |
| 5. |  - চ্যানেল আই অনলাইন | বাণিজ্য যোগাযোগ কেবল ব্যবসায়ীদের জন্য জরুরি নয়: ড. আতিউর রহমান                | <a href="https://www.channelionline.com/%E0%A6%AC%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%A3%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%9C%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%AF-%E0%A6%AF%E0%A7%8B%E0%A6%97%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%AF%E0%A7%8B%E0%A6%97-%E0%A6%95%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%AC%E0%A6%B2-%E0%A6%AC%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%AF/">https://www.channelionline.com/%E0%A6%AC%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%A3%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%9C%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%AF-%E0%A6%AF%E0%A7%8B%E0%A6%97%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%AF%E0%A7%8B%E0%A6%97-%E0%A6%95%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%AC%E0%A6%B2-%E0%A6%AC%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%AF/</a> |
| 6. |                      | Multi-modal connectivity key to boosting trade in BBIN sub-region: Stakeholders | <a href="https://www.tbsnews.net/economy/multi-modal-connectivity-key-boosting-trade-bbin-sub-region-stakeholders-289714">https://www.tbsnews.net/economy/multi-modal-connectivity-key-boosting-trade-bbin-sub-region-stakeholders-289714</a>   |
| 7. |                      | Apart from businesses, BBIN trade connectivity to benefit people: Atiur         | <a href="https://www.businessinsiderbd.com/trade/news/9190/apart-from-businesses-bbin-trade-connectivity-to-benefit-people-atiur">https://www.businessinsiderbd.com/trade/news/9190/apart-from-businesses-bbin-trade-connectivity-to-benefit-people-atiur</a>   |
| 8. | <b>বণিকবার্তা</b>   | অনলাইন আলোচনায় বক্তারা   | <a href="https://bonikbarta.net/home/news_description/271974/%E0%A6%AC%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%A3%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%9C%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%AF-">https://bonikbarta.net/home/news_description/271974/%E0%A6%AC%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%A3%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%9C%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%AF-</a>   |

| SL  | News Paper Name          | News Title   | News Link   |
|-----|--------------------------|--|---|
|     |                          | বাণিজ্য যোগাযোগ বৃহত্তর জনস্বার্থের জন্য জরুরি             | <a href="#">%E0%A6%AF%E0%A7%8B%E0%A6%97%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%AF%E0%A7%8B%E0%A6%97-%E0%A6%AC%E0%A7%83%E0%A6%B9%E0%A6%A4%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%A4%E0%A6%B0-%E0%A6%9C%E0%A6%A8%E0%A6%B8%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%AC%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%B0%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%A5%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%B0-%E0%A6%9C%E0%A6%A8%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%AF-%E0%A6%9C%E0%A6%B0%E0%A7%81%E0%A6%B0%E0%A6%BF?fbcid=IwAR1HYI3B_C6cV_VIzXmuspqvxCDICdcMzUit0ZG4RtftqXkxoWjhj7VX-NM</a>  |
| 9.  | <b>বাংলাদেশ প্রতিদিন</b> | বাংলাদেশ-ভারতসহ চার দেশের বাণিজ্য যোগাযোগ জরুরি : ড. আতিউর | <a href="https://www.bd-pratidin.com/first-page/2021/08/18/681642?fbcid=IwAR0yYGkhwKnFZmwxADc5RRC4px6SWoWJMOfUS8XNBMZxDeIAjVYf0MCpm4">https://www.bd-pratidin.com/first-page/2021/08/18/681642?fbcid=IwAR0yYGkhwKnFZmwxADc5RRC4px6SWoWJMOfUS8XNBMZxDeIAjVYf0MCpm4</a>   |
| 10. | <b>সমকাল</b>             | অর্থনীতি পুনরুদ্ধারে আঞ্চলিক বাণিজ্যের বিকল্প নেই          | <a href="https://samakal.com/todays-print-edition/tp-industry-trade/article/2108115359/%E0%A6%85%E0%A6%B0%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%A5%E0%A6%A8%E0%A7%80%E0%A6%A4%E0%A6%BF-%E0%A6%AA%E0%A7%81%E0%A6%A8%E0%A6%B0%E0%A7%81%E0%A6%A6%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%A7%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%B0%E0%A7%87-%E0%A6%86%E0%A6%9E%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%9A%E0%A6%B2%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%95-%E0%A6%AC%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%A3%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%9C%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%AF%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%B0-%E0%A6%AC%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%95%E0%A6%B2%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%AA-%E0%A6%A8%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%87">https://samakal.com/todays-print-edition/tp-industry-trade/article/2108115359/%E0%A6%85%E0%A6%B0%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%A5%E0%A6%A8%E0%A7%80%E0%A6%A4%E0%A6%BF-%E0%A6%AA%E0%A7%81%E0%A6%A8%E0%A6%B0%E0%A7%81%E0%A6%A6%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%A7%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%B0%E0%A7%87-%E0%A6%86%E0%A6%9E%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%9A%E0%A6%B2%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%95-%E0%A6%AC%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%A3%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%9C%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%AF%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%B0-%E0%A6%AC%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%95%E0%A6%B2%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%AA-%E0%A6%A8%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%87</a> |

| SL  | News Paper Name             | News Title                                     | News Link   |
|-----|-----------------------------|--|---|
| 11. | THE <b>ASIAN</b> <b>AGE</b> | Trade connectivity benefits the people: Atiur  | <a href="https://dailyasianage.com/news/269281/trade-connectivity-benefits-the-people-atiur?fbclid=IwAR2VLrTtQxHgDIehrP6ssGCG-XVS8qD4j05LjFSqcnxCgMHBWWT2xJfp5uQ">https://dailyasianage.com/news/269281/trade-connectivity-benefits-the-people-atiur?fbclid=IwAR2VLrTtQxHgDIehrP6ssGCG-XVS8qD4j05LjFSqcnxCgMHBWWT2xJfp5uQ</a> |
| 12. | <b>বিজনেস বাংলাদেশ</b>      | বাণিজ্য যোগাযোগ বৃহত্তর জনস্বার্থের জন্য জরুরি | <a href="https://epaper.businessbangladesh.com.bd/epaper/print/67368">https://epaper.businessbangladesh.com.bd/epaper/print/67368</a>   |