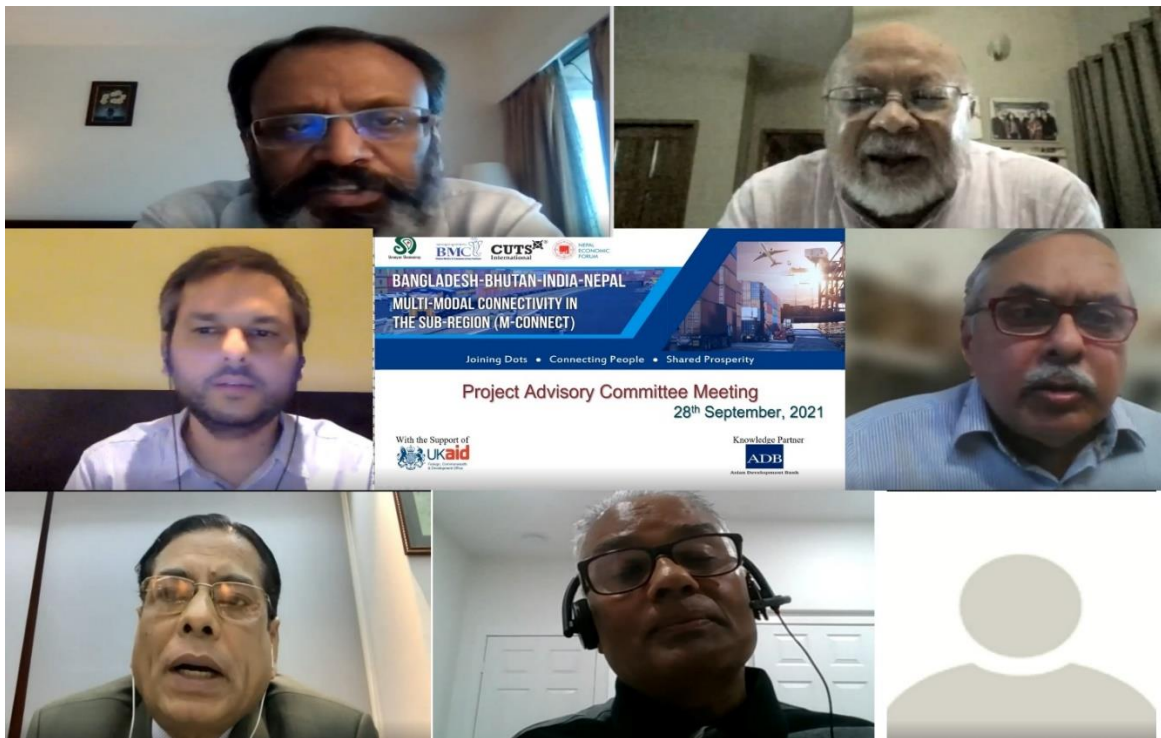


Event Report

Second Project Advisory Committee Meeting

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

September 28, 2021



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Introduction

CUTS International organised the second Project Advisory Committee (PAC) meeting of ‘Enabling a Political Economy Discourse for Multi-modal Connectivity in the BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal) Sub-region [M-Connect]’ project. With the help of its partners, 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, and Webinars conducted as part of the project.

The PAC members guided the project team to effectively disseminate findings among the concerned stakeholders, particularly policy-making bodies at the national and sub-national levels and civil society organisations.

Welcome Remarks

Bipul Chatterjee, Executive Director, CUTS International, welcomed all the participants to the virtual meeting. He mentioned that the project had covered four economic corridors with more than 55 locations while looking at various aspects of connectivity. Furthermore, the study explores the potential of some of the locations mentioned above to be converted as multi-modal hubs. He highlighted the importance of infrastructural connectivity for intra-regional trade. He emphasised the suggestions received will play a crucial role in the further development of the project.

Moderator

Tariq A. Karim, Political Analyst & Independent Consultant, Director, Centre for Bay of Bengal Studies, Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB); Former Advisory Consultant to World Bank, South Asia Regional Integration and Regional Engagement Programme was the moderator of the event. He said that BBIN is an intergovernmental project and there is a strong need to reduce the number of gatekeepers and simplify the procedure. He highlighted that maritime and cruise facilities are underutilised and there is a need to consider environmental issues. He said that the BBIN sub-region should make a resilient supply chain, rather than depending too much on other parts of the world.

Keynote Presentations

Suresh P Singh and Jithin Sabu 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 part of the project. They discussed all the four corridors in the BBIN sub-region. The presentation entailed an

overview of the corridors' available, required, and ongoing infrastructure development. The potential opportunities for multi-modal connectivity for four corridors were shared. Additionally, policy recommendations based on the insights from stakeholder consultations were also shared.

Open Discussion

A. Didar Singh, Former Secretary, Government of India and a distinguished Fellow of CUTS International, stated that working on the political economy factors should be focused. Also, there is a need for joint efforts to involve Bhutan in the BBIN MVA. He emphasised that seamless connectivity will happen in the sub-region, irrespective of the impediments and other externalities; therefore, efforts should be made to achieve it swiftly.

Priyam Sengupta, Deputy Director, Indian Chamber of Commerce, Kolkata, highlighted the importance of digital and energy connectivity and said there is a strong need to prioritise things. He recommended synchronised digitalisation and the adoption of grid connectivity among the BBIN sub-region to facilitate the seamless movement of goods and cargo.

Constantino Xavier, Fellow, Foreign Policy and Security Studies, Centre for Social and Economic Progress, recommended that efforts should be made to deliver findings of political economy to the central and local authorities of the BBIN countries. He suggested adopting practices and methods from regions such as CAREC and Greater Mekong Sub-region to facilitate seamless trade and connectivity. He also suggested that more efforts be made to evaluate welfare loss by not doing such practices in the BBIN sub-region.

Mustafizur Rahman, Distinguished Fellow, Centre for Policy Dialogue, Bangladesh, pointed out that the cost of non-cooperation in the BBIN sub-region needs to be identified. He asserted that the corridors identified should be looked at from the lens of regional connectivity. Moreover, the Public-Private-Partnership (PPP) is imperative in the region. The PPP will be the transformational force in the sub-region and hence, investments and economic returns must be ensured. He suggested that joint ventures involving the private sector beyond the borders will be the way to establish seamless connectivity.

Purushottam Ojha, Former Commerce Secretary, Government of Nepal, remarked that the BBIN MVA has positively impacted the sub-region. There are various examples, such as the use of Visakhapatnam port, electronic cargo tracking devices, and amendments in railway operation between India and Nepal. Moreover, with the development of various inland containers terminals, Nepal can move traffic to the Integrated Check Posts (ICP). However, the sub-region is still pressed on a stack of various documents and complex procedures. Hence, the need for transition to paperless trade and simpler documentation has been raised. The onset of the COVID-19

pandemic has boosted the demand for Information and Communications Technology (ICT) enabled services in the sub-region. Regarding the multi-modal connectivity in the sub-region, he recommended that direct air services from one industrial hub to another should be explored.

Bhimlal Suberi, Former Chief Planning Officer, Policy & Planning Division, Ministry of Information and Communications (MoIC), Government of Bhutan, emphasised the problems faced by Bhutanese stakeholders. He recommended that the suggestions put forward by the project should be in simple terms and easy for understanding among policymakers so that they will well take it. The Government of Bhutan does not much recognise the work of a Non-Profit Organisation (NPO). Hence, the report needs to pass through official channels and reach the government. On the aspect of multi-modal connectivity, he recommended that air transport be included as a part of multi-modal connectivity, and the future use of the ropeway in Bhutan is very susceptible. He also emphasised sorting recommendations on a priority basis. Additionally, the lack of parking facilities in Bhutan is a significant concern for the ground-level stakeholders.

Conclusion

Bipul Chatterjee thanked all the participants for their active participation in the meeting. He remarked it was an enriching session. The recommendations shared must be on a priority basis. Additionally, the cost of non-cooperation amongst the BBIN countries needs to be discussed and highlighted. He added that various suggestions and recommendations made by participants on seamless connectivity are well documented and would be disseminated to targeted groups, including high-level government officials and sub-national stakeholders.