

## Reviving Riverine Livelihoods through Short Haul Trade and Tourism

*This Policy Brief presents the challenges and recommendations with respect to cross-border trade via waterways and river tourism in Barak, Gumti, Haora, and Umngot rivers in Meghna basin. While highlighting the prospects of cross-border trade in Barak and Gumti rivers, it rules out the cross-border navigation in Haora river and identifies community-based tourism (CBT) as a supplementary source of income for riverine communities on the bank of Gumti river in Chabimura (Tripura), Umngot-Piang rivers in Dawki (Meghalaya, India) and Jaflong (Sylhet, Bangladesh). Promoting cross-border trade through waterways would require infrastructural facilities, necessary regulations, need based dredging operations at shallow locations to maintain navigability and market linkages. For CBT, proper guidelines, incentives, skill development and infrastructure are essential.*

### Context

Around half a billion people in India, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh are dependent on the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna (GBM) river basins either directly or indirectly. These river basins contribute to agriculture, fisheries, hydropower and navigation (for trade and tourism) thus making them an integral part of people's lives of the riparian countries.

Ever since the National Waterways Act of India came into force (2016), cross-border inland navigation has gained political interest not only just in India but also in Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. While the policy discourse among these

countries were about the movement of cargo using big steel vessels of capacity 1500-2000 metric tonnes, CUTS in its [study](#) conducted in 2018 pointed out the possible impact of short haul cross border trade on riverine communities.

In this study, CUTS highlighted that cross-border local trade using small mechanised boats in Brahmaputra across the border area of Dhubri (Assam, India) and Chilmari (Kurigram, Bangladesh) has the potential for improving livelihoods and local economy. Trade across the border would lead to new market generation for producers and affordable price for consumers living in both locations. Since inadequate depth of





*Fruits being loaded at Karimganj, Assam, India*



*Chabimura, Tripura, India*

## Cross Border Trade via Waterways

At Karimganj (Assam, India) cross-border trade is happening across the river (bank to bank) and is supporting local livelihoods in both India and Bangladesh. However, currently the cargo movement is one sided, i.e. from India to Bangladesh. With the development of waterways in this stretch, traders in India can expand their markets upto Ashuganj and in future commodities can also be imported from Bangladesh side.

Cross-border trade from Sonamura, (Tripura, India) to Comilla, (Bangladesh) and up to Daudkandi through Gumti River is feasible using vessels of capacity 10-25 tonnes. The existing infrastructure at Integrated Check Post (ICP) Srimantapur, Tripura can be utilised in the Indian side as it is on the river bank. The customs station at Bibir Bazar, Comilla Bangladesh which is currently being renovated is also located close to the river. With similar infrastructure development in Bibir Bazar, cross-border trade via waterways can be initiated in this stretch. Traders in India shared that port restrictions, sensitive lists and absence of quarantine facilities have limited the export of agricultural commodities from India to Bangladesh.

With regard to river Haora, it is highly polluted and very lean close to India-Bangladesh border and does not have necessary depth for navigation in many places. Though the navigability can be improved by dredging, but being in the proximity of well-equipped Agartala ICP, road network and the upcoming rail connectivity, prospects of cross-border trade through waterways is limited. Further, bimodal connectivity (waterways + road) from Ashuganj Port to Agartala is already operational. Better management of the river at the upstream would definitely improve the quality and flow of water thereby assuring better navigability in the border areas. The Public Works Department and Pollution Control Board in Tripura have to act on this.

## Challenges

- High sedimentation
- Poor navigability during lean season
- Presence of shoals and rocky patches
- Low lying bridge
- Lack of awareness among traders about inland water transport
- Existing non-tariff barriers (NTBs) on agricultural commodities
- Poor promotion of inland water transport in the state of Tripura

Recommendations		
Infrastructure related	Regulatory	Business process
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ramp facility and quarantine station in Karimganj (Assam, India) and Zakiganj (Sylhet, Bangladesh) ghats</li> <li>• Developing infrastructure (custom station) at the ghat near Bibir Bazar custom station, Bangladesh</li> <li>• Transshipment facilities at Daudkandi (Comilla, Bangladesh)</li> <li>• Dredging to make channel navigable by removing the shoals at certain places along Gumti</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Removal of tariff and NTBs like high duty, port restrictions, absence of plant and animal quarantine stations, sensitive lists, etc.</li> <li>• Declaring Daudkandi-Sonamura as part of Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade Route 3 (Kolkata-Karimganj)</li> <li>• Necessary regulatory framework for the state of Tripura for vessel registration, certification etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organising cross-border traders meet</li> <li>• Sensitising farmer/producer organisations for primary processing, cleaning and grading</li> <li>• Analysing the business prospects through cross-border value chain studies</li> </ul>

### **Community Based Tourism: Cases of Chabimura (Tripura) and Dawki (Meghalaya (India)-Jaflong (Sylhet, Bangladesh)**

In the framework of the study CUTS also explored the prospects of CBT in Chabimura (Tripura, India), Dawki (Meghalaya, India) and Jaflong (Sylhet, Bangladesh). Chabimura is in the upstream of Gumti river whereas Dawki is close to India-Bangladesh border and on the bank of Umngot river.

Chabimura located about 87 km away from Agartala is famous for its panels of rock carvings on the steep mountain wall on the bank of Gumti. The stagnant water over here is a popular location for nature and adventure tourism for local tourists who come here to enjoy the scenic, carvings, caves and boating.

Currently it is managed by a self-help group (SHG) of Jamatia Tribal Community on lease for a period of 5 years. It was observed that capacity building has to be undertaken with the communities on safety measures, hospitality, pollution control, etiquette etc. to promote sustainable tourism.

## Chabimura: Recommendations

- Proper guideline for community based tourism has to be developed by specifying the kind of incentives that will be provided by the government with beneficiary contribution
- Creation of a niche market for vegetable growers, particularly organic farming
- Capacity building of communities on sustainable tourism, safety mechanisms, etiquettes and to show case local ethnic culture and cuisines.

Women are mostly engaged in vegetable growing using lift irrigation from Gumti; they also undertake weaving. The Tourism Department has to develop a package for Chabimura under its promotional programme.

Jaflong is located in the downstream of Umngot river (known as Piang) in Bangladesh. The border point in Dawki-Jaflong is a popular boating site known for crystal clear water. About 8 km north west of the border town Dawki in the Jaintia Hills lies the village Shnonpdeng. Other than boating, this site offers scuba diving experience, kayaking,<sup>2</sup> snorkelling<sup>3</sup> and cliff jumping. Here, the entire activities are managed by Village Development

Committee. It also provides opportunities for nature guide, fishing, adventure sports, promotion of artisans, local culture and cuisines.

Meghalaya Tourism Department provides subsidies for developing homestays and cottages and organises capacity building programmes for communities. However, there is scope for further skill development particularly with respect to language and other etiquettes. With proper road connectivity, parking and other facilities for tourists the area can attract national and international tourists. The land regulation in Meghalaya also poses some challenges as there is very limited common land available with the

## Dawki-Jaflong: Recommendations

- The Ministry of Human Resource Development (HRD) and Tourism Department have to be actively involved at the community and village-level and put up facilities for training the concerned local youths, communities, women welfare trusts etc.
- To ensure that necessary training and skill development is imparted to all field level participants, the HRD has to engage civil societies and non-governmental organisations so that all communities, women SHGs and villagers can take benefit of these interventions.
- The local government bodies need to take interest in developing the areas tourist-friendly and attractive. The local administration also need to ensure safety and security of the tourist and deploy volunteers to supervise

Committee. The opportunities created by stone crushing industry have led to indiscriminate extraction of boulders from Piang River using sucking machines. This has caused detrimental effect on river health.

Proper regulatory mechanism and its enforcement is imperative to restrict the extensive underwater mining activities taking place at Jafiong (Umngot-Piang river) hardly 2km downstream of the international border. Since several thousands of people's livelihoods are dependent on these activities, it is vital to engage them in alternate

livelihood opportunities, of which tourism could be a promising one.

Promoting riverine tourism in the border town of Dawki and Shnonpdeng would also attract tourists from Bangladesh. On improving the physical infrastructural facilities at Dawki-Tamabil Custom/Immigration stations and with tourism promotion packages, the influx of tourists from Bangladesh is expected to increase thereby benefitting the local communities.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> [www.cuts-citee.org/IW/pdf/Study\\_Report\\_Boating\\_towards\\_inclusivity\\_and\\_also\\_See\\_http://www.cuts-citee.org/IW/IW-phase2.htm](http://www.cuts-citee.org/IW/pdf/Study_Report_Boating_towards_inclusivity_and_also_See_http://www.cuts-citee.org/IW/IW-phase2.htm)
- <sup>2</sup> A kayak is a low-to-the-water, canoe-like boat in which the paddler sits facing forward, legs in front, using a double-bladed paddle to pull front-to-back on one side and then the other in rotation.
- <sup>3</sup> Snorkeling is the practice of swimming on or through a body of water while equipped with a diving mask, a shaped breathing tube called a snorkel, and usually swimfins.

*This Policy Brief is based on major findings of a study entitled 'Promoting River Tourism and Cross Border Navigation in Meghna Basin'. More details are available at: [www.cuts-citee.org/IW/](http://www.cuts-citee.org/IW/)*

*This work was carried out as part of the Transboundary Rivers of South Asia (TROSA, 2017-2021) – a regional water governance programme supporting poverty reduction initiatives in the river basins of Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) and Salween. The programme is implemented by Oxfam and partners in Nepal, India, Bangladesh and Myanmar and funded by the Government of Sweden. Views expressed in this publication are those of the author/s and do not represent that of Oxfam or, Government of Sweden.*



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