



PROMOTING NAVIGATIONAL USAGE OF INLAND WATERWAYS IN BANGLADESH: POVERTY, LIVELIHOOD, GENDER AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

In terms of intra-regional trade and investment BBIN sub-region appears to be lagging way behind the global trend. New hopes about regional trade has emerged as BBIN governments are now emphasizing on trade facilitation through bilateral and multilateral agreements. Major positive changes are expected as both government and non-government stakeholders are working hard to facilitate inter-country trade through land and waterways.

Livelihood, culture and civilization of this sub-region has an intrinsic relationship with the GBM river basin. Yet waterways connectivity situation has deteriorated over the years due to deterioration of the rivers as well as due to political reasons. Government of Bangladesh has put renewed emphasis on developing Internal Waterways (IWs) in its Seventh Five Year Plan, and aims to increase the length of navigable waterways within the country from 4,000 km to 5,750 km by 2021. It has to be noted that promoting navigational usage of IWs is not just about new construction projects solely focused on trade facilitation. Poverty, livelihood, gender and environmental concerns have to be built-in to any IW development plan.

IW Project and the Country Diagnostic Report

The project titled “Expanding Tradable Benefits of Trans-Boundary Water: Promoting Navigational Usage of Inland Waterways in Ganga and Brahmatara Basin” (IW Project) intends to contribute to improving institutions for the governance of inland waterways in the BBIN sub-region. To attain this goal, the project has attempted to create an alternative policy discourse for enabling reform measures between policy makers, civil society and communities. With a view to document the existing policy discourse as well as the perception of different stakeholders regarding use of IWs for transboundary trade- a country diagnostic study has been conducted. The study has revealed numerous poverty, livelihood, gender and environment related concerns of stakeholders .

Bangladesh Country Diagnostic Study

IW hubs covered

- ✓ Shivalaya, Manikganj
- ✓ Ashuganj, Brahmanbaria
- ✓ Chandpur Sadar, Chandpur

Stakeholders Engaged

Govt. Officials, UP Personnel, Fishermen, Ferry Operators, River Port Authority, Vessel Owner, Freight Handler, Cargo Company.



Existing Policy Discourse

In general the policy discourse in Bangladesh regarding utilization of IWs lacks focus on lives and livelihoods of the people living by the river. Here major Acts, Ordinances and Orders currently in place and the identified gaps are shown.

Acts/Ordinances/Orders	Issues
National River Protection Commission Act, 2013	Lack of cooperation and coordination among the different bodies related to IWs, namely- BIWTA, DoE, Water Development Board, Dept. of Fisheries, Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Shipping etc.
Inland Water Transport Authority Ordinance, 1958	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possible damage to smaller vessels from collision with larger vessels not addressed adequately. • Inadequate facilities for women passengers.
Bangladesh Inland Transport Corporation Order, 1972	Absence of proper provision to get compensation from oil carrying vessels in case of leakage due to accidents.
Fisheries (Protection) Ordinance, 1959	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fishing community is against licensing requirements (for fishing). • However, over exploitation is occurring due to lax implementation of licensing requirements.
Pilotage Ordinance, 1960	Provision of operating passenger vessels with masters instead of trained pilot should be revoked. However, there is lack of training facilities for pilots.
Bangladesh Water Act, 2013	Damage to cage fish farming due to increased river traffic not adequately considered.
Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act, 1995	Restrictions/regulations regarding vessels causing damage to environment not being implemented properly. Lack of resources as well as lack of coordination are the factors working behind.



Stakeholder Perception

Stakeholders (sector experts, service providers and community) have been engaged to comprehend their concerns regarding scope and possible implications of expanding trans-boundary trade through IW in Bangladesh. Following are the key concerns that came through the national and sub-national level consultations.

(i) Navigability & River Dredging

Maintaining navigability of the routs (especially during the dry seasons) is a major challenge faced by the respective authorities. Siltation and river erosion also pose threats. While the government has recently initiated massive country wide dredging initiative, there remains concerns about pace of implementation of the projects. Stakeholders have expressed need for improved and sustainable solutions to the navigability problem. There is also lack of logistics and capacity of the project implementing authority.

Key Concerns

- *Maintaining navigability (siltation, river erosion).*
- *Livelihood of fishing community and Char people*
- *Creating IGAs for local people*
- *Addressing gender dimensions*
- *Increased pressure on rivers due to trans-boundary trade*
- *Slow pace in implementing policies*
- *Promoting local MSMEs*
- *Promoting tourism*

(ii) Concerns about the Fishing Community

Over the years fish availability has decreased. While some perceive increased river traffic to be for this decrease, others opine that fish availability can be maintained despite increased river traffic if the rivers and canals remain deep enough. However, siltation remains as a major challenge in this regard. Stakeholders demand that livelihood concerns

of the fishing community have to be incorporated into IW development policies. Security of the fishermen as well as rent seeking behavior of the local elites are other critical concerns here.

(iii) IGAs for Local People

There is a general perception that trans-boundary trade through IWs will create new IGAs for local people. However, lack of skill among the local people may become a critical challenge to overcome. Trans-boundary trade will definitely bring further institutionalization and the local community need preparation and support to adapt. For example, international vessels coming to local ports will definitely create greater need for support services, but without access to finance the local community will not be able to tap that opportunity.

(iv) Gender Concerns

There is little participation of women in IGAs related to IWs in Bangladesh. Very few are found to be providing informal support services (e.g. roadside food stalls for low-income customers). While gender concerns are prioritized in national policies, in practice there is not adequate reflection of those. However, there has been some recent developments, for example breast feeding compartments in new passenger vessels, separate waiting rooms for women at the ports. Stakeholders have recommended that instead of addressing gender dimensions after developing infrastructure and



other facilities, implementors should incorporate these into their plans from the very beginning.

(v) Environmental Concerns

Stakeholders have been found to be concerned about potential deterioration of river conditions due to increased traffic (once there is increased trans-boundary trade through IWs). Increased use of IW may induce development of industrial infrastructure along the river. Those in turn may cause serious harm to the rivers. Increased number of larger vessels plying on the river may result in increased river erosion. Special emphasis on protecting the Hilsa sanctuary which is close to the IW hub at Chandpur has been recommended by many.

(vi) Other Issues

While people generally welcome developing the port facilities, delay in implementation of port development/expansion projects sometimes affect them adversely. For example, it has been over 7 years since the government circulated its intention to expand the port at Ashuganj in Brahmanbaria district. But till date no land has been acquired. But people living in that area have not been developing their establishments (houses, shops, mills etc.) as they presumed the government will be acquiring their land soon.

Some have alleged that land value has decreased in the area due to this delay in implementing the policy decision.

To facilitate trans-boundary trade IWs are to be improved significantly. It has been recommended that once the IWs are improved those may also be utilized in promoting local MSMEs (because there will be improved access to the market place and new customers). Similarly, improved connectivity through IW will also create scope for promotion of tourism via IWs and trans-boundary passenger movement.

Remarks

Increasing trans-boundary trade through IWs will surely contribute towards achieving macro-economic objectives of Bangladesh as an economy. However, to ensure that the poor and marginal communities living along the rivers benefit equally, their concerns need to be incorporated in the overall development plans. At the same time, sustainability concerns also need to be properly emphasized so that benefits of IW-based trade remain significantly higher than the costs.

The project 'Expanding tradable benefits of trans-boundary water: Promoting navigational usage of inland waterways in Ganga and Brahmaputra basins' is being implemented by CUTS International and its strategic partners - Royal Society for Protection of Nature (RSPN), South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment (SAWTEE) and Unnayan Shamannay. More details are available here <http://www.cuts-citee.org/IW/>

Unnayan Shamannay, a leading non-profit research organization from Bangladesh, has been responsible for implementing the project activities in Bangladesh. Details about Unnayan Shamannay are available here <http://www.usshamunnaybd.org/>