

The Bangladesh country level dialogue meeting for improved water governance of Brahmaputra River

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Dhaka, Bangladesh

The Bangladesh country level dialogue meeting for improved water governance of Brahmaputra River was jointly organized by the Institute of Water and Flood Management, BUET and South Asia Consortium for Interdisciplinary Water Resources Studies, India on 21 August 2013 at Institute of Water and Flood Management, BUET. The goal of the meeting was to create an enabling environment to discuss on issues, which are in the interest of the co-management of the Brahmaputra River by Bangladesh and India and are critical to the future of Brahmaputra River's water resources, people and ecosystems dependent on them. The program brought together the researchers, academicians, water professionals, representatives from NGOs and CSOs and representatives from the media to discuss Brahmaputra-related dialogues or policy for co-management of the river and to exchange ideas for future probable platform of mutual interactions. The program was funded by Asia Foundation, New Delhi under the project titled "Transnational Policy Dialogue for Improved Water Governance of Brahmaputra River". The partner institutions of this project are: the South Asian Consortium for Interdisciplinary Water Resources Studies (SaciWATERS) - India, and Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati (IITG) and Institute of Water and Flood Management, BUET. A similar country level meeting is planned in India, followed by a joint dialogue of Bangladeshi and Indian water professionals working on Brahmaputra River to discuss probable platform for future interactions. The ultimate goal is to provide space to influence policies for joint management of Brahmaputra River by co-riparian countries in track three diplomacy format.

The program started with the Introduction of meeting purpose by Professor Mashfiqus Salehin, IWFM, BUET and Dr. Anjal Prakash, SaciWATERS, India and opened with a Keynote presentation, titled "Is there light at the end of tunnel: Basin approach in management of the Brahmaputra?" by Professor Ainun Nishat, Vice Chancellor, BRAC University, Dhaka. Professor Nishat said that he sees faint traces of a bright light at the end the tunnel called - Bangladesh-India relationship. He welcomed the recent multi-lateral initiatives between India-Bhutan-Bangladesh and India-Nepal-Bangladesh dialogues that gives added dimensions of present relationships. He stressed the need for a clear institutional mechanism encompassing technical, professional and political bodies that will inform the dialogues. Ambassador C.M. Shafi Sami, former Adviser to the Caretaker Government & former Foreign Secretary, was present in the inaugural session as the Chief Guest. Supporting the idea for the co-management of Brahmaputra River, he reiterated the need for water sharing arrangements based on basin-wide assessment of total water needs and not on the current practice based on water available at the border. He highlighted the importance of

having a shared vision among the co-riparian countries and stressed the need for strengthening the Joint Rivers Commission for an integrated basin commission. Ambassador Humayun Kabir, Vice President, Bangladesh Enterprise Institute emphasized on the fact that Bangladesh and India relationships followed an approach of positional bargaining where based on the bargaining power, one party wins and other loses. 'We need to move away from this approach and look forward to a win all approach' said Humayun Kabir. Basin wide co-management of Brahmaputra River has the capability of making all parties win. Speaking at the session, Dr. Mihir Kanti Majumder, Former Secretary Ministry of Environment and Forests & Dialogue Adviser, IUCN Bangladesh shared the present IUCN project wherein joint research and dialogues are undertaken to create enabling environment for better management of Brahmaputra River.

The meeting was chaired by Professor Md. Munsur Rahman, Director, IWFM. Two sessions spread across the day experienced distinguished speakers: Md. Jahid Hossain Jahangir, Executive Engineer, Joint Rivers Commission Bangladesh; Mr. Mostafa Kamal Majumder, Editor, Green Watch Dhaka; Professor Rezaur Rahman, IWFM, BUET; Mr. Malik Abdullah Fida Khan, Director, Climate Change Study Division, CEGIS, Dhaka.

Speaking at the session, Dr. Anjal Prakash of SaciWATERs, India emphasized that skills other than technical engineering expertise are required to facilitate and enable the trans-boundary water negotiation process. 'Diplomatic and negotiation skills are needed together with an understanding of the technicalities. Multi-track diplomacy often comes handy in complex negotiations between countries' said Dr. Prakash.

Professor Mashfiqus Salehin said that track I diplomatic efforts by the concerned governments have been made for a long time through the Joint River Commission between Bangladesh and India. Track II diplomatic efforts have also been pursued to enhance the effectiveness of the Track I efforts. 'With growing complexities of water sharing issues and because of the highly politicized nature of discussions between the co-riparian countries, it seems that a Track III diplomacy approach is warranted, in which dialogue and advocacy efforts will be led by the civil society organizations, with the aim to stimulate progress at more formal levels (Track I and Track II)' said Prof Salehin. Speaking at the session Prof. M S Khan said that this dialogue approach will result in an open environment that enables listening to each other and starting to understand each other's view points, not hampered by political or other power oriented position. The participants lauded the positive environment created by IWFM, BUET in initiating a transnational dialogue and felt that these processes will go a long way in having more trust and better outcomes for the benefit of the Brahmaputra River and people whose livelihood and basic survival is dependent on co-management of the river.