



Transnational Policy Dialogue for Improved Water Governance of Brahmaputra River

**Consolidated Report
Phase I
April 2013 - February 2014**

SaciWATERS

SOUTH ASIA CONSORTIUM FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY
WATER RESOURCES STUDIES

Project Background

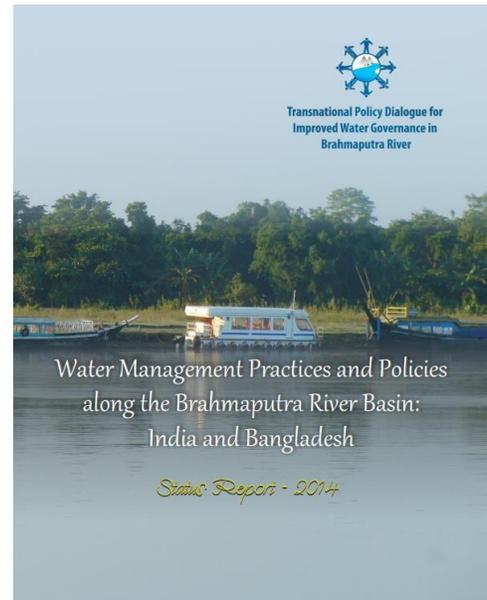
'Transnational Policy Dialogue for Improved Water Governance of Brahmaputra River' is an initiative by South Asia Consortium for Interdisciplinary Water Resources Studies (SaciWATERS), in association with Institute of Water and Flood Management (IWFM), Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), Bangladesh, and Indian Institute of Technology-Guwahati (IITG). Our aim is to influence policies for co- management of Brahmaputra River by co-riparian countries. In order to do this, the project initiated collective knowledge building and bilateral dialogue processes across highly interdisciplinary group of experts and policy makers from India and Bangladesh at track three diplomacy format. This is the final narrative report on the activities funded by a grant from The Asia Foundation, India. The activities carried out during 9 months of the project period can be grouped into four main components

1. Creating a data base of civil society organizations/individuals working on water management of Brahmaputra River in Bangladesh and India and Mapping of current knowledge base on Brahmaputra River through desk study
2. Having country specific meetings for dialogue with specific areas of interest such as water, food, climate change etc
3. To have joint dialogue of Bangladeshi and Indian Water professionals working on Brahmaputra River and discuss probable platform for future interactions
4. Undertake short field work in the Brahmaputra river basin from both Bangladeshi and Indian side and write about the experience in blogs of Asia Foundation\SaciWATERS and\or in the newspaper.

Implementation

Brahmaputra Status Report:

The project started with creating the current knowledge base on Brahmaputra River. A status report titled **“Water Management Practices and Policies along the Brahmaputra River Basin: India and Bangladesh”** has been prepared based on synthesis of findings drawn from the dialogue meetings and the wide body of literature on physical, economic, political and cultural trajectories of Brahmaputra. The challenges that we faced while preparing this report is that scientific evidence and facts on Brahmaputra basin are arguably limited. The basin has hardly been considered as a single unit taking the upstream and downstream trajectories. There is a great dearth of data on flow, sediment transport and budget, nutrient transport, river ecology and river based livelihoods.



The report surfaced some of the crucial issues plaguing the governance and management of the basin, these are

- € Development and management of this unique basin is subjected to various geo-political constraints. The innumerable channels and tributaries, varied topographical and climatic regimes, and multiple uses of shared water across countries unequal in size and power dynamics have made a straightforward management strategy seemingly impossible.
- € The water engineering adopted so far is ad hoc and piece-meal and has largely taken a partial view of the river management. Such structural measures have essentially failed to save the life of the river and the millions intricately depending on it.
- € The concerns and voices of legitimate stakeholders as well as powerful actors have largely been neglected in dialogues, forums or any other platform of negotiation.
- € The dialogues and negotiations across co-riparian countries till date are bilateral in nature. Negotiations are largely formed by virtue of positional bargaining.

- € The roles of NGOs and civil society are often feeble, with limited opportunities for local perspectives and knowledge to trickle up, to influence a formal negotiation process

The report made some important suggestions towards effective and sustainable co-management of the basin, these are:

1. Co-management strategies should be based on the principle of regional cooperation comprising structural and non-structural measures.
2. It is important to take a basin-wide hydro-ecological approach in which the concerns and opportunities of the upstream and downstream can be thoroughly integrated.
3. There should be a knowledge-management hub and data-sharing portal (like the Wikipedia / Brahmaputra Portal) that can be shared by the co-riparian countries and can be accessed by the common public and researchers as well.
4. Research and dialogue initiatives in the co-management of the Brahmaputra River should be gender-sensitive. It is imperative to incorporate the perspectives of women professionals, bureaucrats, media personnel, academicians, community representatives, etc., while designing any sharing mechanism.
5. The dialogue should relinquish bilateralism and head toward a multilateral format. Utmost emphasis should be given to both inter-state and inter-country dialogue based on the principle of equitable and reasonable utilization; obligation not to cause significant harm; and principles of cooperation, information exchange, notification, consultation and peaceful settlement of disputes.
6. Most importantly, a strong political will at state and national levels needs to be developed, with a sustained effort to convert the water resources of the region into a force for sustainable development through an integrated, multi-disciplinary approach including technology as well as social, economic and environmental factors.

Country level consultation meetings:

Two country level multi-stakeholder consultation meetings, one in Dhaka (Bangladesh) and other one in Guwahati (India) were organized on August 21, 2013 and September 10, 2013 respectively. These country level dialogue meetings brought together researchers, academicians, water professionals, representatives from NGOs and CSOs, and media to deliberate on policy issues related to co-management of the Brahmaputra and to exchange

ideas regarding probable platform of mutual interactions in the future. The Bangladesh country level dialogue meeting was jointly organized by IWFM, and SaciWATERS at BUET.

The Dhaka meeting

August 21, 2013

It was attended by 25 Bangladeshi participants from government and non-government sectors. However, the busy schedules of government officials make it difficult for us to set up the meeting date. There were also internal disturbances in Bangladesh with series of strikes and protests posing difficulty in fixing up the venue and date of meeting. This one day meeting was divided into six technical sessions.

The participants stressed the need for a basin wide approach where the management should base on 'win all principal', rather than positional bargaining. In the key note presentation "*Is there light at the end of tunnel: Basin approach in management of the Brahmaputra?*" by Professor Ainun Nishat, Vice Chancellor, BRAC University, Dhaka 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 give 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. 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.

Feedback:

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. They suggested that media coverage both print and electronic media is extremely important to create sensitization on this critical issue.

The Guwahati meeting 10th September, 2013

It was preceded in a similar fashion like Dhaka. The meeting was organised by IITG in coordination with SaciWATERS and was attended by 30 stakeholders from Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Shillong. While setting the tone of the meeting Dr. Anjal Prakash of SaciWATERS mentioned that there is lack of bilateral/multilateral agreements and treaties between Bangladesh and India and that none of the riparian countries signed the UN Water Convention 1997, indicating governments' apathy in understanding the fragility of the system. Widespread corruption, lack of transparency in fund management, and

technological bias are some of the key features of the Indo-Bangladesh relations with respect to the river. The modification of river flow due to barrages, sluice gates and water retention structures are affecting connectivity and river depth on both sides of the border.

He stressed that this dialogue will help in building confidence that collaboration between Bangladesh and India is possible.

Further deliberation surfaced complex management trajectories in Indian part of the basin. Speaking on the ‘Policy aspects and institutional processes towards multi-stakeholder participation and dialogue’, Prof. Dulal Goswami of Guwahati University stressed on sharing of scientific data between the two countries. He pointed out that management of Brahmaputra in India is complicated with the presence of various agencies including state, central government, and autonomous institutions.



They have arguably failed to bring any satisfactory results. Existing institutional arrangements including the Brahmaputra Board are inappropriate and unable to provide an integrated and coherent approach to manage the basin’s diverse needs. So, each State continues to pursue its own development agenda. Moreover, policies have a narrowly sectoral focus, looking exclusively at flood control, irrigation or hydro-development, without considering the close linkages and potential overlapping benefits. Comprehensive research to understand the dynamic nature of the river is lacking.

Professor Chandan Mahanta IITG said that “we have enough knowledge on how we should manage the Brahmaputra River. We have to focus on how we should do it. Brahmaputra has a drainage pattern that runs in diametrically opposite directions and drains in diverse environments. No other river bank erosion hazard is as critical as it is for Brahmaputra. Despite being water rich, the average per capita income in Brahmaputra flood plains is 30 percent lower than national Indian average.

Dr. Sanjeeb Kakoty of IIM Shillong said that “in today’s time, we live in a globalised ecology where human beings are an integral part of water ways. Ecological citizens can transcend political boundaries and when we can talk of a globalised economy, why can’t we talk of globalised ecology”. This change of perspective will help in saving the river for future generations. Dr. Homen Thangiam from Shillong gave a historical perspective on the Brahmaputra River. He said that in 1977, there was a plan to link Brahmaputra with Ganges so as to feed the rich peasants in main-land India. Off late, the priority has been shifted to

hydro-electricity. Poor are not being benefited from these developments. Mr. A K Mitra, Chairman Technical Advisory Committee, Water Resources, Govt of Assam shared his experience of the Mekong River Commission visit. He said that the countries who are part of the commission took 38 years to come together and form an agreement for sharing water.

The commission has developed a mechanism which could be replicated in the Brahmaputra region also. Apart from trans-boundary dialogues, Mr. Mitra stressed on the need for inter-state dialogue for the management of the river. Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim and West Bengal apart from Assam need to come together to understand the river and find ways to co-manage it.

Prof Abu Nasar Saied Ahmed, Retired Professor, Dibrugarh University, Assam stressed that there are six areas of cooperation - water transport, irrigation, fish production, tourism, power generation and sand collection (river survey to find out where sand can be collected sustainably from). NGOs are doing good work but they are very few in numbers and microscopic in their approach. "How much influence they have on the state is a question that still begs answers", he said. Mr. Raju Mimi, of Arunachal Pradesh said that the civil society in Arunachal Pradesh (AP) is vibrant. However, the issue faced by AP at the moment is rampant projects for harnessing hydro power without looking at the fragility of the mountain ecosystem. There is no common platform in AP that discusses these issues without being branded as being Maoist. There is a need to understand these developments in the context of sustainability of the river ecosystem.

Presenting the case of Majuli River Island on the banks of Brahmaputra, Mr. Mitul Baruah of Syracuse University dwelled on the floods and riverbank erosion in Majuli. He discussed the role of the Indian State in the production of hazard-scapes in Majuli and other such geographies, and explained how people are responding to the changes. He stressed that the techno-natural interventions are reproducing the disasters in terms of drying up of wet lands and increasing vulnerabilities of the people. Mr. Ratnadeep Chowdhury of Tehelka said that north-east will be moving in a situation where there would be violence over the control of resources if there is business-as-usual approach to management of the Brahmaputra River. He stressed that the major issues around the river are partial and uncertain accessibility of water resource database resulting in lack of adequate scientific planning, water resource related institutional arrangements that are bureaucratically complex and that most of the projects for management of the river are planned nationally without any consultation with co-riparian states within India. There is no room for inter-state dialogue for the joint management of the river, and thus perhaps difficult to create space for joint dialogue with Bangladesh.

Feedback:

Like Bangladesh we received positive feedback from the participants to initiate such kind of dialogue process on one of the most neglected issue of managing Brahmaputra. Participants in general agreed that such platform provided by the project has been useful in building confidence between the two countries and therefore must continue for future. The meeting produced number of suggestions to make the co-management more effective and dialogue more participatory:

1. Developing State Water Policy for Assam by taking Arunachal Pradesh into confidence.
2. Joint meeting of civil society organisations in China, India and Bangladesh to discuss the co-management of the river
3. Integrated approach for the management of the river that takes a multi-stakeholder view while designing and implementing any program
4. Joint techno-social umbrella organization spread between Bangladesh and India to manage the river.
5. watershed as a unit for planning and management

India-Bangladesh Joint Dialogue meeting:

The Bangladesh-India joint dialogue meeting, the final in the series, was organized to bring representatives from India and Bangladesh on a single platform for mutual interaction and deliberation on issues of common interest. The meeting was organized by the IWFM, BUET, Bangladesh, in partnership with SaciWATERS, India and IITG, India on 20th of March at Hotel



Rigs Inn in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The goal of this joint dialogue meeting was threefold; first, to reflect on to the commonalities of opportunities and challenges that emerged from the country level meetings. Second, to create an excellent learning opportunity, as well as a venue for exchange of ideas among a highly interdisciplinary group of experts and policy makers from India and Bangladesh to deliberate and

exchange thoughts on issues related to hydro-politics and diplomacy, socio-economic

dynamism, livelihood sustenance, and the role of multilateral dialogue in effective co-management of the Brahmaputra basin and finally, to carve out a road map for possible way forward of this initiative. Total 20 participants from India and Bangladesh participated in the meeting.

Some of the critical issues deliberated upon are:

(i) Importance of discussing on 'co-management of Brahmaputra river' alone

The Brahmaputra dialogue project always advocated for co-management rather than joint management. Taking this point Dr. A.T.M. Shamsul Huda, Former Secretary, Ministry of Water Resources, Bangladesh, and Former Chief Election Commissioner mentioned that 'co-management' is quite different from 'joint management', wherein in the later case each government works within its own official framework. But in 'co-management' stakeholders including government, researchers, academicians, activists, media and community come together as a single body to manage the entity. This in turn needs institutional transformation at a regional scale. He expressed his delightfulness to see exclusive dialogue on Brahmaputra River. He commented that most of the attention till now has gone to Ganga basin while very little has been researched on Brahmaputra basin alone. He expressed his happiness to be able to join the dialogue that talks about not joint management but co- management of one of the most dynamic rivers of the world.

(ii) Importance of dialogue process as one of the best co- management practices

The participants stressed the importance of dialogue process in regional cooperation. Eminent speakers like Ambassador Humayun Kabir, Vice-President, Bangladesh Enterprise Institute, Prof Chandan Mahanta IITG, Dr. A.T.M. Shamsul Huda, Former Secretary, Ministry of Water Resources, Bangladesh, and Former Chief Election Commissioner congratulated IWFM, SaciWATERS AND IITG for bringing people across the borders, providing them with space to discuss issues of utmost importance. Ambassador Humayun Kabir commented that such kind of dialogue is one of the best practices that can lead the pathway to multilateral advocacy. He stressed the need to include water as an essential part of various regional and economic cooperation forum like BICM, Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) etc. He also highlighted the importance of disaster management and the scope of cooperation in this arena. He commented that such cooperation can go beyond political considerations.

However the question remains “*whether informing policy and bring institutional transformation through dialogue processes is too optimistic?*” To which Dr. Huda commented that any kind of policy change is a time consuming affair. Several development initiatives happening at the smaller scale can act as a strong stimulus to bring about long term policy

change. He acknowledged that any river commission in the world has long standing history of negotiation. Thus dialogue takes time and it should not be considered as a project based activity only. The process should continue to create conditions and environment for bringing political personnel into the fold.

(iii) Importance of sharing information between India and Bangladesh

The significance of sharing of scientific data between the two countries has been repeatedly brought out in country specific as well as in this joint dialogue meeting. There is a great disconnect between scientific knowledge and managing water resources of Brahmaputra, which is intolerable. Dr. Maminul Haque Sarker, CEGIS, Dhaka, Mr. Md. Azizul Haque, Former Director General, Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB), and Former Chairman, Bangladesh National Committee of ICID (BANCID) stressed on the fact that lack of data and information sharing create mistrust and suspicion hampering the diplomatic relations between the countries. Sharing the story of arsenic contamination in Assam and West Bengal, Dr. Maminul Haque Sarker mentioned that it took fifteen years for Bangladesh to know about it. This created lot of resentment and mistrust among common Bangladeshis about India. Md. Azizul Haque mentioned that strategy should be planned on how effectively classified information can be accessed and shared peacefully between countries.

However what bothers is “*whether lack of information sharing by India can hamper the hydro-diplomacy between two countries?*” This question is extremely critical particularly in the context current regional cooperation initiatives made by both the countries. Mr. Kitriphar Tongper, Department of Political Science, Lady Keane College, Shillong, Meghalaya, India suggested is to create a knowledge management hub and data sharing portal (like that of Wikipedia / Brahmaputra Portal) that can be shared by the co-riparian countries and can be accessed by common public and the researchers. Efforts should be made to use social, electronic and print media to campaign multilateralism.

(iv) Research to be holistic and follow eco-hydrological approach

Discussants in multiple sessions commented on research gaps. Dr. Sanchita Baruah She talked about the need of eco-hydrological approach in the co-management of the Brahmaputra river basin. She mentioned that most of the study in the basin so far has taken hydrological perspective. This is significant to understand the flow regime, sediment discharge etc but does not explain health of the river and the marginal water bodies. She presented how the predator relationship is changing in the Brahmaputra system. She talked about the decreasing number of dolphins and increase in number of catfish in some of the pockets. Such anomaly is affecting the population of the fishes and fingerlings particularly that of Hilsa, one of the important export communities for both India and Bangladesh. There

is a need to understand these symbiotic relationships of the river biota in order to assess the livelihood sustenance of the millions depending on it. Similar thoughts were shared by Professor Rezaur Rahman of BUET.

“However the challenge is how to use the research to inform policies”? Although this is a common problem faced by researchers in development discourse Ambassador Humayun Kabir suggested to come up with very short key summary note that can be share with the policy makers Summary notes should also be shared with the sub-regional (multi-country) groups who have been working in different sectoral issues, including water and energy. Media and civil societies have also important roles to play in this regard, through sensitising bureaucrats and politicians and creating an enabling environment for acknowledging and deliberating upon inter-sectoral/ inter-ministerial coordination both in-country and between countries.

(v) Identifying stakeholders and the role of civil society organisations in co-management of the basin

It is imperative to identify and target appropriate stakeholder. It is extremely important to obtain their views as it is better way to mitigate differences and mistrust. It is apparent that there will be tradeoffs but it is extremely important to see who is getting what and how the voice of the voiceless is getting addressed. The entire panelist agreed that there is an increasing need to develop critical confidence building measure across stakeholders in both the countries. The ensuing discussions brought out many important issues. Ms. Farah Kabir, Country Director, ActionAid Bangladesh said that is crucial to bring gender perspective into the dialogue. She pointed very importantly that the role and the interest of the stakeholder changes over time, thus it is important to know who and at what level the dialogue is carried out. One of the participant mention that indentifying and understanding stakeholder is more of a psychological construct. It is important part of any kind of dialogue initiative to raise the consciousness of the stakeholders to act on issues. It has been largely agreed that any co-management needs to incorporate social and cultural dimensions of the upstream and downstream. Bringing weaker stakeholders needs innovative approach. Participants suggested that educating people about the right to river is important.

Developing human stories from both Bangladeshi and Indian side of the basin:

Short field work in the Majuli Island of Assam and Brahmaputra part of Bangladesh was carried out by SaciWATERS staff. The objective is to come out with two joint human interest articles with Indian and Bangladeshi colleagues



from Bangladeshi and Indian side of the River – the articles will highlight the need for better and co-management of the river.

Evaluation summary

Challenges and Way Forward:

The project has been in operation for last 9 months and we could able to meet the project objectives. However we also faced several challenges while executing the project. The challenge was to bring diverse stakeholders within each of these countries for consultations and dialogues. In case of India we particularly faced difficulty in bringing co-riparian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam together. Arunachal Pradesh has its agenda of developing run of the river dams while Assam is more interested in multi-purpose projects. This difference coupled up with internal factions, interests groups etc made dialogue a challenge. Since Brahmaputra has always been seen as a set of streams and channels the basin wide approach is missing in the planning and development agenda of all the co-basin states. The other states like Meghalaya, Nagaland and Sikkim sharing the basin were not clear about their role and responsibilities in the management and not very interested in participating in the meeting. They were all in the state of fury putting allegations on Arunachal and Assam for bad governance, scarcity and mis-management of the basin. The blame game has also been seen across state and non state actors.

Conducting the dialogue meeting in Bangladesh itself was a challenge because of the uncertain political situation of the country. To get people on board, to discuss on issues, not as crucial as the internal stability of the country, has remained a challenge. Besides, there are lot of mistrust and scepticism amongst Bangladeshis about India's approach of managing the river, particularly with respect of constructing dams.

However, the most important way forward that came out from the reviews, discussions and field visits is to continue this dialogue process more intensively. However such co-management practices can yield significant result if the dialogue is multilateral in nature. In case of Brahmaputra utmost emphasis should be given to both inter-state and inter-country dialogue facilitating horizontal and vertical interaction within and between riparian. Involvement of Bhutan and China in this kind of joint dialogue is extremely vital. This could be achieved through continuous sharing of declarations from dialogue meetings with them and leveraging the benefits of Information Technology (e.g. getting the mass media and social network involved). Most of the dialogues on joint management of the Brahmaputra basin are on track 3 diplomacy. Lifting the status of the joint dialogue from track 3 to track 2 or track 1-1/2 and bringing the government representatives ministers into the fold will be significant step towards multilateral advocacy. Because of so much diversity in people's views both within and across the basin countries, moving towards integrated co-management of Brahmaputra River will take time. This is where the importance of dialogue meeting lies; dialogue should lead to consultation level and then move towards an integrated co-basin management level. Based on what are already scientifically known about the Brahmaputra river, a "Brahmaputra protocol: do's and don'ts" should be developed, focusing on different sectoral issues in a holistic way. Research and dialogue initiatives in the co management of the Brahmaputra river

should be gender sensitive. It is imperative to integrate women professional, bureaucrats, media personnel, academicians, and community representatives etc to integrate their perspective while designing any sharing mechanism.

Media coverage, a very crucial strategy of creating sensitization on this issue has not been very successful the way we thought it would have been. Although media presence was there in all the meetings, the coverage was much less. This forces us to reflect on our strategy of bringing media into this whole dialogue process. We realized that bringing institutional transformation is a long-term goal and the path to change, perhaps, is most critical. Thus it is important to lay down short and medium term goals and this is what we thought of doing in the next phase of work.

