

*Building Capacity of Civil Society Organizations & Communities
for effective engagement in Transboundary decision-making
process of Brahmaputra River*



Write-shop Report
The Grand, New Delhi
22nd – 24th August, 2016

SUMMARY

Transboundary water bodies act as a source of potential growth and development by creating hydrological, social and economic dependency among the basin communities and the riparian nations at large. Therefore, the focus should be to create balance from potential conflict to cooperation. The Brahmaputra Basin, with its rich natural resources stands to benefit from developing trust and confidence among the four riparian nations of India, Bangladesh, Bhutan and China through efforts to strengthen multilateral policy dialogue.

Through this write-shop, which has been conducted as a part of the inception phase of this initiative, we attempted to identify the challenges that the CSOs generally face during a transboundary water dialogue and the important role that they will play in enabling community engagement for decision making process in a policy dialogue. The deliberation also recognized to make the current dialogue more participatory by emphasizing on the importance of engaging bureaucrats and government departments as well and to improve the communication lines between the CSOs and the government officials through a two way capacity building approach. Gender sensitized inclusive participation is also a necessity in these deliberations as historically TBW related issues has been considered as a masculine topic because of the technicalities that are involved and which ultimately deprives the 'weaker sex' from talking about their issues that they face during a disaster, and also their expectations from the river. Moreover, we need to develop trust and confidence among the state and non-state actors as the CSOs find it difficult to rely on the bureaucrats due to the lack of transparency in sharing information in the past and the bureaucrats does not accept the fact that CSOs can act as strategic knowledge partners with adequate capacity building being provided.

The write-shop also brought together the key partner CSOs from each riparian country to discuss about their work plan for the identified study sites in their respective countries. They also talked about the major issues that the communities living in the river floodplain encounter and the mitigation strategies that can be adapted for them. In the final session we identified the gaps in the activities that have been planned under the work plan, like knowledge and skill building sessions, and how we can improve upon it. Women's narrative regarding the river and disasters will also be documented as case studies from each nation, except for China (as they will be only knowledge partners), and finally one video will be compiled from these narratives. There will be two documentary videos from these case studies – one on women's account on the river and the other on the community's perspective towards the river.

The final achievement will be the sustenance of the dialogue on the river, even after the conclusion of this project. For that we have to demonstrate some success, be it in any sector (e.g. disaster management), if we want to sustain the interest of the stakeholders. The implementation phase will be crucial in terms of maintaining the interest, timeline and outcome of the activities by the partners, and for SaciWATERS to monitor and evaluate the progress of the project.

Enhancing Quality of Transnational Policy Dialogue on Improved Water Governance of Brahmaputra River, 22nd August 2016

Background:

The South Asia Consortium for Interdisciplinary Water Resources Studies (SaciWATERs) organised a write-shop on **“Building capacity of civil society organizations & communities for effective engagement in transboundary decision-making process of Brahmaputra River”** with the support of **The Asia Foundation** at the Grand, New Delhi from 22nd – 24th August, 2016. This joint consultation write-shop was organized to ensure that adequate capacity is built within relevant context, along with a thorough integration of multiple perspectives and understanding. The discourse highlighted the needs and challenges of the region and brought together multiple methods, tools and approaches that can address them. This deliberation also brought together a key Civil Society Organization (CSO) from each of the riparian countries (India, Bhutan, China and Bangladesh), except for China, along with experts from different regions to share ideas and enable cross-fertilization of efforts. The outcome of this discussion will feed into the final proposal and will influence the activities that are to be conducted at the different regions of the riparian nations.

The workshop sought to reflect on the following key questions:

- 1. Why is the role of civil society in transboundary water management limited? What are the challenges they face while trying to engage in transboundary decision-making?**
- 2. How can we make transboundary decision-making participatory, inclusive and gender sensitive? What role does the state need to play and how?**
- 3. Is it considered a challenge for state and non-state actors to sit together and discuss their concerns? Best practice across the world that can be used for Brahmaputra Basin?**

The write-shop was attended by track 3 and 2¹ diplomats. The first day consultation was attended by more than 18 other participants², including those from Bangladesh, Bhutan and participant from Wageningen University who joined over skype. The representation was from over 12 organisations, including academic institutions and Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and freelance documentary filmmaker.

Introduction:

Arundhati Deka, from SaciWATERs, welcomed the participants and gave a brief overview of the purpose of the consultation workshop. This was followed by Safa Fanaian of SaciWATERs giving an overview of the project proposal through a presentation on **“Enhancing Quality of Transnational Policy Dialogue on Improved Water Governance of Brahmaputra River”**. The presentation highlighted the identified key challenges and focused on the causes of conflicts at the transboundary level of the Brahmaputra Basin. SaciWATERs initiated this Transboundary Brahmaputra dialogue bilaterally between India and Bangladesh in 2013 and currently is in its third multilateral phase. The

¹ Track 1: High-level politician

Track 2: Influential academicians, bureaucrats

Track 3: Non-Governmental Organisations, academicians, civil society, and grass root level community

² Annexure 1 gives the list of the participants

overall challenges that we experienced across the four countries can be explained through the following five gaps:

1. Lack of awareness on rights and legalities related to TBW³ among CSOs and community leaders;
2. Knowledge asymmetry among stakeholders present at the dialogue and decision-making platforms.
3. Weak communication, advocacy and negotiation skills of CSOs and community leaders;
4. Incomplete information on standardized government policy and scientific terminologies/proceedings.
5. Low level of trust between state and non-state actors
6. Lack of plurality of views specifically from women and local communities who rely directly on the river.

These identified problems motivated us to involve the CSOs and local communities, and to bridge the gaps by building skill, knowledge and capacity of these CSOs and communities. We aspire to improve the quality and plurality of participation in joint dialogues with the decision makers and convert the distrust between the state and the non-state actors to a healthy trust. Though the dialogue is a slow and deliberate process, it is effective, consistent and progressive.

Session: Reflection & Discussion on the Key Questions and the Way Forward

- 1. Why is the role of civil society in transboundary water management limited? What are the challenges they face while trying to engage in transboundary decision-making?**

The Challenges: Civil society can be considered as an aggregation of non-governmental organizations and institutions that manifest interests and will of citizens. Based on SaciWATERS' past experience, it has become clear that the role of civil society in development and water governance is very significant. There is a growing recognition that CSO's are partners in the decision making process. However, it is indeed a challenge to make CSO's stand shoulder to shoulder with its partners (especially local government, public and private sector), in policy formulation, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. Also, sometimes the government overlooks the CSOs as a strategic and knowledge partner that can communicate efficiently with the local communities of a concerned region.



Community engagement is a very challenging task as the needs and requirements differ for every community in different regions. Therefore, CSOs can play an important role in identifying and segregating the issues and needs of these communities and bringing them into one platform. And this will have a greater impact rather than having small protests to bring out the issues, for each community. However there is a need to enhance their capacity to act as successful intermediaries between the government and the people by following the efficient approach.

³ TBW: Transboundary Water

Whose capacity needs to be built? While talking about capacity building, we need to emphasize on the importance of understanding the kind of capacity needed. There is a limited knowledge base regarding capacity building exercises, and what should be constituted under them. Bureaucrats sometimes tend to possess a certain attitude of superiority in position and knowledge. The CSOs and the communities at times are not well equipped enough with the concerned arguments related to TBW issues (be it technical, social, legal, environmental, etc.), for e.g. the climate change and its impacts. Therefore, ideally it should be a **two way capacity building** for both the CSOs and the bureaucrats, if we are anticipating better interaction among these groups. Media can also assist in capacity building by disseminating knowledge among the CSOs and community leaders, as engaging community for decision making process for policies is otherwise challenging.

Most of the decisions taken regarding TBW at the centre or state level are closed door decisions and the communities come to know about it only after a long time. Communities don't usually consider rivers as Transboundary River, but rather as a local reality that provides for their lives and livelihood. There is a need to reduce the time lag between information sharing by government authorities so as to increase transparency in sharing knowledge within the basin. CSOs can play an important role as a mediator in disseminating this knowledge to the communities. Also, we need to consider building consensus and informal friendships or conversations during these workshops and meetings among the various stakeholder groups, as sometime these closed door decision making might also depend on previous dialogues and friendships that have happened during previous meetings.



Trans-boundary perceptions: Further perceptions of the CSOs in different countries vary and it would be ultimately bent towards the national interest. So, it's important to identify common agenda among all the CSOs of the riparian nations, so that we can work towards one goal instead of dwelling on many different objectives. Since these organizations are considered to be representing interests of the local community, verifying the legitimacy of the CSOs of all the four nations and how they approach these communities is of utmost significance. There is a need to identify disconcert that exists between the concerned CSOs and the different communities of the particular region. The position of these different actors can be recognized through mapping or basic social network analysis.

"The ultimate goal is to ensure that the river gets harnessed by everyone who relies on it" – K R Viswanathan

Inclusivity: Sometimes we are not able to ascertain the position of the people of a community as they are not on the table of discussion or they are not a part of the deliberations that have taken place already or are taking place at the present. They tend to be marginalized because of the existing CSO structures, who themselves lack understanding of the issues and does not have fair knowledge regarding the river and the associated livelihood problems. It would be fruitful to interact with the communities directly to understand their vulnerabilities during a disaster and then capacitate the CSOs accordingly through trainings and workshops.

Another challenge is communicating with communities regarding the purpose of this dialogue and its significance. Developing simple tools to enhance the understanding of the interdependence and integration of the river is necessary for this dialogue. Community approach

“We should not just look into participants in the academia, but look at the ones who are in the academia and also active outside.” – Prof. Sanjoy Hazarika

programmes can be one of the tools and can be conducted for the same intention. There is a lot of suspicion among the people regarding CSOs and they are not given the same importance as a government body. Partnering with governmental agencies and winning the faith of the people is very vital in the dialogue process. With the confidence of the communities on the CSO's side, local people can be trained to map the study area and assist the CSOs in identifying local priorities and concerns which are more inclusive. Local media can play an important role in this case by supporting the locals for mapping the particular region.

Involving China in dialogues is also a debated issue. Chinese government has limited space when it comes to the CSOs and they are considered low in priority. The inclusion of China for any dialogue is then through the academia, which could then lead to involvement of the government. Currently it is said that the focus of Chinese legislature is more towards environmental pollution aspect. The TBW issue is low on the priority agenda of Mainland China. There is however space for involving few Chinese NGOs in deliberations.



2. How can we make transboundary decision-making participatory, inclusive and gender sensitive? What role does the state need to play and how?

Common interests: This process begins with bridging the gaps among the riparian nations for better cooperation. There is a need to identify common interests among these countries and define the do's and don't's within the river basin as a general outline. It will be a good starting point for mutual understanding and collaboration not only for the four nations but also among the riparian states. As within India several issues exist regarding the river (technical, social and political) between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.

As precedence, the communities who are dependent on the river entirely for their lives and livelihoods should be identified along with their issues. For this, mapping exercise can be conducted along the river to identify the livelihood activities that are affected by the river and in what way. This can lead to prioritization of issues to enable discussions about the tradeoffs and available alternatives for the problems. The participation of Panchayat Raj can also play a critical role in this regard as many communities in Arunachal Pradesh hold them in high regard. This will be beneficial in the sense that, it will be easier to communicate and convince the locals regarding any new policy through the panchayat.

Taking on this challenging task, SaciWATERS along with key CSOs from the region would work on these issues over the next year. SaciWATERS will coordinate with CSOs in India, Bangladesh and Bhutan. There is also an ongoing parallel process of identifying and coordinating with government authorities in the specific study sites, such as the Disaster Management Authority, for training and workshops. Community engagement for decision-making is vital as several concerns are not known

“Media should be approached with carefully so that the issue does not get sensationalized in a negative way”

– *Safa Fanaian*

or left out within decisions and policy processes. CSOs and media, including local media, play an important role in disseminating knowledge among the communities.

Media’s role: Media engagement is important for opinion building as varying outlooks enrich deliberations, but it should keep the interests of the people in mind. They are an important stakeholder for dialogues. However their capacity

also needs to be built to enable reporting to be more accountable. Though national media generally tend to have their own personal interests, it is essential to identify those with a more open perspective. Local media will also play a key role and is essential for local community engagement. If positive engagement is sought from media interaction, journalists with a developing mindset should be engaged. The **Third Pole** is also working on transboundary water issues and they can be roped in for this project for capacitating the local media.

Gender sensitized participation: The position of the various abovementioned actors can be recognized through mapping or basic social network analysis. To bring more inclusive ideas to the table, like increasing women participation in these kinds of dialogues, there is a need to scout and look for women who are holding important positions in the respective authorities or government departments. Gender based development should be prioritized and gender equality objectives should be included in the beginning of the project (at positions of decision making), focusing on - gender integration, gender awareness and gender sensitive activities. Again, gender does not only mean women. Both men and women’s participating in these dialogues should be given equal weightage. But generally the number of women participating is comparatively much less than men as the issues related to the river, like construction of dams and other technical aspects, have always been considered to be masculine subjects. Hence, emphasis on participation of women groups will be given priority.

For better facilitation of women contribution, pre-session can be organized with only women, before a meeting or workshop so as to capacitate them to be a part of these dialogues through training. There can also be provision for them to write down their views if they are unable to articulate them verbally. We have acknowledged one activity where SaciWATERs will include women’s narrative in the form of a video, regarding their



expectation from the river. Probably the narratives of the women groups and the communities can be collected before entering into the dialogue. It might give a better perspective towards the activities that are to be conducted as a part of this initiative. The purpose of this engagement is also to not only increase number of women in dialogue but also facilitate informed discussion.

Stakeholder engagement workshop conducted for socio-economic impact assessment for any study, usually have higher percentage of male participants. Often at times, men consider women’s’ opinion to be similar to their own and hence fail to involve women in deliberations. However these household women tend to have a more practical opinion regarding water issues because of the kind of domestic work they are associated with which men are not aware off. Therefore, transformation of defined gender roles should also be prioritized.

Effort should be also towards gender sensitized participation, be it men or women. Also, the women representation can be region specific, like in Bhutan, the gender issue isn't prominent. Therefore, we may not have to emphasize more on women participation in these regions. But as far as Bangladesh and India are concerned, they have a more vulnerable group of women, who are affected more especially during floods. Hence, the emphasis is more on their contribution to the dialogue.

3. Is it considered a challenge for state and non-state actors to sit together and discuss their concerns? Best practice across the world that can be used for Brahmaputra Basin?

Transparency: Transparency is considered to be missing between the state and non-state actors in the basin dialogue context, which is to be addressed through this project. As mentioned earlier, a two way capacity building for the CSOs and the bureaucrats is necessary for improved interaction and sharing of knowledge. We should focus more on communication and negotiation building and to manufacture trust between the state and non-state actors.

It is a necessity to develop a common language of communication between the people of the basin communities and the bureaucrats so that they are able to communicate and convey their message to each other more efficiently. It's not always unwillingness to negotiate, but lack of articulation and communication that limit participation of communities.

Learning from other basin studies: There is a need to look into other dialogues that have already taken place and review them for suggestions and inputs that can be inculcated in this initiative. Several TBW related work has been already conducted in Eastern Europe, especially for the Danube River. These reports can be referred to for ideas, before moving onto the next phase. We can also try to understand the MoUs⁴ of different treaties and they might assist us with our literature review. A thorough review of literature should be conducted not for just journals, but also for the society engagement activities that have happened already in the previous dialogues. Also, keeping on track with the ongoing dialogues is significant as the terms might be relevant for the context of this project as well.

“The aim is to make the track 2 participants think more from cooperation perspective and less from conflict perspective” –

Dr. Anamika Barua

Institutional structures: Instead of formulating a plan to introduce new systems or institutes, the local system present can be strengthened as some departments are already in place but are not functional. For example, in many areas of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, flood warning systems are there in place but not operational. We also need to understand the existing settings for communication between the state and non-state actors and the present scale of capacity, and how we can build on it. E.g. Bureaucrats in many countries do interact with the CSOs and it will be good to retrieve that knowledge and understand the kind of efficient system that they follow.

“Science based evidence should not be forgotten as it is the base for every study” –
Dr. Priyane Amerasinghe

Collaborative communication: We are looking at communication as one of the critical tools so that issues can be approached in a non-violent way, unlike the violent activism approach followed

⁴ MoU: Memorandum of Understanding

by some of the activists in the regions of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. Communication tools can be used as an entry point for initiating dialogues between the track 3 and track 2 delegates, and eventually with track 1 dignitaries depending on the success scale of the initiative. In fact, to reduce the power asymmetry, we can develop models like causal loop which will improve the line of communication among various groups. We have also acknowledged an activity within the project, wherein we will include women's narrative about their expectation from the river and the issues that they face during disasters. This will be documented from different regions and compiled into one video.

Media can play a positive role in this proposal as it will convey the perspectives of various groups into one platform. They can also be persuaded to follow a story telling (through pictures) kind of approach while highlighting the outcome of the project. Media and communication will also bring continuity to the dialogue and not just go into a pause phase after conducting each training workshop or even after the conclusion of this initiative.



Involving track 1: One on one communication with the parliamentarians is also being planned to keep in pace with the track 1 delegates. We can include one session where we involve, interact and share information with the parliamentarians regarding the dialogue. Different platforms that can be kept in mind for such interactions are – SAARC⁵ (Ecological Integrity), Asian Ministerial Conference and International River Symposium. For building a relationship between parliamentarians and CSOs or communities, probably we can look into the parliamentarians who are already working on this issue or are sympathetic towards it, for e.g., Mr. Kiren Rijiju, Union Minister of State for Home Affairs of India. From past experience we can consider that as individuals, some parliamentarians tend to be far more open and considerate than the bureaucrats.

The interests of the stakeholders involved should be sustained and not just end when the project concludes. It is important to demonstrate some success for that, but that is also complex because success is identified in a different way for various sectors (e.g. agriculture, fishery, etc.). Maybe we can identify one activity, probably disaster management, to keep a gauge of our progress and to maintain the continuity in the dialogue.



⁵ SAARC: South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation

Annexure 1

SI No.	Name	Designation and Organisation
1	Prof. Sanjoy Hazarika	The Managing Trustee, Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research (C-NES)
2	Dr. Shreshth Tayal	Fellow, The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI)
3	Dr. Jabin T Jacob	Assistant Director and Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies (ICS)
4	Dr. Priyanie Amerasinghe	Senior Researcher: Human and Environmental Health, International Water Management Institute (IWMI)
5	Mr. K R Viswanathan	International Climate Adaptation Specialist, Practical Action Consulting
6	Mr. ATM Zakir Hussain	Founder and Executive Director, Jagrata Juba Shangha (JJS)
7	Mr. Tsheten Dorji	Project Officer, Royal Society for Protection of Nature (RSPN)
8	Mr. Sonam Gyelpo	Thimphu-District Environment Officer, National Environment Commission Secretariat (NECS)
9	Mr. Jamyang Phuntsho	Sr. Forest Officer, Watershed Management Division (WMD), Bhutan
10	Dr. Anamika Barua	Assistant Professor, Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati (IITG)
11	Dr. Medha Bisht	Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations, South Asian University
12	Mr. Navarun Varma	Fellow, The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI)
13	Mr. Sumit Vij	PhD Researcher, Wageningen University
14	Mr. Chinmay Tripathy	Freelance Documentary Filmmaker
15	Mr. Rajeev Jha	Flood Resilience Specialist, Practical Action Consulting
16	Mr. Raj Kaithwar	Research Associate, South Asian University
17	Mr. Manik Boruah	Associate Programme Manager, Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research (C-NES)
Skype Participant		
18	Dr. Jeroen Warner	Associate Professor, Sociology of Development and Change, Wageningen University