

*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*  
22<sup>nd</sup> – 24<sup>th</sup> 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, 23<sup>rd</sup> & 24<sup>th</sup> 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 22<sup>nd</sup> – 24<sup>th</sup> 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.

### **Session I (23<sup>rd</sup> August, 2016): Overview of the project; Sharing of plans and contribution by the Partner Organizations (RSPN and JJS)**

The session began with Safa Fanaian of SaciWATERS giving a brief about the project and a quick recap of the previous sessions from 22<sup>nd</sup> August. She explained why we require transboundary cooperation to begin with, and the key issues and challenges that are associated with it. There is information and knowledge gap at the basin level and lack of political will for cooperation across state and national boundaries. It is possible that conflict and cooperation can co-exist in the same river basin, provided we follow the right approach of diplomacy. Rivers have a history of cooperation than war. Even in the Indus basin, there have been more instances of cooperation than war. Power asymmetry is also present in the sense that how can one government influence the decision making process of the other. The upstream riparian nation always has an upper hand when it comes to taking decisions regarding the river. Most of the negotiations so far have taken place bilaterally as bureaucratic negotiations, with no public involvement whatsoever. These negotiations are mostly state centric and the state’s nationalistic, hydro-political, dam building agendas tend to shape how these treaties or negotiations are made. However, we are looking at collaborative approach rather than adversarial approach. We are trying to build collaboration between government, communities, NGOs, and public welfare organizations through this dialogue.

Mr. Tsheten Dorji from Royal Society for Protection of Nature (RSPN), along with Mr. Sonam Gyelpo of National Environment Commission Secretariat and Mr. Jamyang Phuntsho of Watershed Management Division, shared their activity plan through a presentation based on the technical proposal of the project. The outcomes of this discussion have been listed below –

- Though Bhutan doesn’t have much expertise on transboundary water issues, but have been initiating various programmes regarding watershed management issues at grass-root level since 2013.
- Anticipating **National Partners** for this initiative have been identified as – National Environment Commission, Watershed Management Division, Department of Disaster

Management, Department of Hydromet Services, District Administrations Gewog Administrations (Project Area), and Communities (who are most vulnerable).

- Gender issues are said to be non-issue in Bhutan, so participation of women in various related issues is also higher. Even in case of women representation in various dialogue meetings, they will be available in the same bureaucratic position as men and can be approached for participation.



- Lower level of trust between state and non-state actors is also not really an issue in Bhutan. Though advocacy and negotiation might pose as a greater challenge between these actors.
- There is less number of CSOs who focus or initiate work on water related problems. Even The Water Act of Bhutan was enacted only in 2011 for better river basin management.
- The identified project sites initially were Punakha and Trongsa, but the proposed sites for implementation are Punakha and Wangdue Phodrang now. Punatangshu is the main tributary to the Brahmaputra. The location of Wangdue has been proposed due to the close proximity from Punakha. There is no point of picking up a region which is in some other corner. This will be more cost effective, although we might have to start from scratch at Wangdue, but again RSPN already has other ongoing projects in the region and have some available prospects.
- A map can be prepared to show the connectivity of study sites, and to demarcate the region of discharge.
- The main issues associated with GLOF<sup>1</sup>/flash floods are:
  - Submergence of agricultural land
  - Submergence of human settlement
  - Risk to human life
  - Affect on drinking water supply and irrigation channels
  - Damages to infrastructure
  - Waterborne diseases

One of the major impacts of GLOF/flash floods: **Loss of agriculture/livestock**. Flash floods are more common, while GLOF happened last in 1994.

- In Bhutan we will have street level or local level government representatives and block level representatives. We still need to identify the people or delegates that we want to engage with and why.
- Challenges that we might face during the project:
  - Lack of willingness to participate among the communities or community leaders
  - Unforeseen weather conditions and calamities

The measures that can be considered to overcome these challenges are – timely consultations with district level authorities and subsequent monitoring. It is also very important for the communities to

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<sup>1</sup> GLOF: Glacial Lake Outburst Flood

understand the gravity of the TBW issue if we want to sustain the interest of the participants. This sustained effort can be also taken into account and utilized in other similar efforts or projects as well.

- Apart from this write-shop, there can be a project inception phase meeting at the local level (need assessment for capacity building), which can be also in the form of skill building session. District level disaster management authority is already in place in Bhutan and we can try to organize the training sessions for the communities with their assistance. This effort can be continued even after the project gets over, to portray the sustenance of the initiative.
- For Bhutan, the field visit will begin probably from November, as October is the harvest season.

Mr. ATM Zakir from Bangladesh Jagrata Juba Shangha (JJS), shared their activity plan through a presentation based on the technical proposal of the project. The outcomes of this discussion have been listed below –

- In Bangladesh more than 30% of the population lives under the poverty line, and flood plays a major role in the devastation of land and property, Bangladesh being a downstream riparian nation.
- The regions identified for the project are –
  1. Jamalpur district: Sub-district – Islampur Upazila
  2. Sirajganj district: Sub-district – Kazipur Upazila



Both the identified sub-districts have very low literacy rate. The Kazipur sub-district is located very remotely, so the government workers don't even visit these areas. There are no employment opportunities in these regions, so the migration of men from these locations to the cities is relatively higher and therefore more number of women lives in these shores.

- The prominent issues identified for these regions are:
  - Frequent flooding
  - No access to flood resilient seeds
  - No state attention towards these places
  - Lack of knowledge about rights and legalities over the river
- Key community members and leaders have been identified from these districts, which includes women leaders/groups, NGOs, local journalists.
- In Bangladesh, government approval is always required for carrying out any kind of project or to receive funds from foreign agencies. A project proposal needs to be prepared for the NGO Affairs Bureau, and for which a commitment letter will be required from SaciWATERS. The time frame for the project will also be subjected to local conditions, such as harvest, weather and festive season. Keeping these things in mind, the field visit for Bangladesh can extend from November to February.

*General points for all the implementing partners from the riparian countries, gathered from the discussion:*

- The two day skill development training session will inculcate CSOs, communities and community level leaders, and probably journalists. The participants of this session should understand the context of the programme, as language tends to act as a barrier sometime. So, the material should be prepared accordingly by the resource person.



- A common framework of questions for all the countries can be developed for the purpose of video documentation. For the case studies compendium, even one from all the three countries (Bhutan, India and Bangladesh) will be great.
  - For the practical training session for disaster management, no money or funds are involved from the implementing partners' side as only the resource person will visit the respective country.
- One of the common ground in the three countries is – disaster related to transboundary, and the concerned authorities from all the countries are on board. The disaster management authorities in Bhutan have existing guidelines and contingency plans but we aren't sure if they also carry out training sessions for the local communities. We need to identify their existence for coordination.
  - In China, there are no communities living along the Yarlung Tsangpo River and therefore they won't have any capacity building workshop. But the partners, Yunnan University, will share knowledge on CSO capacity building experience from the Mekong river project. They will share their experiences with each country, which includes best practices perspective and identifying the concerned NGOs.
  - The Third Pole can also be contacted for the purpose of media involvement. Bhutan only has national media and they can be invited to cover the workshops. During the regional CSO meet, we can have a cross country media discussion. ICIMOD can also be a prospective partner for conducting trainings of the local media, as they are experienced with this kind of work. There will be a maximum number of 8 media lines from all the countries.

*Comments and suggestions for the video documentation:*

- For building the case studies compendium, we can start by identifying the target groups. The film can be on conflict and also on cooperation. The format and the language will be on the basis of the people involved from the community. The film will highlight the problem areas, communities and activities along the trans-boundary. The technical aspect of the film will include the facts and figures of the loss generated by the disasters.
- The existing conflict and the eventual need for a dialogue will be the main highlight of the documentary. The role of SaciWATERs can come in the end where we can talk about the interventions that will be carried out. The film can actually start with SaciWATERs, giving the organizations' perspective and then it can travel towards the journey of the implementing partner organizations.

- The stories from the trans-boundary will be on an emotional level. Also, we need to identify the right audience for this documentary, which might include concerned parliamentarians, bureaucrats, academicians and CSO representatives. The purpose will be also to highlight the issues and decisions that are being taken for this river by the outsiders or the government, without understanding the vulnerability aspect of the region, and how do they influence and sometime end up manipulating the people living in these regions.
- We can document the case studies at the community level interaction (skill, knowledge building sessions), and then sort out the ones that we want to include in the film.
- We can have two documentaries –
  1. Trans-boundary documentary on women narratives; and
  2. Trans-boundary documentary on the communities, which will include both men and women
- Even for Bhutan, though gender biasedness is not an issue, we can always talk about problems like sanitation and privacy, that women face during the time of calamities and men usually don't or it is comparatively less.
- We will focus more on India and Bangladesh, for the women narratives, as the issues are more prominent in these areas. We can also think of doing a comparative case study of these two countries with Bhutan, since supposedly the situation is a little better for women in Bhutan.
- In Bhutan, permission is required to shoot any kind of video narratives. The technical person or the filmmaker can be accompanied by the locals to make the process a little easier. Also, the video narrative in Bhutan can be only from the community perspective, which will include the women and their river narrative as well.
- The documentaries can be of 10-15 minutes. The one on community can be of 10 minutes and the women narratives can be of 7-8 minutes.

At the end of the session, the partners were requested to make a write up on the basis of the following questions:

1. Area to be covered. Why?
2. Key concerns and priorities of the areas.
3. Who will be involved in the planned training programmes?
4. When will they be held?
5. Challenges/risks – and how do we address them?
6. Indicators or milestones to measure progress?
7. Outcomes?

**Session II (24<sup>th</sup> August, 2016): Sharing of plans and contribution by the Partner Organization of C-NES; Brainstorming Session for the work-plan**

The representative from Centre for North-East Studies and Policy Research (C-NES), SaciWATERS' implanting partner in India, shared their activity plan through a presentation based on the technical proposal of the project. The outcomes of this discussion have been listed below –

- Regions and Communities identified (tentatively):

- i. Subansiri river (Lakhimpur district) - Gogamukh, Ghagar and Banpuroi Jamuguri. Targeted community - Mixed Assamese.
  - ii. Dihang (Siang), Dhemaji district - Upper Kobu. Targeted community - Mishing.
  - iii. Dibang, (Sadiya Sub-Division), Tinsukia district - Bura Buri Panchayat. Targeted community – Deori
- Issues identified for these regions:
    1. Erosion (due to floods) and fish production in Subansiri.
    2. Conflict between the Miri community of Arunachal Pradesh and Mishing community of Assam.
    2. Transportation issues
    3. Smuggling and elephant poaching
    4. Fish poisoning for mass selling (Dibrusoikha wetlands in Subansiri)
    5. Man – elephant conflict issue
  - Few key people in different regions, who are involved in community based work, have been identified for the study.
  - Possible risks & challenges identified for the study locations:
    - The regions identified to implement the project itself are a great challenge. Especially Upper Kobu (Dihang) and BuraBuri (Dibang) are remotely located and no road communication is there to reach those places.
    - Getting effective representatives from these areas are also a challenge, and local language & dialect (Mishing & Deori) might also create some issue during the training workshops.
    - Frequent Bandhs/strikes called by various organizations.
    - Natural disasters i.e. floods, erosion, storm etc.
    - Possible pressure from the Dam (Hydro Power) lobbies.
    - Local politics, especially on Dam issues.
    - Support from the govt. departments/ officials.

*Brainstorming session for the gaps in the activities, and the ways to address them –*

- **The groups that we are targeting:** We need to build the capacity of local NGOs, bureaucrats and the community leaders. Also it is important to build the capacity of the women facilitators.
- **Knowledge gaps that need to be addressed:** Making the targeted group aware about –
  - The responsible government authorities
  - Disasters (country specific)
  - Water flows (technical aspects)
  - Rights on the river (for the local communities and CSOs)
  - Government policies regarding the river
  - Reason for floods and mitigation initiatives
  - Data collection methods (for disasters)
  - Traditional knowledge practices (country specific)
  - Linkages between different government departments (and their mandates)
  - Environment laws and policy awareness (country specific)
  - Responsible authorities and their roles
  - Communication materials (like posters in Bhutan)

- Transboundary level understanding of the river

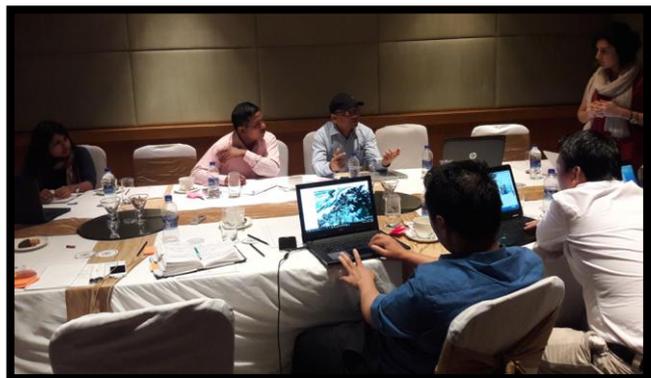
	<b>Bangladesh</b>	<b>India</b>	<b>Bhutan</b>
Language	Bangla	Assamese+ local language in Arunachal Pradesh	Bilingual

- **Skills that need to be developed for the targeted groups on communication (for the facilitators):**
  - Knowledge and its framing so that it is open for discussion, rather than being demanding
  - Advocacy - developing the skills of the concerned groups to engage with the communities effectively.
  - Leadership skills - how to present the issues to the concerned bureaucrats/policy makers effectively.
  - Commitment - to participate and also to disseminate information to the local communities in an effective way.
  - Contextualise - how to train the communities effectively (it would include both collection and sharing of information and tools used to carry out these activities.)
  - Negotiation/Resolution - through Dialogue building or consultation.
- **Narratives of Women – How to go about it:** Through initial interactions at different meetings (skill development, knowledge building, district level consultations) and followed with discussions on the ground. The themes that we want to capture in case studies are:
  1. Knowledge sharing on traditional practices
  2. Documenting the challenges faced by the women during disasters or otherwise
  3. Documenting best practices
  4. Issues on floods
    - What are their concerns,
    - Challenges (block level),
    - And, expectations.
- **District level meetings:**
  - Information sharing on policies and issues
  - Identifying and avoiding duplication
  - Strengthening of the existing institutions and meetings, such as -
    - Bangladesh – development meeting, DDMC<sup>2</sup> Regulatory, Upazila DMC<sup>3</sup>
    - Bhutan – Geowg disaster management committee meeting (if its formalized and still existing) and find out if any state level deliberations exist
    - Assam – present in all levels but strengthening and reactivation is required. It will help in identifying existing resources. Also, it will reduce the gap between district authorities and communities. The vulnerability aspect will be addressed.

<sup>2</sup> DDMC: District Disaster Management Committee

<sup>3</sup> DMC: Disaster Management Committee

- India and Bangladesh – Disaster management authorities will provide training to the women groups (ASDMA and Bangladesh Disaster Management Authority). Mandates are already in place, developed by the government.
  - Convergence of existing and new efforts
  - Enhancing the communication link between the communities and the responsible government departments
  - Assisting vulnerable locations to build the plans for disaster management
- **Monitoring:**
    - Plan and specific timeline has to be developed by SaciWATERS
    - Bi-monthly reporting - both ways: Partner institutions will be submitting a report to SaciWATERS (about the activities that have been carried out) and SaciWATERS will also submit a report to the partner institutions regarding the future activities.
    - Skype discussions/conference call (bi-monthly)
    - Partner visit- once in 6 months (mid-term evaluation)
    - A final regional level CSO meeting will be organised among the partners and other delegates
- **Risks Involved:**
    - Commitment or continuous participation of the targeted groups
    - Per-diem to people who are already committed/ involved in the project
    - Strikes and bandhs - especially in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh (solution: alternate dates should be proposed and planned)
    - Unexpected weather events
    - Cooperation from the government departments
    - State secretary combined state level meeting (challenge to bring the government stakeholders into one table as the CSOs)
    - *Dominant voices:* We have to also bring out the voices on the table other than the dominant ones. Also, the voices and opinions from the participants should be genuine.
    - *Activist Approach:* We have to deal with that tactfully through conversations and training, prior to any meeting
    - Financial aspect: activities carried out should fit within the budget
    - Political risk (Elections might bring stagnancy to the activities)
    - Film/Documentary - it is important to build confidence of the people to speak in front of the camera and also identify



- the existing traditional best practices. Research material preparation should begin as early as possible.
- **Expectation from SaciWATERS:**
  - Format for the narratives should be prepared
  - Technical support and content support for the training [IEC<sup>4</sup> (transboundary aspects of the river)], should be shared with the communities
  - Communication and following up with the activities of the partners
  - Release of funds to the partners - based on the submission of reports – one in 6 months (two reports)
  - MOUs, TOR<sup>5</sup> and commitment letter (receipt of money) - should be conducted by the end of August
  - Coordinator for the videos (finalization of key narratives)
  - Monitoring and cross sharing of information across the partners from riparian nations
  - Media efforts, with the help of the local partners
  - Liasoning with government agencies
  - Generating a facebook group - for easy dissemination of the information among partners

Through this initiative we expect to build a platform for communication of issues among the various state and non-state actors across the riparian nations, and also to generate trust and confidence among them to effectively take part in decision making process regarding trans-boundary issues. We also anticipate the sustenance of this dialogue, through initiatives on managing issues like disaster management, and not just end with this project.

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<sup>4</sup> IEC: Information, Education and Communication

<sup>5</sup> TOR: Terms of Reference

**WORKPLAN:**

The country wise work-plan and deliverables with the timeline:

*RSPN: BHUTAN* (Person In-Charge – Mr. Tsheten Dorji)

No	ACTIVITY	Months of 2016 – 2017												
		9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1	One Skill development session for negotiation, dialogue, communications, and advocacy of target groups													
2	One Knowledge building sessions on technical (water flows and sharing), policy, and laws of target groups													
3	Interactive sessions with women leaders to document their viewpoints and their narratives about the river.													
4	Study tour for the riparian countries to Bangladesh to understand flood management system.													
5	District consultation and deliberations between community leaders and street level bureaucrats.													
6	State level interactive deliberation between state bureaucrats and CSO's													

JJS: BANGLADESH (Person In-Charge - Mr. ATM Zakir Hossain)



C-NES: ASSAM, INDIA (Person In-Charge – Mr. Manik Boruah)

Activities	Tentative Timeline (1 <sup>st</sup> Sept 2016 to 31 <sup>st</sup> August 2017: C-NES)												
	Sep-16	Oct-16	Nov-16	Dec-16	Jan-17	Feb-17	Mar-17	Apr-17	May-17	Jun-17	Jul-17	Aug-17	Sep-17
1. One skill development session for negotiation, dialogue, communications & advocacy					Preferred between Oct 18 <sup>th</sup> to 21 <sup>st</sup> or Nov 2 <sup>nd</sup> to 4 <sup>th</sup>								
2. Knowledge building session on technical (Water flows and sharing), policy & laws						Preferred between Dec 5 <sup>th</sup> to 8 <sup>th</sup> or Jan 4 <sup>th</sup> to 7 <sup>th</sup>							
3. Interactive sessions with women leaders to document their view points and their narratives about the river					19th-24 <sup>th</sup>		6 <sup>th</sup> -10 <sup>th</sup>		22 <sup>nd</sup> -26 <sup>th</sup>	Total 3 such sessions will be carried out in each locations i.e. in January there will be 3 in 3 sites and same will repeat on March and May			
4. Study tour to Bangladesh													
5. District consultation and deliberations by the community engagements for sharing in formal dialogue process									Project will coordinate with respective DDMA and Revenue Dept. to get the dates for holding consultations at their existing platforms for managing floods etc. normally happens before monsoon starts.				
6. State level interactive deliberations between state bureaucrats & CSOs									Date will be finalized through a well-coordinated efforts with the concerned stakeholders and with support from IITG and SaciWATERS				
7. Practical training session for women on leading flood management											Dates will be finalized within the 1 <sup>st</sup> quarter of the project period.		



## List of Participants

23<sup>rd</sup> – 24<sup>th</sup> August, 2016

<b>Name</b>	<b>Designation and Organisation</b>	<b>Email ID</b>
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