

International Cooperation and Transboundary Perspectives on Water

Summary Report of the Panel Discussion

India Water Forum 2016



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Transboundary rivers are ubiquitous all around the world. South Asian transboundary rivers are inseparably linked with the regional geopolitics involving several riparian countries unequal in both size and power. There are many social, economic, and environmental issues surrounding these rivers and their basins. For starters, all the riparian countries are developing and/or majority of the civil population are living below the poverty level. Furthermore, this large community in each country is highly diverse in religious, ethnic and social divisions. Water related issues include floods, water availability, water pollution/sedimentation, introduction of flow regulation structures (dams/barrages), and minimum flow requirements downstream has impacted the livelihood of these diverse communities and in return impacted on the socio-economic growth, and the development of the country. The growing demands for water caused by the rise of population, high development and industrialization increase the necessity of identifying the importance of these resources and opt for better governance of these transboundary rivers. However, it is not an easy task to manage these multinational river basins, for a mere misuse by one user will subsequently have an impact on another user of this common pool resource. On a positive note, it has been identified that these rivers often can act as a powerful catalyst for cooperation. The co-management of the rivers by riparian countries addressing the interest of all the stakeholders is the key to revenue the maximum benefit from these water resources, by not only confining to technical benefits but also by reaching out to the areas of Socio-economy, Environment and Policy as well.

South Asia Consortium for Interdisciplinary Water Resources Studies (SaciWATERs) along with The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) co-hosted the panel on International Cooperation and Transboundary Perspectives on Water at the third India Water Forum. It was held on 22nd April 2016 at the India Habitat Centre, New Delhi. The overall objective of the panel “International Cooperation and Trans-boundary Perspectives on water” was to share the experience of the panelists on issues and challenges and seek for avenues for transboundary co-operation. This panel was divided into two subpanel discussions:

Panel 1: Transboundary Issues, Challenges and Need for Cooperation

Objective of this sub-panel was to focus on the importance of identifying and addressing the transboundary issues and challenges and need for co-operation in transboundary river basin management. The panel addressed the following three key questions :

Key Questions

- What is the need for transboundary cooperation? Do you think the co-operation can lead to a better river basin management?
- What efforts are required to address transboundary issues to promote co-operation?
- What are the roles and responsibilities that each riparian country/state should undertake for a smoother process of formulating cooperative arrangement to meet challenges of water scarcity?

Panelists

The first sub panel was chaired by Sh. G S Jha Chairman of the Central Water Commission. Mr. Ravi Narayanan Chair of the Asia Pacific Water Forum Governing Council delivered the Key Note address, Mr. Munshi Faiz Ahmad, Chairman of Bangladesh Institute of International Strategic Studies (BISS), Mr. Anupam Mishra from Water & Power Consultancy Services (WAPCOS) and Dr. Sagar Prasai, the country representative of the Asia Foundation were the speakers for the first subpanel.



“If we begin to trade better, then we can do a better job in transboundary water management”.

-Dr. Sagar Prasai, The Asia Foundation

“One way of addressing transboundary water issues is to apply the theory of change, by including institutional change and reforms, institutional and personal capacity and technology all wrapped up in political will and demand”

-Mr. Ravi Narayanan, Asia Pacific Water Forum



“The countries must commit not to undertake any unilateral interventions that may impact other riparian states. Any necessary intervention must be done on the basis of full disclosure, consultation, dialogue and where possible joint participation”

- Mr. Munshi Faiz Ahmad, Chairman BIIS

Discussion Highlights

- There is a need for a portal for accessing and sharing unbiased information, building trust between riparian countries and giving importance to advance scientific knowledge.
- The countries must commit not to undertake any unilateral interventions that may impact other riparian states. Any necessary intervention must be done on the basis of full disclosure, consultation, dialogue and where possible joint participation and must remain committed towards minimal environmental impacts.
- That in order to resolve transboundary river conflicts, there is a need for extensive consultation and data sharing.
- To overcome the challenges faced in a treaty in the long run, there is the need to expand the tradable benefits, package it with economic interest such as navigation etc., shift from bilateralism to multilateralism for multinational rivers and moreover it is important to articulate domestic national interest in each country.
- Every riparian state/country should try to develop their water resources in an optimum manner which is environmentally sound and sustainable without causing substantial harm to other riparians

Panel 2: Indus, Ganges and Brahmaputra: Avenues of Cooperation

The objective of this sub-panel is to share knowledge and experience of the panelist on the three main transboundary rivers “Indus, Ganges and Brahmapurtra” and to look for avenues of cooperation between the riparian countries. Following key questions were addressed by the panelists.

Key Questions

- Can we outline potential avenues (knowledge/research/implementation) for collaboration between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh on transboundary governance?
- What steps can we take to build trust and confidence between the riparian countries so as to enhance the existing cooperation?
- Can we identify approaches/mechanisms that allow the silent voices and concerns of all stakeholders be heard, so as to facilitate transparency within ongoing collaborations?

Panelists

The panel was chaired by Dr. S.K. Sarkar, Director of Water Resources Division, The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI). The speakers for this sub-panel were Mr. Nisar Memom, Chairman of Water Environment Forum (Pakistan), Dr. S. Janakarajan, professor at Madras Institute of Development Studies (MIDS), Ms. Bushra Nishat, from International Water Association (IWA), Dr. Shakil Romshoo, Head of the Department of Earth Sciences, University of Kashmir and Dr. Anamika Barua, Executive Director, South Asia Consortium for Interdisciplinary Water Resources Studies (SaciWATERS).



Discussion Highlights

- The three issues that contribute towards the transboundary disputes are the Quantity of water released from the upstream to the downstream, Quality of water released and Timing of the release of water.
- The underlying idea of cooperation is that water can act as a source of regional development and yet the concept of integrated water management at the basin level is not getting realized.
- For a successful treaty it is important to develop a mechanism to include the perspective of all the stakeholders, especially from the grassroots level, thus a bottom-up approach should be followed.
- Transboundary water dispute is now becoming more of a political dispute than water dispute therefore a strong political will is required apart from the sharing of scientific knowledge.



“Lack of transparent mechanism on data sharing creates a lot of problems, whether it is related to hydropower projects, exchange of flow, irrigation needs etc.”

-Dr. Shakil Romshoo, University of Kashmir.

“Co-management can reduce the impacts of the disasters and this can be done through building confidence and trust which can happen only if we meet and talk through a structured & continuous dialogue process”.

-Dr. Anamika Barua, SaciWATERS.



- Apart from data sharing, it is important to initiate the process of dialogue before any kind of negotiation. Steering continuous dialogues involving all the concerned stakeholders would enhance the chances of success of a treaty.
- Data sharing can play a major role in building the trust between the riparian countries
- Having Technical knowledge is important; however it is equally important to gather knowledge and research on the socio-economic and policy aspects.

Summary

From the above discussions it was concluded that to build better relationships between the riparian countries/states it is imperative to build a platform for data sharing. The countries should make sure that the interventions undertaken are done on the basis of full disclosure, consultation, dialogue with the other riparians. The discussion highlighted the need of having multi-lateral agreements for better river basin management. For a successful treaty it is important to integrate the perspectives

of all the stakeholders especially the poor and the vulnerable communities which are generally ignored. To do so, apart from having political dialogues, it is important to engage with track 3 and track 2 diplomats as well. More importantly, it has to be a continuous process simultaneously taking place in each riparian state involving all the concerned stakeholders. It would ensure that the interests of all the stakeholders are taken into account especially the concerns of the unheard, which would lead to a better co-management of the river.

