



Country Level Workshop India

Transnational Policy Dialogue for Improved Water Governance of Brahmaputra
River- Phase 3



AUGUST 12, 2016

Radisson Blu, Guwahati

Background of the Workshop

SaciWATERS in 2013 initiated a project titled “Transnational Policy Dialogue for Improved Water Governance of the Brahmaputra River” with the aim to create a platform to discuss the issues, challenges, and opportunities towards improved co-management of the river basin. The project was started by a group of researchers from India and Bangladesh in 2013 as a bilateral dialogue initiative between India and Bangladesh which later became a multilateral dialogue with the involvement of China and Bhutan. The project is currently in its third phase (2015-2017). The workshop on 12th August 2016 in Guwahati, Assam at Radisson Blu was a part of this initiative and was jointly organized by SaciWATERS and Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati (IIT-G).

The aim of the workshop was to promote better decision-making by ensuring that the views of different stakeholders (government, civil society organizations, funding agencies, academia, scientific community and media) are heard and taken into account. To enable this, the workshop targeted to bring out the information available about the Brahmaputra Basin, jointly identifying the economic opportunities and potent avenues for disaster management that are available in the region and to work together for effective management of the basin.

The workshop was mainly attended by Track 3 (Non-Governmental Organisations, academicians, civil society, and grass root level community) and track 2 diplomats and few track 1.5 (Influential academicians, bureaucrats) diplomats like Dr. Amarjit Singh, Officer on Special Duty (OSD), Ministry of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation, New Delhi. A detailed list of the participants has been attached in annexure-1.

Inaugural Session

The Inaugural Session started with Dr. Aditya Bastola, Executive Director, SaciWATERS



welcoming all the dignitaries to the workshop. He gave an overview of the aims and achievements of the organization. SaciWATERS is a policy research institute and since its inception in 2001, it has focused on critical issues related to water resources management in South Asia using a pro-poor human

development approach.

The emphasis is on the accumulation of new knowledge through a combination of research, capacity building, advocacy, partnership and knowledge mobilization. Further, he gave a brief about the previous two phases of the project “Transnational Policy Dialogue for Improved Water Governance of the Brahmaputra River”.

“Through today’s discussion, we want to look for the opportunities of cooperation within India itself.”

- Dr. Aditya Bastola

Adding on to it, Dr. Anamika Barua, Associate Professor, IIT-Guwahati through her presentation reinstated the aims and objectives of the third phase of the project and also emphasized on the importance of the dialogue in transboundary cooperation. For effective transboundary

river management, it is important that the solutions should first come from within the country and ‘country level workshops’ like this can play an important role in finding those solutions. The dialogue aims to reduce the power asymmetry present in the region by creating a platform for all the four riparian countries where they can share their concerns and issues and which could also



act as a catalyst in removing the growing apprehensions and mistrust among them. The project has been able to generate a willingness at multiple levels for the continuation of the dialogue and has also lead to the development of the human relationships among the participatory stakeholders. Moreover the dialogue would assist in achieving one of also the major aims of this project; i.e. to develop a

basin level institutional framework which could provide the means, mandate, and resources necessary to employ formal and informal agreements, reflecting the needs and interests of the concerned stakeholders. She ended her presentation by the stating the importance of having an institutional level framework without which it would be difficult to achieve sustainable management of the river basin.

“All cooperation is not necessarily good as many a times such issue based cooperation eventually become a source of conflict rather than cooperation”

-Dr. Anamika Barua

The key note address was delivered by **Dr. Amarjit Singh, Officer on Special Duty (OSD), MoWR, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation, New Delhi.** According to him the two



issues that need immediate attention are the floods and the absence of an effective institution in the region. For efficient basin management it is important to have an institution, which the local people can trust. Such an institutional structure can be built by taking into account the views of the concerned stakeholders and the local communities and it would give real power to the people of the region. For dealing with the floods in the region, storage structures can be built in the upstream areas, which would help in

regulating the flow of water downstream. Along with that it is crucial to take into account the seismic safety of such structures. The river has huge potential, which has not been tapped yet, and an effective institutional structure can help in the development of the region. For dealing with the disputes present within the region, it is important to provide the local people with real scientific information and also a platform where they can share their concerns and issues. The governance structure and the capacity building needs of the communities needs to re-examined in order to facilitate the cooperation between the states.

“Prevention of the floods and the kind of institutional structure required are the two major issues that need to be dealt with immediately”

-Dr. Amarjit Singh

The overall discussion of the workshop was centered on three main themes i.e. knowledge sharing, disaster management and economic opportunities and also focused on the importance of having an effective institutional framework in the region.

Knowledge Sharing

Sharing of knowledge is important to build the capacity of the stakeholders across the riparian countries for informed decision making related to the river. It helps in building trust and confidence across the national, sub-national and eventually at the regional level. Lack of scientific knowledge and information about the basin acts as a major obstacle in reaching a consensus for effective basin management. Dissemination of knowledge and good practices would ultimately improve the decision making process across the region.

Sharing of information:

- One of the major reasons behind disputes is the absence of real and scientific information. Scientific information must be made accessible to the local people of the region in a language which can be easily understood by them.
- The local politicians and the local media can play a very crucial role in the dissemination of the knowledge among the local communities of the region. The CSOs and NGOs of the region can also help in making the people aware by using the right perspective. They can play an important role in making sure that the right information reaches the end users and they also have the power to mobilise and motivate the end users.
- Dissemination of knowledge should be voluntary and not because of pressure. Certain tradeoffs have to be dealt with in case of any development initiative being undertaken. What is important is that the views of the local communities i.e. the ones who will be affected has to be taken into account.
- The quality of any study carried out in the region (like any social impact study) can be improved greatly with the inclusion of the views of local communities as they are the ones who will actually be affected by that particular intervention.
- When it comes to river management, only technical or engineering aspect is taken into account and the 'biology' aspect is often ignored. Taking into account the ecology and the biodiversity of the region is equally important for sustainable management of the basin.

“Any impact study should be conducted by a neutral organization or agency and it should not be funded by any project proponent.”

-One of the participants

Data sharing:

- It is important for the upstream regions (countries/states) to share the hydrological data with the downstream regions for efficient flood forecasting.
- Along with the hydrological data, sharing of other data like livelihood patterns, navigation, fishery etc. is also equally essential.



- Sometimes, even if the data is available with the local district offices, acquisition of the data becomes a cumbersome process for the local CSOs and NGOs and even the researchers.
- One of the issues with the sharing of the data is the accuracy of the data provided. Data accuracy as of now is around 60-70% which needs to be enhanced further.
- Various studies like the impact assessment studies are being carried out by the experts in

“Eco-hydrology is an integral part of impact assessment studies, but in India it is still not taken into consideration”

-Dr. Sanchita Boruah

Bhutan, Bangladesh and China. It is important to build a platform where this sharing of knowledge among the riparian countries can take place.

Role of dialogue in sharing knowledge and information:

- There are other issues apart from power generation and flood management that also need equal attention. An integrated approach needs to be developed to deal with all the issues in a holistic manner. Dialogues like these can help in addressing the issues which are not perceived directly.
- These kind of open discussions are very important as it helps to bring out the voices of those, which are otherwise not heard.

- The information generated through these workshops should be disseminated to the public through media. This would also help in maintaining the interests of the concerned stakeholders in these workshops.
- The stakeholders of the dialogue can stay connected through social media (like Facebook/ twitter) to share information, this will also help in keeping the interests of the stakeholders alive.



Economic Opportunities

There are many opportunities identified within Brahmaputra basin for economic growth, and they are being propagated within different regions. However, economic opportunities linked to the rivers are never in isolation, they influence each other, water security in one region could

“This dialogue process is for mutual benefit; wherein the tradeoffs can be discussed with all the concerned stakeholders”

-Mr. A.K. Mitra

mean (in) security of resources in the other. Within this context it becomes essential to foster cooperation and to understand shared economic opportunities, along with their interdependencies so as to provide incentives for collaboration among neighboring states and countries. This session helps in identifying

basin wide economic opportunities which could help in addressing poverty, food and energy security concerns in the region.

- In spite of the regular flooding in Brahmaputra, the people of the region are dependent on it for various livelihood options like agriculture, cattle and livestock rearing, jute cultivation etc.

- Brahmaputra River has a huge storage potential which if utilized in a sustainable manner can benefit all the four riparian countries. For example, the total power requirement of Bangladesh is around 18000-20000 MW where as it produces only 6000 MW of power. Similarly if Bhutan were to channelize its resources in an effective way, it has a huge potential to generate hydropower which it can distribute to other riparian countries.
- People should be made aware of the economic benefits of the construction of the dams to gain the consensus and trust of the people. For example after the construction of the dam, the region would have a potential of about 10,000 MW of power, out of which the share of the people living in Arunachal Pradesh will be 1300 MW. This would bring in additional income of around 2500 crores for Arunachal Pradesh. Hence it is imperative that the people are made aware of the economic advantages and are able to trust the local authorities.

- Construction of dams on the private fertile lands will greatly affect the livelihood practices (especially the agricultural activities) of the people in the region. For example, in Bhutan local people believe that the construction of dams is affecting the tourism activity in the region. The concerns and issues of the local people should be taken into account before the implementation of any intervention.



- The economic opportunities in the basin have not been utilized to their full potential. This region which has ample amount of water, imports most of its fishes from Andhra Pradesh. Approximately 50% of the food in Arunachal Pradesh is imported from other states. For sustainable development of the basin, it is important to provide people with safe livelihood.
- Government of India sends a huge amount of money to the North East for the development of the region but the money will not be utilized for the economic benefit of the local people of the region until and unless the local CSOs, NGOs, Community Based Organisations and individual stakeholders are capacitated to absorb the resources.

- Apart from building the dams for harnessing the economic benefits from the river, it should be ensured that the ecological sustainability of the river is maintained.
- Before using the river for our own benefits, the health of the river should also be kept in mind.

“We need to build a consensus within our nation before approaching the other national governments”

-Mr. Likar Angu

Disaster Management

One of the ways of bringing in cooperation in the region is through disaster management. The region is widely affected with floods and erosion and it is very crucial to deal with the issues. Identification of the opportunities to co-manage the disasters in the region will help in bringing about cooperation at both national and regional level.

- When talking about effective disaster management, both structural and non-structural aspects should be taken into consideration. The capacity of the people living in the region should be built along with the implementation of the structural measures.
- For preventing the floods in Assam, the storage potential of the river should be utilised. For example, construction of Siang Dam can help in regulating the flow of the water in the river especially during the monsoons which would help in reducing the devastation caused by floods in Assam.
- With the utilization of the modern technology, it is possible to construct seismically stable hydropower or storage structures. The main challenge is to educate local people about this through a right channel.

“The focus should not be only on the Brahmaputra River but the entire Himalayan Ecosphere”
-One of the Participants

- It is important to conduct cumulative impact assessment of the development activities being carried out in the region.
- Brahmaputra River carries one of the highest sediment loads in the world, which needs to be dealt with carefully for the management of the floods in the region. A lot of deforestation is being carried out in the upstream regions because of which the sediment load in the river and its

various tributaries is increasing. Management of the sediment load is very crucial for effective flood management.

- The livelihood of the people is greatly affected by the rampant erosion in the region. This issue has not been included at the national level under the State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF) but needs the immediate attention of the policy makers.



- Apart from that, there is a need to put in place effective early warning systems which would help in making the people aware of the impending disaster well in advance.
- Mock drills are conducted by the local governments but at the time disaster no actual information is provided to the people.

Importance of an Institutional Framework

- It is important to understand the kind of institutional framework that is need for the management of the basin. The framework should be sustainable and efficient and should be such that the people are able to trust it.
- We need to have an authority which can be used as a common knowledge base, which can pass legislations also and make it mandatory for the riparian states to follow them religiously.
- Such an institutional mechanism will also keep a tab on the utilization of the resources.
- Barak and Brahmaputra Board can be reconstituted by taking into account more representation from CSOs and various professionals. The institutional structure should give real power to the stakeholders of the basin. Also, such institutional structure should be built by taking into account the views of the stakeholders and the local communities. This would strengthen the institutional structure of the board and will help in improving the basin management

- A road map should be built with pragmatic approach and either national or international institutions or even both can play an important role for co-management of the basin.
- At the state level, state regulatory bodies can be activated which would aid in effective basin management.
- For efficient basin management it is mandatory that the various departments like the Water Resources Department, disaster management authority, ministry of environment and forests etc. of both the states work together for the welfare of the people of the region.
- None of the South Asian countries are signatories to the International Water Convention of 1997. It is important to build a consensus among the four riparian countries to approach the issue in a holistic manner.
- The governance structure in place needs to be re-examined. Role of an institution is to ensure that the existing knowledge in the basin is used efficiently for the advantage of the people in the region. It is very crucial to utilize the existing best practices for effective basin management.
- Institutions manned by the local people of the region can play an important role in effectively using the existing knowledge base for better management.
- The government follows a top down approach while signing the MOUs with the various investors. It is imperative that the CSOs, NGOs and the local communities are involved in the decision making process for the initiative to be successful
- In South Asia, there is a certain hierarchy of river which needs to be broken. When talking about Brahmaputra, equal focus should be paid to its tributaries also, the entire Himalayan ecosystem should be taken into consideration. This should be taken into account especially during the formulation of policies and programmes for the region.



Capacity Building:

- The local leaders like the Panchayat can be approached with the pros and the cons of the envisaged development initiative. The indigenous people have faith on the local leaders and hence they can play a major role in mitigating the information through a right perspective to them.
- In case of sharing of the information with the local communities also, these local leaders can be trained, who in turn can convey the information to the local people of the region.
- Moreover not only the capacity of the CSOs but also of the government departments needs to be built so that they are also able to communicate with the local CSOs and NGOs effectively and are also able to understand clearly the concerns raised by the communities. Lack of effective communication is one of the barriers to effective basin management.
- There is also a need to build the capacity within the government institutions also. Different workshops are attended by different bureaucrats. It is crucial that the information gained through these workshops is transferred among the bureaucrats within the institutions as well so that none of the information gets lost.

Summary:

For effective basin management, the riparian nations should use the water optimally but in an ecologically sustainable manner to bring prosperity to the region. The aim should be to reduce the knowledge gap in the basin and to improve the understanding of the river basin. It is imperative that we come up with a road map which would benefit all the four riparian countries. Conducting dialogues like this can help in managing the tradeoffs and would ultimately help in achieving this aim. It is essential to put in place the checks and balances so that point of view of the local CSOs, NGOs and Community Based Organisations is effectively channelized. Capacity building of both the local communities and the government institutions needs to be done so that both the sides are able to communicate effectively with each other. The riparian countries have to put their thoughts together for a roadmap ahead to manage the transboundary issues like hydropower development or any other development activities effectively. There is a mistrust among the downstream states and countries regarding the utilization of the resources by the upper riparian countries and because of these disputes, the full potential of the river is not being utilized. To deal with the issues effectually at the international level, it is important first to deal with inter-state water disputes within the country. The concerns shared by the people in all the riparian countries are the same, everyone wants development but the priorities are different. At this stage to bring about a consensus among the people, it is crucial to deal with the tradeoffs and the priorities in an effective manner. An institutional structure which takes into account the views of the local communities and the concerned stakeholders needs to be established in the region.



Annexure-1: List of Participants

Academicians:	
Dr. Anamika Barua	IIT-G, Assam
Dr. Chandan Mahanta	IIT-G, Assam
Dr. Sanchita Boruah	Kanoi College, Dibrugarh, Assam
Prof. Arvind Phukan	Alaska University
NGOs:	
Mr. Ashok Rao	C-Nes (regional office-Guwahati)
Dr. CR Hira	C-Nes (regional office-Guwahati)
Mr. Manik Boruah	C-Nes (regional office-Guwahati)
Ms. Chandana Borah	C-Nes (regional office-Guwahati)
Mr. Arup Saikia	DPO, Dibrugarh, C-Nes
Ms. Swapna Das	DPO, Barpeta, Unit II, C-Nes
Mr. Mehebab Alom Hazarika	DPO, Dhubri Unit II, C-Nes
Government Departments:	
Dr. Amarjit Singh	Officer on Special Duty (OSD), Ministry of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation
Dr. Rabindra Kumar	PCCF, Department of Environment and Forests, Arunachal Pradesh
Mr. A.K. Mitra	Technical Advisor, Water Resources Department, Assam
Er. Likar Angu	Chief Engineer, Water Resources Department, Arunachal Pradesh
Mr. A.K. Gupta	Senior Joint Commissioner, Ministry of Water Resources, New Delhi
Mr. Joy Borman	Secretary, Brahmaputra Board
Mr. PP Changkakaty	Secretary, Water Resources Department, Assam
Mr. Kripal Jyoti	Assam State Disaster Management Authority

Mazumdar	
Er. Naba Deka	Assam State Disaster Management Authority
Er. Nilamani Barua	Chairman, Assam Electricity Regulatory Commission (Retd)
Others:	
Mr. Mirza Z. Rahman	PhD Researcher, IIT-G
Ms. Bandana Khatanair	PhD Researcher, IIT-G
Ms. Jarjum Ete	
Mr. Vijay Taram	Advocate
SaciWATERS:	
Dr. Aditya Bastola	Executive Director
Ms. Safa Fanian	Research Fellow
Ms. Vishaka Gulati	Research Associate
Ms. Arundhati Deka	Research Associate