

A photograph of a sunset over a body of water. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright orange glow. Two people are in a small boat on the water, silhouetted against the sunset. The water reflects the light from the sun.

Role of dialogue in Transboundary water management The Brahmaputra Basin

Policy Brief Issue #1
February, 2016

Photo credits: Swapnali Bora

Dialogue for transboundary conflict management:

Transboundary river basins of South Asia, are often perceived as important engines of regional economic development, crucial bases of livelihood resources, and sites of biodiversity conservation. However competing and conflicting roles, that they play, often make policy governance and management practices particularly challenging (Kliot et al., 2001; Sneddon and Fox 2006; Uprety, Salman and Salman 2011).

Dialogue can play an important role in fostering mutual understanding and resolving conflicts, particularly in the context of conflict management. Röling & Woodhill (2001) have defined dialogue linked to food, water and energy as "... a contrived situation in which a set of more or less interdependent stakeholders in some resource are identified, and invited to meet and interact in a forum for conflict resolution, negotiation, social learning and collective decision making towards concerted action."

A dialogue is important because even though people's/stakeholders reasons might be intangible and 'soft', but 'they are very real in their consequences' (Röling & Woodhill, 2001).

Stakeholder representatives often have inflexible mandates, when they enter the negotiation process; within this context understanding perceptions and reasons gives the connection to reality. Dialogue facilitation can powerfully bring together stakeholders and bridge the gap between political elite and populace. To bring about sustainable change, people have to develop a sense of joint ownership of the process and become stakeholders in identifying new approaches to address common challenges. It helps in changing the way people talk, think and communicate with one another. Overall it works to enlarge the stake and moves away from positional bargaining to larger interests (Röling & Woodhill, 2001; World Water Council, 2004; Zeitoun & Mirumachi, 2008).

Within transboundary context, dialogues helps to develop trust and confidence between riparian countries. Involving multiple states in consultation and decision-making is complex, however a dialogue can facilitate this process in a step-by-step approach. Although it is a long drawn process, the resulting confidence and trust that it builds, is enduring.

The Brahmaputra Basin:

The Brahmaputra River Basin, which originates from the Tibetan Plateau, is the biggest trans-Himalayan river basin, encompassing parts of the territory, ecosystem, people, economies and politics of China, Bhutan, Nepal, India and Bangladesh. Brahmaputra is also one of the most critical and unique trans-boundary river systems. It is unique in several ways; first, the Brahmaputra River is fifth with respect to discharge, fourteenth with respect to drainage area, twenty fifth with respect to length, second with respect to sediment load, and first with respect to sediment discharge amongst the world's rivers. Second, the basin stands out as an exception to the traditional theory that relates poverty with water scarcity. It is one of the least developed regions of the world with unmatched and multiple use developmental potential. Third, the river carries water from the drier parts of the basin to the regions that are abundant in rainfall. Fourth, its physical geography has bound environmental, economic, political and security interdependencies of four co-riparian countries. However such mutual dependency has largely been beset by colonial legacies of unresolved boundary disputes, deep-seated distrust and political tensions making the hydro-diplomacy of the basin not as strategically nuanced as it ought to be (Wirsing and Jasparro 2007; Salehin et al., 2011; Uprety et al., 2011).

The basin with its rich biodiversity has a huge potential for irrigation development, livelihood opportunities, hydropower generation and other operations such as navigation. Development however has largely

remained country specific leading to confrontation and conflicts. Key challenges for sustainable management of the basin include floods and droughts, infrastructural developments, rising suspicion and distrust, and lack of open communication within and between countries. Challenges are expected to grow due to increasing demand for water and energy, interference with natural river flows from dams, inter-basin water transfers, water diversions, deforestation and floods, altered sediment and nutrient loads. Livelihoods are already impacted due to changes in hydrology from erosion and ecology from deforestation and plantation. Food production systems, cultural identity,

“We should learn from nature- as various tributaries together form Brahmaputra River- the same way all Riparian states can come together to form an authority to manage Brahmaputra Basin”- Er. Joy Barman, Secretary, Brahmaputra Board Assam

rural economies have all seen dramatic changes in recent years, with more changes likely in the time to come. Among the most powerful contemporary forces shaping both local cultures, livelihoods, land-use and ecosystem are various government policies and the expansion of regional, national and international

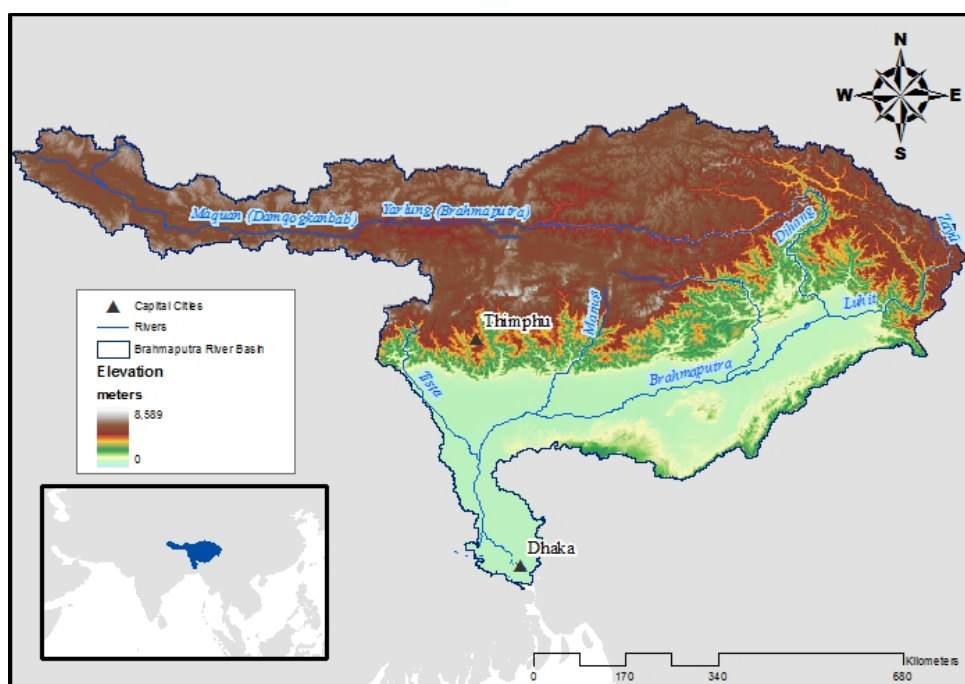


Figure : Brahmaputra Basin (Source: southwaterinitiative.org)

Role of dialogue in Mekong River Basin:

Mekong River runs a length of 4,900km, originating in China, and flowing through Myanmar, Thailand and Lao PDR. The dialogue here has been tedious and long drawn evolving over 38 years to create the Mekong River Commission. MRC members includes Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam with China and Myanmar as 'Dialogue Partners' within discussions. This partnership enabled cooperation with China and Myanmar thereby creating direct communication between riparian countries³. For instance, it was at the fifth Dialogue Meeting, held in 2000 at Phnom Penh, that China expressed its willingness to provide hydrological information of the Upper Mekong River to the Mekong River Commission, which resulted in the conclusion of "Data Exchange Agreement" (Bobekova, Pearse-Smith, & Svensson, 2013; Onishi, 2007).

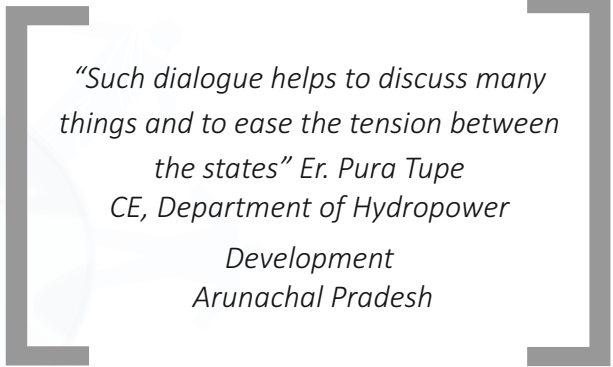
Brahmaputra Dialogue – an initiative by SaciWATERS

markets (Biswas, 2011; Salehin et al., 2011) In the recent past, discussions on the co-management of this river never figured out as top priority among the riparian countries. Any discussion that took place was essentially bilateral, confidential with not much information in the public domain as to what is happening or likely to happen, and what that would mean to all the countries. Negotiations till date on joint management have been marred with prior distrust and uncertainty.

Need for a dialogue and discussion across multiple stakeholders was strongly felt for the survival of this gigantic river system. Such thinking brought funding

agencies and researchers together to unpack the trajectories of effective co-management of Brahmaputra River. The project titled "Transboundary Policy Dialogue for Improved Water Governance in Brahmaputra River" is one such initiative by SaciWATERS that aimed to create a platform to discuss the issues, challenges, and opportunities towards improved co-management of the river basin.

The project started in 2013, in two phase (2013 – 2014 ; 2014 – 2015) as a bilateral dialogue initiative between India and Bangladesh. Efforts were made to clearly strategize the ways to involve multiple stakeholders (track 2 and track 3) into this process. The dialogue workshops were conducted at the country level, to understand the country perspective on the Brahmaputra water issues. These workshops also helped in identifying participants who can represent the country at the regional level dialogue.



*"Such dialogue helps to discuss many things and to ease the tension between the states" Er. Pura Tupe
CE, Department of Hydropower
Development
Arunachal Pradesh*

Since the project began in 2013, there have been six consultation dialogues that were held at different levels among the varied stakeholders of the Brahmaputra basin. They include:

Role of dialogue in Kura-Araks rivers basin

The basin of Kura-Araks occupy an area of 188 thousand km² and shared by five countries Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Turkey, and Iran . Among the riparian countries, there has been 15 years of intense conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan along with growing tension over water shortages and water pollution.

Since 2002, a series of dialogues were initiated by a neutral party with the Parliamentarians of Armenia and Azerbaijan. This dialogue resulted in both the countries exhibiting strong interest in establishing initiatives and programs to address water pollution. The two countries signed two letters of understanding. The letter indicates that they would work through a commission of parliamentarians and water experts to identify significant sources of transboundary water pollution and develop projects on improving water monitoring. Furthermore, aside for the environmental collaboration the series have resulted in building a close personal relationship among the participating parliamentarians, who were able to see and get acquainted with the grievances of 'the other side'. One major learning from here is that "Political tensions between countries do not necessarily prevent governments from coming to the table to talk about issues such as management of their transboundary water resources" (TFDD, 2007).

Phase I

- *Transnational policy dialogue for improved water governance of Brahmaputra River- Bangladesh Country level dialogue. Dhaka - August 21, 2013.*

This meeting lent efforts to creating an enabling environment within Bangladesh to discuss critical issues of co-management of the Brahmaputra river by Bangladesh and India



- *Transnational policy dialogue for improved water governance of Brahmaputra River-India Country level dialogue. Guwahati - September 10, 2013.*

Similar to the meeting held in Bangladesh, a meeting was held in India to create an atmosphere that enables co-management of the river.

- *Bangladesh-India Joint Dialogue for improved water governance of Brahmaputra River at BUET. Dhaka- November 11-12, 2013.*

Uniting previous efforts, this meeting served to establish a network of actors from both countries to inform Brahmaputra-related dialogues and influence its policy for co-management of the river. It also enabled a joint platform for discussion on co-management of Brahmaputra River.

Phase II

- *Track II diplomacy format with specific focus on integrating regional and national approaches of water governance and management of Brahmaputra Basin. New Delhi - January 22, 2015.*

Once an enabling platform was built, the next series of consultation served the purpose of bringing together key players managing the Brahmaputra River on a same platform so as to ensure vertical integration of voices and interests of policy makers at State and National level.

“Various suggestions have come like – holistic and basin level approach, IWRM, regional cooperation etc., – all these will not succeed without dialogues and consultations between riparian countries”

Mr. A.K Mitra Technical Advisor and Ex- Secretary, WRD, Govt. of Assam

- *Multi-country stakeholder dialogue to understand issues of common interest for improved Brahmaputra Basin management, Dhaka May 23, 2015.*

This workshop served to understand the key challenge and opportunities across co-riparian countries positioned differently in terms of knowledge power and development initiatives. The meeting for the first time involved all the four co-riparians from China, Bhutan, India and Bangladesh.

Role of dialogue in Nile River Basin

Shared between 11 countries. The Nile Basin Initiative, started from cross country and international organizational push. From this initiative they started creating spaces for dialogues which later resulted in theme based dialogues for further collaboration and strengthening of ties and understanding of issues. This initiative begun 14 years ago. Through this they have created an all-inclusive platform that assists in creating enabling environment for strong joint institutions (Nile-SEC, ENTRO and NELSAP-CU) - for continued dialogue and regular fora for technical discussions.

Their experience has shown that for such initiative to be successful there has to be strong institution, as strong institutions help in pushing forward important agendas. The slow progress of the dialogue between countries is attributed to the complexity in bringing everyone together. Further, process of trust building have gone back and forth as differences arise due to uneven economic opportunities and infrastructure developments (Alam, Dione, & Jeffrey, 2009; Eckstein, 2009; Zeitoun & Warner, 2006).

Role of dialogue in Drin River Basin Dialogue

Drin River Basin is located in the Western Balkans (South East Europe) and it is shared between Albania, Greece, Kosovo, Macedonia and Montenegro. There are several agreements between countries on management but not in effect due to several conflicts. In 2009 a process of dialogue began between stakeholders and countries. The "Drin Dialogue" process 2008-2011 addressed the issues and challenges concerning the basin and at the end of this process the riparian countries expressed their intention for a Shared Vision for the Drin Basin management. The Declaration was signed and adopted by the Ministers and high-level representatives of Albania, FYR Macedonia, Greece and Kosovo on October 2011 (Choukr-Allah, Ragab, & Rodriguez-Clemente, 2012).

- *Transnational policy dialogue for improved water governance of Brahmaputra River. Phase II- Dissemination dialogue meeting. Guwahati - August 5, 2015.*

This meeting served to share information on the process and results that were seen from this initiative in the past two years along with charting a direction for the future of this initiative.

The innovation and uniqueness of this initiative is that it successfully created a platform for dialogue between India and Bangladesh. A big achievement of this project has been the recognition of the importance of a dialogue in the Brahmaputra Basin. Further, this process has generated a demand from the stakeholders for continuation of the dialogue for at least five years so as to create a pathway for formulating a forum on Brahmaputra basin management. Group of experts, bureaucrats and

diplomats from India and Bangladesh came together and unanimously recommended that the great treasure of the Brahmaputra urgently demands the greater knowledge that can only come through collaborative research, and through listening to a wider cross section of voices, from multiple stakeholders, like, affected communities, civil society, ecologists and environmental experts as well as policy makers. In order to facilitate vertical and horizontal integration within and between countries they recommended for sustain dialogue processes at multi-tract mode. The most important recommendation was to move from tract 3/ 2mode to tract 1.5 mode and to bring all the countries, including China and Bhutan, sharing the basin into a single platform. Thus, the demand for continuing the dialogue and that the initiative should move into a third phase, has been stakeholder driven.



Wayforward

Based on the experience gained in the last two years and recommendations from the multi-stakeholder workshops, SaciWATERS plans to continue this dialogue process for another two years and initiate a third phase of the dialogue. The phase III will bring together four riparian countries of Brahmaputra Basin – Bangladesh, Bhutan, China and India – for dialogue on co management of the river basin. The aim of this phase will be to develop a basin level institutional framework. The need for such an institutional framework at transboundary level was raised several times by the stakeholders (also came as a recommendation). It was felt that such an institution could provide the means, mandate, and resources necessary to employ formal and informal agreements which would reflect the needs and interests of stakeholders.

To achieve this aim the following activities are planned:

1. Review the existing transboundary protocols/treaties/accords to understand the processes shaping the institutional arrangements for managing the Transboundary Rivers.

In our two years of engagement with the government representatives in India and Bangladesh, we could perceive that sharing learning and effective dissemination of cases from different trans-boundary basin organizations helps shape their perspective. By understanding the practices across different river basin, they get acquainted with the lengthy process of dialogues and negotiations that institutions undergo in which conflicts over the utilization of shared water resources were also frequent. Hence, the cases and review of treaties/ protocols would be presented in a joint knowledge-sharing workshop in partnership with relevant national/ state government departments at a regional level.

"It may take 72 years for Brahmaputra River Commission to come up but the process has started, and I am very optimistic that it will definitely happen"

*Mr. Fazlur Rashid,
Bangladesh Water Board*

2. To bring the views of multi-stakeholders through individual interactions and multiple workshops

The aim is to integrate the views of multi-stakeholders

(government, civil society organizations, funding agencies, academia, scientific community and media) through individual interactions and multiple workshops. The purpose is to promote better decision making by ensuring that the views of different stakeholders are heard at all stages through dialogues and consensus building exercises. In the last two years SaciWATERS realized that everyone involved in this process has a justifiable view, relevant knowledge and experience to bring to the decision making

Unlike negotiation, in a dialogue forum there is no winner or loser and hence it provides an opportunity to all the stakeholders to raise issues, concerns and also to find common grounds for corporation"

Dr. Anamika Barua, ED, SaciWATERS

3. To assess the various economic opportunities, challenges and research priorities in the basin

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 mean (in) security of resources in the other. From the previous phases we have come to understand the challenges faced and some of the important economic opportunities in the region; phase III would move a step ahead to find the avenues to overcome these challenges.

4. To map the functionalities attached to various government (central/state) line departments to bring dovetailing and improved coordination for basin management

An institutional mapping for the Brahmaputra Basin gives insight into the existing distribution of power and decision-making within institutional and governance structures for the management of the river. This objective identifies key actors, their interactions, locus of control, who has the ability to influence decisions, and to examine their source of funding. This will also clearly map out the functional and geographical boundaries within which these institutions operate. While a basin level institution may require new planning, management tools and models, such a mapping exercise will provide us with an inventory of institutions which already exists and how best they can be capacitated for basin level decision making and management.

References:

- Alam, U., Dione, O., & Jeffrey, P. (2009). The benefit-sharing principle: Implementing sovereignty bargains on water. *Political Geography*, 28(2), 90–100.
- Best, J. L., Ashworth, P. J., Sarker, M. H., & Roden, J. E. (2007). The Brahmaputra-Jamuna River, Bangladesh. *Large rivers: geomorphology and management*, 395-430.
- Biswas, A. K. (2011). Cooperation or conflict in transboundary water management: case study of South Asia. *Hydrological Sciences Journal*, 56(4), 662-670.
- Choukr-Allah, R., Ragab, R., & Rodriguez-Clemente, R. (Eds.). (2012). *Integrated water resources management in the Mediterranean region: dialogue towards new strategy*. Springer Science & Business Media.
- Eckstein, G. (2009). Water scarcity, conflict, and security in a climate change world: challenges and opportunities for international law and policy. *Wisconsin International Law Journal*, 27(3).
- Kliot, N., Shmueli, D., & Shamir, U. (2001). Institutions for management of transboundary water resources: their nature, characteristics and shortcomings. *Water Policy*, 3(3), 229-255.
- Onishi, K. (2007). Interstate negotiation mechanisms for cooperation in the Mekong river basin. *Water International*, 32(4), 524–537.
- Röling, N., & Woodhill, J. (2001). *From Paradigm to Practice: Foundations, Principles and Elements for Dialogue on Water, Food, and Environment*. In Background Document for National and Basin Dialogue. Bonn.
- Salehin, M., Khan, M. S. A., Prakash, A., & Goodrich, C. G. (2011). Opportunities for trans-boundary water sharing in the Ganges, the Brahmaputra, and the Meghna basins. *India infrastructure report*, 29.
- Transboundary Freshwater Dispute Database (TFDD) (2007). Oregon State University. retrieved
- Uprety, K., & Salman, S. M. (2011). Legal aspects of sharing and management of transboundary waters in South Asia: preventing conflicts and promoting cooperation. *Hydrological Sciences Journal*, 56(4), 641-661.
- Wirsing, R. G., & Jasparro, C. (2007). River rivalry: water disputes, resource insecurity and diplomatic deadlock in South Asia. *Water Policy*, 9(3), 231-251.
- World Water Council. (2004). *Proceedings of the Workshop on Water and Politics: Understanding the Role of Politics in Water management*. Marseille.
- Zeitoun, M., & Mirumachi, N. (2008). Transboundary water interaction I: Reconsidering conflict and cooperation. *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics*, 8(4), 297-316.
- Zeitoun, M., & Warner, J. (2006). Hydro-hegemony—a framework for analysis of trans-boundary water conflicts. *Water policy*, 8(5), 435-460



Transnational Policy Dialogue for Improved Water Governance of Brahmaputra River Phase III

The overall goal of this project is to influence policies for joint management of Brahmaputra River by Bangladesh, India and other countries who contribute to the flow of the river. The Phase I & II was bilateral dialogue between India and Bangladesh. The phase III in particular will bring together the four riparian countries of Brahmaputra Basin – Bangladesh, Bhutan, China and India – for dialogue on co management of the river basin.

The purpose of this series of policy brief's is to bring together the discussions and suggestions that emerge from the dialogue process with all stakeholders on the Brahmaputra Basin. These recommendations are to inform decision making and enable effective governance and management of the Brahmaputra Basin

Project Duration: Phase I (2013-14); Phase II (2014-15) & Phase III (2015-17)

This policy brief is also available online: www.saciwaters.org/brahmaputra-dialogue

PARTNERS



IWM, Dhaka



ICS, New Delhi



RSPN, Bhutan



IIT, Guwahati



BUET, Dhaka

SaciWATERS

B - 87, 3rd Avenue, Sainikpuri,

Secunderabad - 500 094, Telangana, India

Telephone: +91 40 27117728, 64642602

Tele Fax: +91 40 27116721

Email: info@saciwaters.org; Website: www.saciwaters.org