

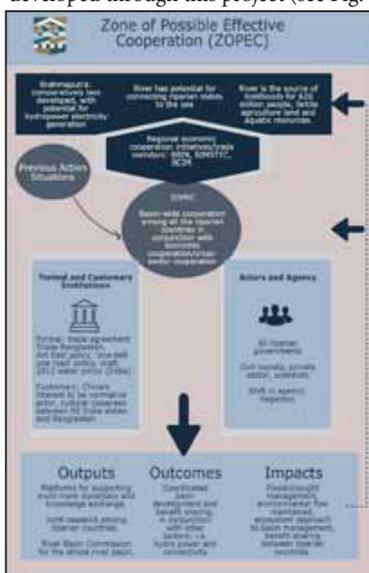
Transboundary Water Cooperation

Brahmaputra River

Water is an essential resource for life, health and development. In many parts of the world, water, particularly freshwater, has been source of both conflict and cooperation. As a way to manage conflict and enhance cooperation, it is critical to identify factors that affect water cooperation. The Water Diplomacy project, initiated by The Hague Institute for Global Justice along with seven global partners, aims to identify key factors that affect water cooperation, taking a combined approach of research and stakeholder dialogues. In doing so, we identified a zone of possible effective cooperation (ZOPEC), where the potential for mutual gains between countries is significant. Over the past decade, a handful of such projects have shown a promising potential for cooperation in the South Asia region. However, the overall progress in cooperation still has a long way to go in the region and a greater effort and commitment is needed.

The project conducted an in-depth analysis of factors that affect cooperation over the Brahmaputra basin, one of the largest in South Asia. The Brahmaputra river (and many of its tributaries) emerges from the eastern Himalaya and traverses across a varied and complex landscape before falling into the Bay of Bengal. The whole river basin has a large hydropower potential, fertile agricultural lands and plenty of aquatic resources that supports riparian populations and their livelihood. The Brahmaputra traverses through four countries including China, India, Bhutan and Bangladesh that claim sovereignty over various parts of the basin. Resource management of the whole basin is now at an important juncture, with increased trade-offs evident between different visions of how the basin should be utilised in the future.

Within the Brahmaputra river basin, most cooperation in the past has typically been between governments (Track I) taking a bilateral approach. Our in-depth analysis of these bilateral cooperation processes identified various factors that influences the way cooperation takes place. In the Brahmaputra basin context, geography, political relationships including power relationships, even within nation states, economics and cultural histories showed complex dependencies influencing the policies and ultimately the overall status/progress of effective cooperation. Thus, the analysis identified the importance of formal institutions such as laws and policies in shaping each basin state's positions vis-à-vis its resource use, as well as customary institutions such as culture and history that shape the way cooperation takes place. These factors are reflected into the multi-track water diplomacy framework, an analytical framework developed through this project (see Fig. 1).



As part of the research approach, our project also analysed processes of dialogues and cooperation facilitated by civil society groups, academia, think tanks and international organizations within the Brahmaputra basin (Track II and III cooperation). These types of cooperation can play different roles to those of Track I cooperation, as they often facilitate dialogue among different stakeholders representing different users of the river, and often result in joint actions such as joint research, capacity building, media campaigns and dialogues. The non-official

nature of these dialogues provided advantages in facilitating informal conversations, fostering long-term relationships and trust among different stakeholders within the basin.

Based on the analysis of existing cooperation and factors affecting cooperation, the project also conducted analysis of the ZOPEC that could bring effective cooperation and provide benefits to all the riparian countries. The analysis was validated during the Brahmaputra basin multi-stakeholder workshop, where further inputs on the ZOPEC were proposed by participants. The workshop was conducted in November 2016 as part of the Water Diplomacy project, and twenty seven participants from four riparian countries participated in active discussions on the ZOPEC.

The key feature of the proposed ZOPEC is to have basin-wide cooperation among all the riparian countries in conjunction with economic cooperation, allowing cross-sectoral cooperation and benefit-sharing. Such cooperation integrates all sectors involving water, ecology and economy in its scope and can potentially create win-wins for all the riparian countries. Taking a cross-sectoral approach in water cooperation can open space for sharing benefits from different sectors. For example, downstream countries can benefit from upstream hydropower generation by offering its trade routes (navigation, road and rail) and access to port facilities in return for energy supply by the hydropower generating country. Arrangements for benefit-sharing may include benefits to the river (e.g., improved water quality, environmental protection, etc.), benefits from the river (e.g., hydropower, irrigation, etc.), benefits because of the river (e.g., reduced risk of conflict, increased food and security, etc.), and benefits beyond the river (e.g., integration of markets, benefits of regional trade, etc.). Adequate management of the basin, based on an ecosystem approach, can also promote tourism as the river is a home to endangered species such as river dolphins.

The circle in the centre of Fig. 1 indicates this ZOPEC, followed by potential output, outcome and impact from such cooperation. The analysis of current contextual factors, formal and informal institutions, and actors support the ZOPEC. Existing economic cooperation within the region is one of the key contextual factors that can positively affect the ZOPEC.

Taking a cross-sectoral approach to water cooperation can also create shifts in power relationship where traditionally, large and upper riparian countries tend to dominate and have advantage in use of resources.

While the region is politically fragmented, historically and culturally it is closely inter-linked; harnessing these links can facilitate cross-border cooperation, whilst acknowledging customary institutions can be an important factor that supports cooperation. Our experience of the Water Diplomacy Project in the Brahmaputra basin suggests that building upon these pre-existing ties and augmenting them with multi-track dialogue processes provides a possible route for enhanced cooperation between the countries of eastern South Asia.

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