

Towards Collaborative Transboundary River Governance

Brahmaputra Dialogue Initiative.....

Transboundary rivers are those which crosses political or geographical boundaries, within a nation or internationally, and act as a source of potential growth and development by creating hydrological, social and economic dependency among the basin communities. Trans-boundary waters (TBW) are a critical, non-substitutable resource, which figures prominently in all continents and supports more than 70% of the world's population (Wolf et al., 1998). Managing such profound cross-state resource can pose as a potential security challenge in the current times. Therefore cooperation and collaboration among the riparian nations is a necessity, despite the existing political contention, for effective TBW governance.

Among South Asian rivers, the Brahmaputra is the principal arm of the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna systems. The Yarlung Zangbo/Brahmaputra/Jamuna (hereafter referred as Brahmaputra River Basin) is one of the critical trans-boundary river systems, including four riparian countries —India, China, Bhutan and Bangladesh. This basin constitutes a populace of 130 million, where in more than 40% reside under poverty. The basin is unique, considering its size, annual drainage, sediment load, hydropower capacity, endemic biodiversity and wildlife. Although it is riddled with physical and cross-boundary governance challenges, there are many signs of on-going cooperation: flood season data sharing between India and China; cooperation on navigation between India and Bangladesh; hydropower development collaboration between India and Bhutan.

Brahmaputra dialogues process since 2013

Dialogues are considered a best practice to enable co-management of the river resources, jointly mitigate disasters, address development and livelihood issues. An inclusive dialogue process can help to build capacity of multiple stakeholders through sharing of knowledge and information related to the various aspects of TBW management. For dialogues to be effective, it has to be multi stakeholder, multilateral and gender sensitive so that voices of all the concerned stakeholders are represented (Brouwer et al., 2016).

Addressing the complexity of transboundary governance, SaciWATERS initiated a dialogue process in 2013 for the River Brahmaputra through the project titled "Transnational Policy Dialogue for Improved Water Governance of Brahmaputra River". This was a first of its kind in the basin. The objective was to understand the issues of the region, its challenges, and means for fostering cooperation across the boundaries for better governance. SaciWATERS along with IIT-Guwahati (IIT-G), Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) and The Asia Foundation initiated a bilateral dialogue between India and Bangladesh in 2013.

Since then, the dialogue has progressed to Phase II and now currently in Phase III, expanding to eight partner organisations, across four riparian countries of the Basin – in a multilateral dialogue on river basin co-management. The objective now has expanded to include multilateral and multi-stakeholder dialogue process among the riparian states and nations. Through various country and regional level dialogues, the process has grown from track 3 to track 1.5 stakeholders participating in these deliberations. In the current phase (Phase-3), efforts are exerted to build a two-way capacity building process engaging community representatives and bureaucrats. It also seeks to enhance gender balance by empowering women to contribute to dialogues and bring out local women's narratives to better inform decision-making process regarding TBW issues.

Achievements since 2013

Brahmaputra Dialogue has been successful in bringing together track 3, 2 and 1.5 diplomats from India, Bangladesh, and Bhutan; and influential academicians from China on one platform. The dialogue has provided a space for multi-level actors and stakeholders to interact and share

views, which would have not been possible otherwise. One of the major achievements of the project has been the recognition of the importance of a dialogue in the Brahmaputra Basin. Further, this initiative has generated a demand from the stakeholders for the continuation of the dialogue so as to create a pathway for the formulation of a forum on Brahmaputra Basin management. It has built relationship between departments and CSO's across borders that pave way for cooperation. It has shaped consensus on the key challenges being faced at local, state and national levels. Three years of dialogue helped in realising that it is imperative to understand and acknowledge the existing cooperation within the basin. The project has attempted to place a greater focus on the identification of avenues of cooperation. Brahmaputra Dialogue initiative is steadily contributing towards building collaboration among the riparian nations of China, India, Bhutan and Bangladesh for effective TBW governance.

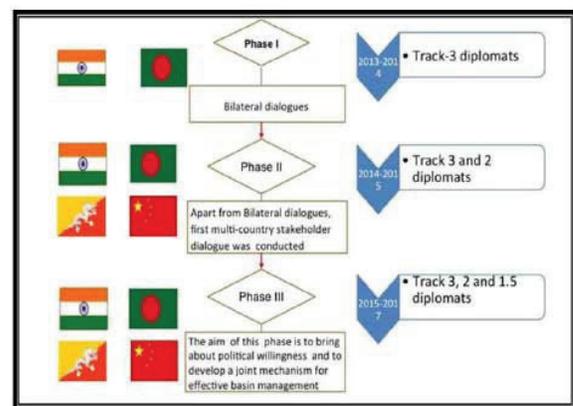


Fig. 1. Transnational Policy Dialogue for Improved Water Governance of Brahmaputra River- Phase progression

Way forward

Addressing the concerns of inclusion and capacity, the way forward looks to involve and build capacity of the stakeholders, both women and men, both CSO's and bureaucrats for decision making process to become more gender sensitive. Although it is difficult to remove power asymmetries, the project through such dialogue initiatives is attempting to encourage the basin hegemon to work towards a holistic and sustainable management of the river basin. River basin management is an intricate issue, requiring effective two-way communication and dialogues. Dialogues, however are a slow and deliberate process. The process requires time for building consensus towards inclusion and optimal agreements. This effort while slow is steadily building foundations for long-term relationships and paving the pathways for cooperation towards effective management of Brahmaputra River.

References

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