

Lessons from Civil Society Engagement on Water



South Asia.....



Photo : Subrat Sharma

South Asia's transboundary river systems i.e. Indus, Ganges and Brahmaputra - collectively support over 700 million people across the sub-continent. Despite a number of formal bilateral mechanisms that mediate water allocation and use, the management of these rivers has for the most part been abysmal. Given the complexity of transboundary water management, this is perhaps not surprising. However, the approach to water management in South Asia is also a large part of the problem. Governments and state agencies at a national level continue to play a dominant role in decision-making processes associated with transboundary water management (TWM). From a disciplinary perspective, the approach to TWM is overwhelmingly technical focused largely on designing engineering solutions to manage what are very large, complex and inter-dependent eco-systems. Basin level or regional planning of river systems, while recognized in theory, in principle has yet to be actualized either at a national or transboundary level. In this closed environment, there is limited scope for alternative perspectives to percolate into the system.

Greater civil society engagement on transboundary water governance issues is vital to ensure a more comprehensive and nuanced approach to policy making and planning on water, particularly to effectively address its social and ecological dimensions. Given the fact that there are often multiple and diverse actors with differing interests and stakes in the use and management of a water resource, civil society organizations (CSOs) have the capacity to navigate these differences and bring different actors and perspectives together to the negotiating table. This in turn can help in informing and providing legitimacy to policy and planning processes and reduce conflicts. As mediators, CSOs also serve to bridge the gap between state and non-state actors; highlighting key issues and concerns from a grassroots and community perspective and at the same time playing a constructive role to build local support for government policies and programs. Last, but not least, civil society engagement is critical to bringing in the voices of the excluded and marginalized in particular women, girls and indigenous communities that are not only the most vulnerable but also at the frontlines of climate change linked disasters and impacts.

Engaging with civil society on regional water governance issues is however no easy task. Despite many efforts, the space for engagement and representation of civil society voices at key national and international forums remains limited. At a regional level, civil society engagement and collaboration on transboundary water in South Asia has been equally challenging. The lack of regional integration; weak land, sea and air connectivity, not to mention the absence of integrated mobile and banking services has made it very difficult for CSOs to work collaboratively across borders to share experiences and exchange best practices. However, there are signs of increasing openness and

willingness both within and outside government for engaging with civil society on an issue as complex as transboundary water.

Since 2011, The Asia Foundation has supported civil society organizations in South Asia to work collaboratively to address the region's complex water resource challenges. Through support to CSOs working in India, Nepal and Bangladesh, the Foundation has been working to broaden discussions on water beyond the state, and create multi-stakeholder platforms for dialogue on water in the region. The Foundation's programming has focused on convening and supporting multi-stakeholder and multi-country dialogues and platforms on water; supporting media training and exchange programs for more informed reporting on transboundary water issues; and initiatives to enhance the availability of data and information on water in the region. Some of the key lessons learned from engaging with civil society on water issues in South Asia have been first of all to recognize the importance of engaging with governments at different levels. Any effort at bringing about reform will only succeed where there are concerted efforts to engage with bureaucrats, technocrats and water professionals at different levels i.e., district, state and national. Second; access to credible data and information is critical to inform not only government interventions but also to enable civil society to develop credible counter-narratives. Third, engaging with the media is critical to busting many of the myths that surround the transboundary water discourse in the region. The Asia Foundation along with the Third Pole Project has supported a number of media fellowships and study tours with environmental journalists in India, Nepal and Bangladesh in order to encourage balanced and informed reporting of transboundary water issues. Fourth, moving beyond dialogue and policy level engagement; where civil society engagement on cross-border issues is perhaps of most value, is where it serves to highlight the interests and needs of communities that are dependent on and most impacted by changes in transboundary river regimes. Today, across South Asia, many organizations are at the forefront of researching, analysing and reporting on the diverse impacts that climate change for example, is having on the livelihoods of people dependent on rivers. Ensuring that the lessons from their work is appropriately channelled into the policy and planning process at a national and regional level is critical to reforming the TWM regime in South Asia.

To conclude, much of the debate on transboundary water issues in countries in the region, has been led by governments with limited space for civil society engagement. However, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that civil society engagement is crucial to a more productive, collaborative and constructive discussion on the issue of water security. Specifically, at a national level, civil society organizations can serve as important conduits for fostering dialogue, highlighting critical issues around environment, biodiversity, livelihoods and gender, and linking grassroots issues to national policy making processes. At a transboundary level, through their ability to engage, network and convene across borders, civil society organizations can engage with a range of stakeholders, and foster dialogue processes that support and bolster formal negotiations. In this way, civil society can serve to highlight critical issues on water security, foster collaborative relationships and partnerships that transcend borders and in so doing deescalate tensions around regional cooperation on water.

Mandakini Devasher Surie(mandakini.surie@asiafoundation.org)

Senior Program Officer,
The Asia Foundation
114 JorBagh,
New Delhi - 110 003, India