



Photo: Nodi Boithok facilitated by Gang Umayen Kendra in Ponnai, Kulliam, Bangladesh (BIR)

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TROSA LEARNING BRIEF

NODI BOITHOK (RIVER MEETING)

**STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES' COLLECTIVE
ACTION FOR INCLUSIVE WATER GOVERNANCE IN
BRAHMAPUTRA & MEGHNA BASINS**



OXFAM



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nodi Boithok or 'River Meeting' is a process, through which civil society organizations and local vulnerable communities collectively work, to identify water governance challenges and opportunities at the grassroots level. Through this process, communities' capacity to engage with and influence duty bearers is strengthened, to secure their water resource rights.

The process was initiated in early 2018 in Bangladesh by TROSA programme and has been implemented by two partners - Center for Natural Resource Studies (CNRS) and Gana Unnayan Kendra in Brahmaputra and Meghna basins, respectively. So far, through a series of 30 *Nodi Boithoks*, we have engaged over 300 community leaders (women and men). They discussed and planned strategies to influence and resolve issues such as access to river bank erosion control support, fisheries rights, access to inland water transport, remedies from the impacts of 'malfunctioning' rubber

dam and unplanned and unregulated sand and gravel-mining - all of which are related to the governance of transboundary river basins - Meghna, Brahmaputra and Jinjiram. Issues raised, discussed and remedial actions proposed in these meetings were later shared with relevant Bangladeshi stakeholders at sub-district and national levels. Some of these can later be taken forward to cross-boundary counterparts in India at state and central levels, especially those related with Brahmaputra and Meghna basins.

Among the outcomes of this initiative, most significant is a participatory influencing process to make Hilsa fisheries more inclusive and promote community-led indigenous river erosion control infrastructure and start discussing about the transboundary dimensions of both these issues.

INTRODUCTION

Rivers in South Asia are governed as state-owned common pool resources. Over a long period of time, communities living in these river basins have been detached from the governance systems, despite the water policies aiming at a participatory governance model. This has worsened vulnerabilities and poverty among river-dependent communities.

Now, communities' participation in river related issues are often limited to grievances over encroachment of river banks, demand for flood and erosion protection infrastructure, or shortage of water for irrigation and drinking. Even in such cases of protest, the initiatives

often die at the grassroots, mainly because it is not business as usual for the local communities to talk about 'big-matters' like river governance, especially to design the solutions to the challenges they face.

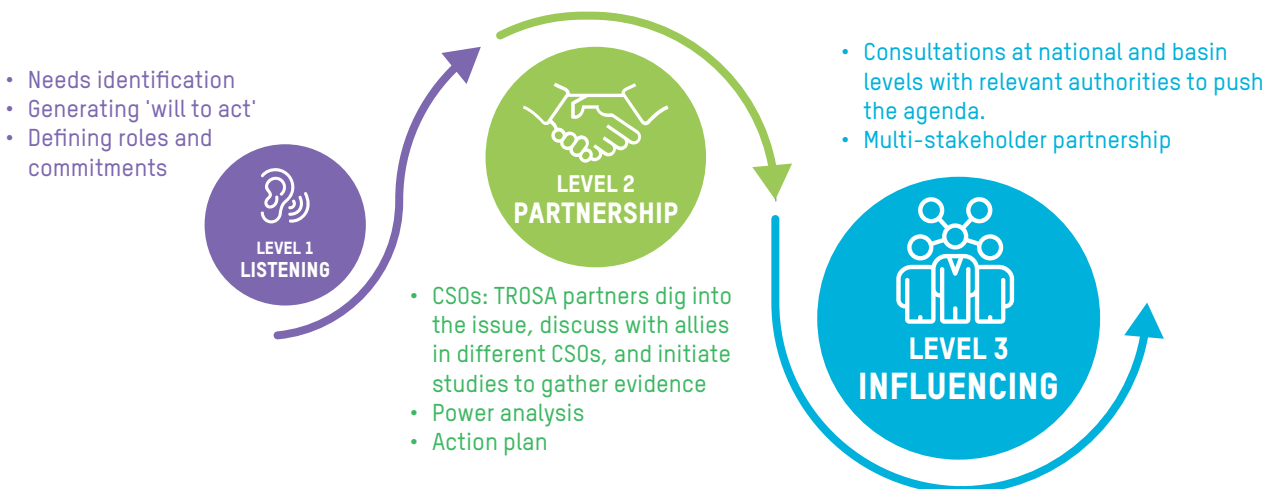
This pretext has compelled Oxfam and its partners to play the role of a catalyst for community-led initiatives to uncover the root causes of the most pressing concerns and foster partnerships between civil society organizations (CSO) and men and women from stakeholder communities towards achieving inclusive and equitable solutions.

APPROACH

Nodi Boithok follows a bottom-up approach starting with monthly meetings at the village level to listen to stories of the communities living around the TROSA working areas in Brahmaputra and Meghna basins. These events are organized by CNRS and GUK, who use reflections from the *Nodi Boithoks* to forge partnership with other relevant CSOs. They decide whether the issues require substantiation of evidence before moving forward, while also conducting a power analysis of the stakeholders involved. Based on

the results, the most pressing issues across multiple geographic locations covering shared river basins are selected for advocacy.

Accordingly, CSOs make an initial influencing plan in partnership with communities. With time, this is escalated to national and basin levels and several *Nodi Boithoks* usually happen in between for coordinated planning and reporting back to the communities on progress of influencing.



ISSUES AND ACTIONS

PROBLEM	NEED FOR TRANSBOUNDARY COOPERATION	ACTIONS TAKEN SO FAR
<p>1. Practices of 'Exclusion' in Hilsa management:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Exclusion of fishermen from the benefits of Hilsa fisheries in North Bengal (Bangladesh) and Assam (India) and over fishing in Bay of Bengal (Bangladesh, India and Myanmar)• Marginalization of fishermen in the current management system (top down enforcement approach and undermining human rights)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bangladesh, India, and Myanmar to establish a transboundary collaboration for inclusive and participatory governance system of Hilsa fisheries, providing just benefits to fishers from all riverine areas from Bay of Bengal to Assam	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Discussion in <i>Nodi Boithoks</i> at local level• Learning visit between fisherfolk and CSOs in Brahmaputra and in Meghna basins• Consultation with top officials of the Department of Fisheries in Bangladesh• Hilsa Watch (participatory monitoring of closure on Hilsa fishing)
<p>2. Unsustainable sand extraction:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fast infrastructural growth and mega projects created high demand for sand• Community members and CSOs don't have their say in sand management• CSOs and communities perceive indiscriminate sand extraction from rivers as a threat to fisheries and river habitat and a potential reason for erosion.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cumulative impact assessment/ strategic environmental assessment of mega projects and trace their sand 'footprint'	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consultation at <i>Nodi Boithoks</i>• National consultation with CSOs and National River Conservation Commission (NRCC)
<p>3. Exclusion of small boat users and traders from transboundary inland water transport system</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Push for enabling policies in Bangladesh and India to include grass-roots communities as users and beneficiaries of transboundary water transport system	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Discussion at Nodi Boithok• Youth-led study (ongoing)
<p>4. Lack of respect and support for traditional and ecosystem based management practices for erosion control:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Government high cost mega-projects focus on erosion control only, which requires significant time and money and excludes local communities from management	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reviving traditional erosion control practices across shared basins	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Discussion in Nodi Boithok• Demonstration in Jijiram Basin
<p>5. Community-led flash flood preparedness</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Transboundary community-based early warning system (CBFEWS) and flood preparedness in Jijiram river system	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Discussion at Nodi Boithok

LEARNING

Nodi Boithoks have increased level of confidence among community members, especially women, about their rights and entitlements. It is important to note that if enabling environment can be created, community members can raise their voice and demand their rights from the authorities. With continuation and mainstreaming of this process across the shared river basins, a more inclusive water governance in the basin is possible. In countries (like Bangladesh) where the policy keeps options open for community participation in decision-making processes at all levels, proper implementation and monitoring of the policies will be critically important.



Photo: A Nodi Boithok, organized by CNRS in Bishnupur, Chandpur/Oxfam



Photo: An indigenous technique to reduce river erosion, known as bunding, has been revived by the communities in Jinjiram River following discussions at Nodi Boithoks/Oxfam 2019

About TROSA

TROSA is a five year (2017-2021) regional water governance programme being implemented in the transboundary river basins of Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) in Nepal, India and Bangladesh and the Salween in Myanmar. Adopting a human-rights based approach, TROSA facilitates river dependent communities' participation in water governance and help them uphold their rights to water. As part of this, it also supports and promotes multi-stakeholder partnerships and collective action for inclusive water governance policies and practices at various levels. TROSA is funded by the Government of Sweden and managed by Oxfam.

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Disclaimer: Views expressed in this brief are those of the author/s and don't represent the views of Oxfam or Government of Sweden.

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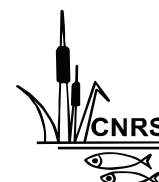
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NEXT STEPS

- TROSA will continue with the *Nodi Boithok* initiative to empower vulnerable river communities, allowing their voices to be heard on management of water resources until a participatory governance system is fully functional.
- Community-led solutions will be addressed and piloted to follow up on community aspirations expressed in the *Nodi Boithoks* by TROSA partners.
- Connecting local governments and relevant private sector actors with communities across shared basins, through the *Nodi Boithok* process will work as a bridge to connect local and regional stakeholders toward inclusive water governance at a basin scale.

