



*Small mechanized boats offer a source of trade and livelihood for riverine communities in the transboundary rivers of South Asia.
Photo: Dhubri, Assam. Sailendra Yashwant/ Oxfam India*

TROSA LEARNING BRIEF

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MULTI-STAKEHOLDER COLLABORATION FOR MORE INCLUSIVE INDIA- BANGLADESH TRANSBOUNDARY INLAND WATER POLICIES

BOOSTING TRADE THROUGH INLAND WATERWAYS



Oxfam and TROSA support



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Trade through inland waterways using small mechanised boats offers a source of livelihood for small traders and riverine communities. The current renewed focus on inland waterways in both Bangladesh and India as alternative trade routes to enhance bilateral trade presents good opportunities to improve local businesses and generate employment for local communities.

Since 2017, TROSA and CUTS International have collaborated to generate evidence to address research-policy gaps and facilitate dialogues between government representatives, mainly among the Inland Waterways Authority of India ([IWAI](#)), the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority ([BIWTA](#)), Customs Department of India, Border Security Forces and civil society, traders, boat operators and local communities to tackle stumbling blocks in policy revitalization efforts. Such a targeted bottom-

up approach of engaging multiple stakeholders at various levels on a sustained basis has resulted in positive outcomes at policy level.

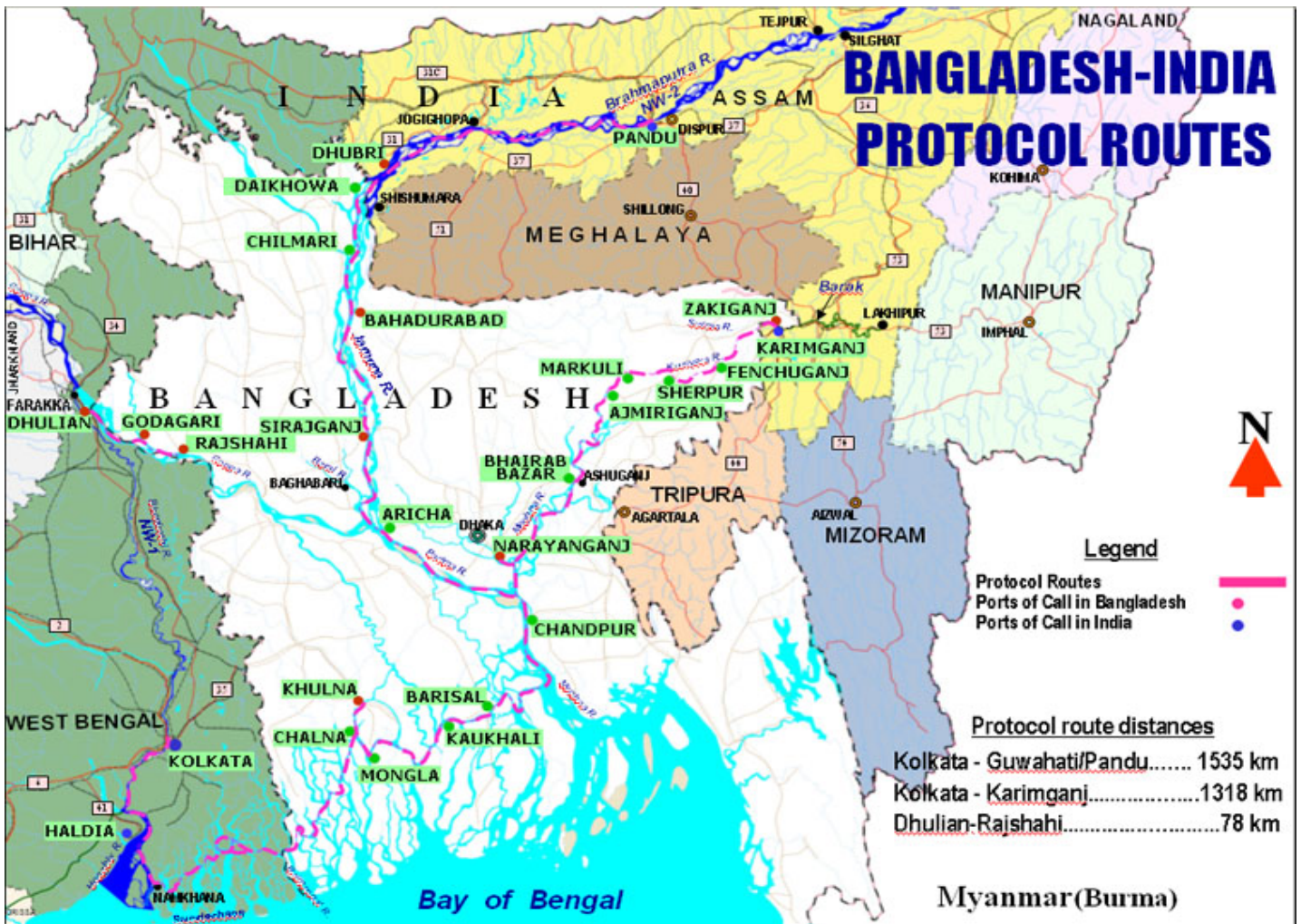
A series of dialogues and discussions were facilitated by CUTS International under TROSA that underlined the need for inclusive spaces for trade via transboundary waterways. These efforts ultimately contributed towards generating a tripartite consensus among authorities, traders and civil society in Bhutan, Bangladesh and India to expand river trade. This has opened up valuable local trade routes for small producers and the marginalised riverine communities. It has also increased opportunities for cross-border trade of local agriproducts as well as created avenues for local women's involvement in promoting inclusive market value chains.

INTRODUCTION

Trade through inland waterways between India and Bangladesh is governed by the Protocol of Inland Water Transit and Trade ([PIWTT](#)). In the past few years, both the governments and traders have shown lot of interest in using inland waterways as an alternate mode of transportation for trade and transit. With the prime focus being on the movement of big steel vessels of 1000- 2000 MT, India and Bangladesh has agreed on joint dredging with 80:20 cost sharing for maintaining navigability between Sirajganj- Daikhowa and Ashuganj and Zakiganj. However, there was little attention to the opportunities for cross border trade in shorter stretches of waterways across immediate borders. Furthermore, the local traders, producer communities and small vessel owners had limited scope for participation in cross border trade. The cases for such opportunities were visible in the stretch between Dhubri (Assam) and Chilmari (Bangladesh) as well as Sonamura (Tripura) and Daudkandi (Bangladesh).

Dhubri and Chilmari were declared [as Ports of Call](#) along the Protocol Route in October, 2018. Currently, Dhubri terminal is being used to transport stone chips from Bhutan to Chilmari and Bahadurabad in Bangladesh via waterways using mechanised low draft vessels. The decision to allow low draft vessels was taken in the 20th Standing Committee Meeting on the Protocol in December 2019.

The [second addendum](#) to the Protocol signed in May 2020 has included Sonamura-Daudkandi as new Protocol Route and also declares Jogighopa (Assam) as a Port of Call. Bhutanese traders were interested to have Jogighopa as a Port of Call as the approach road to Dhubri terminal is a bit congested. In September 2020, a vessel carrying cement from Bangladesh reached Tripura (India) in a [first ever export](#) trip through inland waterways.

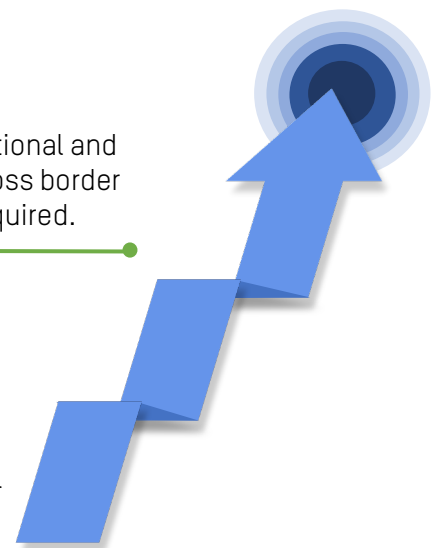


Map: CUTS International

TROSA, CUTS International, and partners¹ interacted with different stakeholders, including women, creating awareness and generating evidence in support of cross border trade via waterways.

Steps:

- 3** Multi-stakeholder dialogues at subnational, national and bilateral levels on the prospects of inclusive cross border trade, infrastructural and regulatory reforms required.
- 2** Awareness generation among boatmen, local traders on the possibilities of cross border trade through Protocol Route- (saves time, money)
- 1** Evidence generation at ground level on tradable commodities. Removing the misconception that PIWTT permits only big steel hull vessels for transboundary operation.



¹ Oxfam India and North East Research & Social Work Networking (NERSWN) supported CUTS in evidence generation in Assam; Oxfam Bangladesh and Gana Unnayan Kendra in Kurigram Bangladesh.

The key policies that needed intervention



1

Declaring new Ports of Call/rejuvenating the forgotten Customs notified river stations

2

Allowing smaller shallow draft vessels to ply in Protocol Routes

3

Allowing transit cargo movement from Bhutan to Bangladesh through waterways

Local traders use small boats to ferry goods along the inland waterways of Bangladesh and India
Photo: CUTS International



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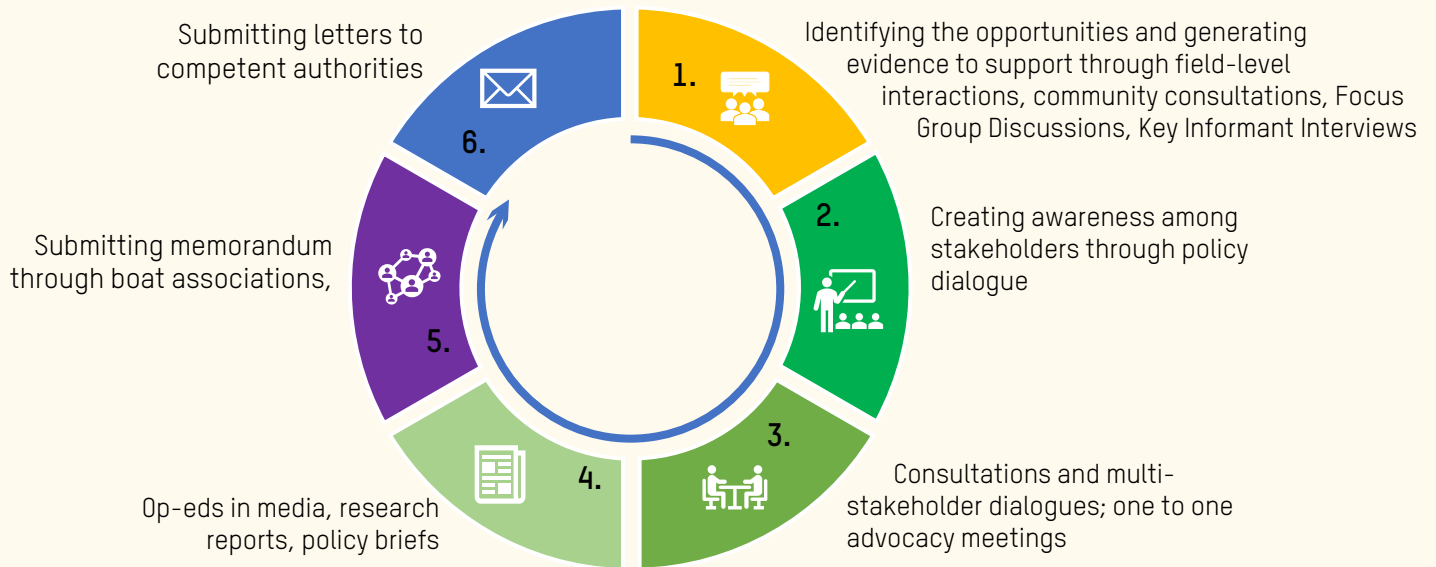
93 kms of Gumti river has been recently included in the Indo-Bangladesh Protocol route connecting Tripura with Bangladesh and rest of India through Inland Waterways. This route has good potential of enhancing the Exim trade between Tripura and Bangladesh connecting hinterlands with the main markets of Bangladesh.

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~Mr Shashi Bhushan Shukla, MEMBER (TRAFFIC & LOGISTICS),
Inland Waterways Authority of India



How we engaged and influenced the key stakeholders and decision makers



Why small boats?

The upper stretches of river Brahmaputra and Barak have poor navigability for big vessels particularly during lean season. Thus, introduction of vessels that can play in low draft conditions and diversification of cargo based on local demand can increase the volume of trade through Protocol Routes. Around 1000 mechanised shallow boats operate around the border, many having valid registration and survey certificate. Traders across the border are looking forward for an opportunity to use Inland Water Transport due to long waiting time across customs points connected by road link.



A small boat from Bangladesh ferries goods into India.
Photo: CUTS International

KEY LEARNINGS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR REGIONAL COOPERATION

- Initiatives for transboundary cooperation at subnational levels would support local livelihoods in border areas and also help in building trust. Opportunities for economic benefits and livelihoods need to be projected to the local communities for taking them on board.
- Similarly, engaging private sector is crucial. Inland Water Transport is one such area where business interests match with broader geopolitical interests of better infrastructure, regional connectivity and cooperation. Hence, it gained traction from both the sectors. The boat association representatives submitted a memorandum to the local Member of Parliament, Dhubri for allowing the movement of shallow boats across border.
- Participation by locals who are still having family connections across the border will make things happen quicker. Team's interaction at Karimganj LCS (Kushiyara river, NW-16) revealed that there is substantial movement of passengers across the river by boat through the immigration centre. The cross-border passenger movement is primarily for religious tourism, family reunion, medical tourism, and business purposes. The Indian Postal Service provides services to Bangladesh in this border location crossing the river by boat. Local trade and tourism near border areas can lead to people -to-people connectivity and subnational cooperation.
- There are other transboundary rivers (For e.g. Ichamati and Karnaphuli rivers) that may have similar prospects but are yet to be explored.

CHALLENGES

- Vessels plying in Protocol Routes are to be registered and surveyed. Though in India the mechanised boats of 10 to 50 tonnes capacities are registered, vessels of similar capacity are not registered in Bangladesh. However, there are barges of 250-300 tonnes capacity in Bangladesh which are registered and currently engaged in carrying stones from Dhubri to Chilmari.
- In case of trading perishables, quarantine facilities are required near customs stations.
- Currently, the trade is one-sided i.e India to Bangladesh. Absence of cargo from Bangladesh side adds cost to the transportation.
- Inadequate knowledge among traders about the prospects of waterways; poor linkages with traders across border. Under TROSA, CUTS International and Oxfam India are organising Trader's meet in Meghna basin and Brahmaputra basin respectively to sensitise traders on the benefits of waterways and establish linkages across border
- Hatsinghimari and Rawmari have to be declared as extended Ports of Call for Dhubri and Chilmari, respectively for wider benefits.

EXPECTED CHANGES

- Increase in income level for local traders, fisherfolk, boatowners, farmers, craftsmen, local women working on handlooms and women groups engaged in various economic activities.
- New employment opportunity for local educated youths to work as clearing and forwarding agents, reuse of many unused jute and other go-downs lying near the river bank at Dhubri which were very active during heydays of inland water transport in the 20th century.
- New boats will be constructed providing opportunity for boat building industry.

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.

Author: Veena Vidhyadharan, CUTS International and Sameer Singh, Oxfam in Cambodia

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