



Building Trust and Confidence

Cultivating Joint Sustainable Management of the Sundarbans Through a Programmatic Approach

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CONTEXT:

The Sundarbans is a cluster of low-lying islands, with its highest point only 2 meters above sea level, surrounded by a labyrinth of channels, swamps, and wetlands in Bangladesh and India. It has the largest contiguous mangrove forest in the world and one of the most biodiverse ecosystems.

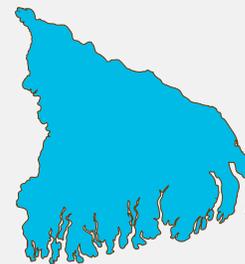
The Sundarbans is home to about 13 million people, more than 400 types of plants and algae, and more than 500 wildlife species — including the threatened Bengal tiger, Gangetic dolphin and olive ridley turtle. Its coastal location means the Sundarbans is under active formation. Sediment deposits from upstream rivers collide with the coastal forces of tides, cyclones and storm surges to reshape the largely fluid landmass through a continual process of erosion and accretion.

Human-induced stresses, such as deforestation, agriculture, and construction of embankments and upstream dams, have caused shifts in natural processes and altered the topography and hydrology of the area. Little or no freshwater flows in the lower part of the delta. That is affecting livelihoods and gradually reducing ecosystem services in an area with some of the poorest, most vulnerable communities in South Asia.

Future climate shocks in the Sundarbans could lead to increased storm runoff, frequent and extensive flooding, and changes in salinity levels, which will hurt agricultural productivity and forest composition. Mangroves act as a buffer to slow cyclones

hitting densely populated areas, such as Kolkata and Khulna, with maximum force winds. The mangroves also are a carbon sink and help stabilize mudflats and catch sediment deposits. Global climate models suggest that the coastal parts of the mangrove forest likely will vanish within 50 years.

Sundarbans Landscape



The Bangladesh-India border that cuts through the Sundarbans has administratively split the landscape. The absence of coordinated decision-making in the Sundarbans has led to piecemeal, sector-driven responses the region's complex governance challenges.

Bangladesh and India reached a Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) in 2011 to manage and sustainably develop the Sundarbans under an umbrella framework agreement. The framework included collaboration in water resources management, information sharing, disaster management and climate change adaptation. These agreements, however, were not fully operationalized.

APPROACH:

The South Asia Water Initiative (SAWI) supported the two countries and their Joint Working Group on Conservation of the Sundarbans (JWG) through activities that aim to help operationalize the 2011 agreements and coordinate country-level actions with a dynamic and permanent joint institutional mechanism for sustainable development across the entire Sundarbans.

Activities were implemented through a programmatic approach to fast-track cooperation, focusing on (1) establishing and fostering multi-stakeholder dialogues to build an environment of trust and confidence for collaborative action; and (2) producing technical evidence, through a process of joint research and strong multi-stakeholder engagement, to inform the dialogues and serve as baseline guidance to determine strategic priorities once the institutional architecture is in place.

In 2015, SAWI facilitated and supported the Bangladesh-India Sundarbans Region Cooperative Initiative (BISRCI). A group of policy think tanks, civil society organizations and academic institutions from Bangladesh and India, along with the World Bank developed BISRCI as a knowledge-based advocacy platform for effective bilateral cooperation to protect the Sundarbans.

SAWI and BISRCI held awareness-raising events and capacity-building workshops about the Sundarbans' vulnerability to climate change to facilitate bilateral cooperation and influence policy decisions. BISRCI supported organizing a side event at the 2015 UN Climate Change Conference in Paris (COP 21) — the yearly session of the Conference of the Parties to the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the 1997 Kyoto Protocol. BISRCI strived pushing the Sundarbans agenda at the global level, and bringing together policy makers from Bangladesh and India to chart a path toward joint management of the Sundarbans.

BISRCI made a formal proposal to the Government of India, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change. Selected from among 60 proposals, the "Climate Change Adaptation in Coastal Areas and Other Sectors: Experience from the Sundarbans Region" side event had the objective of informing and influencing the global climate change community about the importance of the Sundarbans in a global climate change adaptation agenda and to seek implementation support (through finance and technology) for the Sundarbans under the Green Climate Fund post-2020 as the single largest contiguous adaptation site in the world.

Ahead of COP 21, BISRCI held a dozen meetings with key ministries in Bangladesh and India to discuss how joint and sustainable development for climate resilience could be showcased. BISRCI emphasized the importance of the participation of the relevant ministers from both countries, including the foreign/

external affairs, environment, forest and climate change, water resources, surface transport ministries to provide impetus for Sundarbans cooperation, and to create and sustain a Sundarbans joint platform.

The side event attracted more than 100 delegates at COP 21, including influencers from civil society organizations, international media, think tanks, developed countries, and Bangladesh and India. Both environment ministers participated — the first such meeting to discuss the Sundarbans at an international event — and committed to cooperate to conserve biodiversity and ensure sustainable and climate-resilient development. Following the ministers' public commitment, a panel discussion promoted the need for international resources to help meet climate change adaptation requirements.

"Sundarbans may be in two countries, but tigers know no boundary. This hotspot has to be preserved together. We have already agreed that we will have a joint management plan to preserve Sundarbans.."

— Prakash Javadekar,
Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate
Change, Government of India

"We will try to work out how the climate vulnerability of the Sundarban can be raised on a global platform jointly and much more strongly."

— Anwar Hossain Manju,
Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate
Change, Government of Bangladesh (2015)

BISRCI used the momentum of COP 21 to continue building a case for Sundarbans climate change adaptation. In 2017, the group advocated for Green Climate Fund support at the COP 23 meeting in Bonn, Germany. A BISRCI-produced documentary film, "Nature's Own People" (2017), used personal stories to describe development challenges in the fragile wetlands. The documentary was shown at more than 15 international film festivals, including the Large Short Films Festival in Mumbai and the CinemAmbiente Environmental Film Festival in Turin, Italy.

BISRCI established a dialogue process for news media organizations in Bangladesh and India to elevate the Sundarbans climate story to the national discourse. A 2015 workshop strengthened the news media's capacity to write authoritative stories on Sundarbans climate change. The journalists' visit to the Sundarbans included seeing climate change impacts on fishing communities, forest camps, and villages and learning about potential ecotourism services to create jobs. The workshop took a holistic view of the ecological, socioeconomic and climate vulnerabilities of the Sundarbans.

The workshop, and subsequent smaller media events, sparked a media collaboration plan, including joint media outputs, future capacity-building events, and a social media strategy to increase stakeholder engagement and accurate reporting on the Sundarbans. Links established among local and major media outlets facilitated collaborative news reporting projects to detail Sundarbans challenges, generating calls for action by stakeholder groups.

BISRCI facilitated public engagements and interventions include sustained local dialogues between community and local government and state and federal government, with participants identified through a stakeholder map completed in April 2016. The map sets out the roles of government ministries, offices of foreign and external affairs, water resources agencies, inland water transport, forest and environment agencies, and national security entities.

These inputs have indirectly influenced policy-related discussions, including nationally determined climate change actions in both countries, ideas on managing national parks on both sides of the border, and cooperation on the blue economy agenda. Even amid national elections in Bangladesh and India, when internal issues took priority in national dialogue, BISRCI worked in the background to strengthen the enabling environment for enhanced cooperation.

In March 2019, BISRCI facilitated the signing of a MoU allowing passenger and cruise vessels on coastal and protocol shipping routes that were previously restricted to cargo shipments. BISRCI

also supported deliberations between the two countries on SAWI's conceptual plan to integrate community-based tourism along the inland waterway route and to promote inland navigation in the Sundarbans. The agreement may lead to further cooperation supporting inland waterways transport and people-to-people contacts to strengthen bilateral relations.

ABOUT SAWI: The South Asia Water Initiative (SAWI) was a multi-donor trust fund supported by the UK, Australia and Norway and administered by the World Bank. SAWI supported a portfolio of activities designed to increase regional cooperation in the management of the major Himalayan river systems in South Asia to deliver sustainable, fair, and inclusive development and climate resilience. It did this through four complementary outcome areas: strengthening awareness and knowledge on regional water issues; enhancing technical and policy capacity across the region; facilitating dialogue and participatory decision processes to build trust and confidence; and scoping and informing investment designs. SAWI's work was structured across three river basins (Indus, Ganges and Brahmaputra) and the Sundarbans, spanning Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Nepal and Pakistan. SAWI reports, briefs, and knowledge products are at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/sawi>.