

Background Note

Bangladesh-India
Sundarban Region
Cooperation
Initiative

May 2018



PREAMBLE

PM level 2011 MoU between Bangladesh and India on Conservation of the Sundarban

- The MoU on the conservation of the Sundarban was signed on 6 September 2011 by Bangladesh and India
- The MoU's preamble emphasizes that the Sundarban is a single eco-system shared between the two countries.
- It points out that both governments are party to the Convention on Bio-diversity 1992 and the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands which calls for adoption of common principles of conservation.

Joint Working Group under 2011 MoU

- The working group is anchored in the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change
- The 2011 MoU recognises the following actions for the working group:
 - Conserve and monitor the Sundarban
 - Encourage mangrove regeneration, habitat restoration and rehabilitation programs to increase the potential for carbon sequestration
 - Address issues of livelihood, deprivation by flooding and other climate related disasters, man-animal conflict, pollution, resource depletion.
 - Catalogue the diversity of flora and fauna in the Sundarbans
- The Sundarban region also presents additional new opportunities for coordination in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and in realising the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs).

Bangladesh-India Sundarban Region Cooperation Initiative

- Since June 2015, the Bangladesh-India Sundarban Region Cooperation Initiative (BI-SRCI) consortium has been implementing a 'knowledge-based advocacy initiative' to facilitate and support effective bilateral cooperation in the Sundarban Region. Partners in this initiative include: EnGIO, Kolkata; Institute of Defence Studies & Analysis (IDSA), New Delhi; International Water Association (IWA); Observer Research Foundation (ORF), New Delhi; Policy Research Institute (PRI), Dhaka; The World Bank and The World Wildlife Fund (WWF), India.

- The broad vision for the future of joint efforts by Bangladesh and India within the provisions of the 2011 MoU on the Sundarban is that of securing higher quality of life for the people of the Sundarban region without compromising the needs of the ecological habitat in which they live.
- BI-SRCI, aims at advancing the spirit of the September 2011 MoU and other related bilateral agreements between the two countries, such as those on fisheries management, conservation of the tiger, blue economy, and the Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (which now includes the provision of passenger travel).
- Achieving this vision will include but not limited to a joint institutionalised framework that can identify key ecological and social challenges confronted by the Sundarban region, find appropriate responses to the challenges and facilitate implementation of these solutions through respective channels and institutions in Bangladesh and India.
- Under BI-SRCI initiative, several interactions have taken place among elected representatives at the national, state (West Bengal) and local levels on cooperation towards sustainable development of the Sundarban. This includes visits by Members of Parliament from Bangladesh to West Bengal; a jointly organised session at the Paris CoP in December 2015 wherein the Environment Ministers of Bangladesh and India issued a statement supporting increased cooperation on the Sundarban; and a special Legislative Assembly session was held in West Bengal to promote conservation and sustainable development in the Sundarban.
- BI-SRCI has also brought together civil society organizations, think tanks, communities, and key members of the strategic community from the two countries, including organising field-visits to Sundarban, to deliberate on how to enhance further cooperation and devise the way forward for creation of a multi-departmental bilateral platform that will offer actionable suggestions to boost bilateral cooperation on Sundarban.
- BI-SRCI has so far put together lessons drawn from the international experience in joint or coordinated management of shared ecological landscapes among two or more countries. Several exchanges among the journalists from the two countries have also been organised on topics related to Sundarban; this has resulted in increased positive news coverage in the national and international media outlets on Sundarban.
- BI-SRCI suggests development of a “Joint Landscape Narrative” that looks at Sundarban in Bangladesh and India as one ecological landscape for the purpose of sustainable development and conservation of the flora and fauna. This covers several areas such as biodiversity management, history and culture, ecological services, agriculture, livelihoods for the poor, and natural resources management.

Key Recommendations of BI-SRCI

- Both governments may consider forming and enabling a body such as a “Sundarban Foundation” to work with and assist the bilateral JWG. The members of this Foundation can be drawn up from experts/analysts/civil society members associated with the BI-SRCI.
- Such formal/informal affiliation of BI-SRCI to the existing JWG on Sundarban will help quality interaction between the governments and the civil society over issues concerning Sundarban. The research, analysis and inputs generated by BISCRI will greatly contribute to the JWG’s effective functioning and strengthen one important strand of relationship between the two countries. BI-SRCI can function as a body attached to some think-tank like IDSA or ORF, and conduct research on various themes related to Sundarban and regularly interact with the concerned ministries/departments.
- BI-SRCI recommends initiation of eco-tourism which can be enabled with active coordination among the following agencies/institutions. It proposes development of a Joint Ecotourism and Livelihood Action Plan in the Sundarban for capacity building of local communities, including women entrepreneurs, and benefit from commercial activities arising from increased ecotourism. The Ministry of Tourism/ITDC/West Bengal Tourism may be tasked to draw up a plan for cross-border eco-tourism which can be operated by private companies who already have boats operating on rivers in Bengal and Assam.
- Since this would be a complex exercise involving departments of Customs and Immigration, private operators and other stakeholders, development of a Joint Sundarban Conservation and Management Plan by the respective Environment Ministries of the two countries is absolutely essential. Sundarban Haats may be developed to encourage transboundary trade and sale to tourists visiting Sundarban.
- Organize a Conference with stakeholders from both sides to help the exercise to draw up the proposed action-plan for sustainable development, preservation and conservation of Sundarban with the additional objective of seeking out international funding. This should include NGOs working with women entrepreneurs.

Role of Proposed Sundarban Foundation

- Facilitate continues progress on objects and goals of the 2011 MoU
- Follow up on decisions taken by the meetings of Ministers of External / Foreign Affairs of the GOI and GOB in the context of the Sundarban

- Consider initiatives and projects submitted by independent advisory groups and take the relevant decisions for the performance of joint or co-ordinated studies and projects (if any) and advise on proposals to be implemented
- Evaluate the performance of projects of joint interest.

Common Themes Identified for Joint Action from a Social Perspective

- Reducing vulnerability to natural disasters
- Disaster Management
- Livelihood rehabilitation
- Provision of basic health care, education & skill development
- Minimally invasive livelihood opportunities such as eco-tourism along the protocol route

Common Themes Identified for Joint Action from an Ecological Perspective

- Mangrove restoration
- Flood control
- Sea-level rise
- Conservation of fresh water supplies
- Salinity and water quality management
- Bio-diversity mapping/cataloguing
- Carbon sequestration
- Sustainable cropping patterns

Additional Imperatives for Joint Action from the Perspective of Climate Change

- Taking action towards Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)
- Achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Sundarban Region: A Snapshot

Biophysical

- The Sundarban Biosphere Reserve (SBR) in India is about 9630 km² (9,63,000 hectares)¹
 - 4260 km² (4,26,000 ha) is forested
 - 5370 km² (5,37,000 ha) is inhabited
- The Sundarbans Delta (including inhabited parts and wildlife zones in India & Bangladesh) is about 19,288 km² (19,288,00 ha).
 - 6017 km² (6,01,700 ha) is the forested part in Bangladesh
 - 3641 km² (3,64,000 ha) known as Sundarban Impact Zone (SIZ) in Bangladesh is inhabited
- It is a celebrated ecological habitat
 - It is among the three largest single tract mangrove forests
 - It is the most bio-diverse
 - It is the most significant fish nursery of the Bay of Bengal
 - It is the only habitat of the endangered Bengal Tiger

Social

- It has the lowest per capita income and per capita land area compared to Small Island Developing States (SIDs); it has more people than 18 SIDs
- It suffers persistent pressures from sea level rise, salinization of soil and water, cyclonic storms and flooding
 - Between 1891-1994 it was exposed to 90 cyclones (35 severe)
 - Cyclones alone account for about 45% of all losses in the Sundarban
- 92 % of people are exposed to disaster events (2000-10): (83% in India, 99.6% in Bangladesh)
- The estimated population of the Indian Sundarban region of about 4.1 million people.
 - Population growth is driven in large part by demographics as there seems to be relatively little significant migration to or from the Sundarbans area according to census data.
 - Most of the recent population growth has occurred on the West Bengal side, where the decadal population growth rate of about 14 percent in the area is

¹ Survey of India (now Geological Survey of India)

similar to that for the state of West Bengal, but below India's decadal population growth rate of 18 percent.

- By contrast, the Bangladesh part of the Sundarbans experienced a much smaller decadal population growth rate of 1.34 percent according to the 2011 Population and Housing Census.
 - The population density is also lower in the Bangladeshi portion of the Sundarbans, ranging from 369 inhabitants per square kilometre in Bagerhat district to 844 in Pirojpur district. In comparison, the population density in West Bengal portion of the area is estimated at 2,462 persons per square kilometre in North 24 Parganas and 998 persons in South 24 Parganas.
- Estimates indicate that about 94 percent of the population of the Sundarbans is rural.
- Living conditions are generally very poor and are exacerbated by the area's high exposure and vulnerability to natural disasters.
- According to household survey results, over half the population in North and South Parganas in West Bengal, India live below the poverty line with 10 percent being classified as extremely poor.
- The poverty rates are similarly high in the Bangladeshi portion, half of the population in 17 districts that share borders with the Sundarbans Impact Zone (SIZ) having consumption levels below the upper poverty line.
 - The area's physical infrastructure is inadequate and contributes to limiting access to markets as well as basic services such as electricity.
 - The physical geography of the area greatly limits road construction; boats of varying sizes represent a key mode of transport.
- The main livelihood activity is single-crop rain-fed agriculture, with fishing, forestry, and tourism also offering sources of income.
 - Paddy is the main agricultural crop.
- Nearly 80 percent of households pursue livelihood options that involve inefficient production methods in agriculture, fishing and aquaculture.

Impacts of past environmental degradation are estimated as equivalent to 14 percent of the gross domestic product of the Sundarbans.