

Expanding Tradable Benefits of Trans-boundary Water: Promoting Navigational Usage of Inland Waterways in Ganga and Brahmaputra Basins

National Policy Dialogue

Organised by

South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment (SAWTEE)

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EVENT REPORT

KATHMANDU, 29 June 2017: South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment (SAWTEE) organized an event to discuss the prospects of inland waterways for transboundary connectivity here today. The experts present at the National Policy Dialogue pointed out the urgent need of setting up of an institution to govern water transport to develop navigation as an alternative mode of transport.

The event which was organized to disseminate key findings of the diagnostic study conducted under the “Expanding Tradable Benefits of Trans-boundary Water: Promoting Navigational Usage of Inland Waterways in Ganga and Brahmaputra Basins. The study attempts to identify gaps in policies and institutional capacity for transboundary connectivity via waterways in Nepal. In addition, the study evaluated the connection between existing water transport services and impact on the livelihood of the locals and possibility of using waterways for trade logistics in the Koshi and Gandak River basins in Nepal.

A comprehensive feasibility study of the rivers to assess navigability, upgrading existing traditional boating services at the rivers and identifying the possibility of multi-modal transport system internally will be the first step towards developing navigational services in Nepal, pointed out Ms Dikshya Singh, research officer at SAWTEE. While pointing out the developments related to development in inland waterways in India, Policy Analyst at CUTS International, Dr Saurabh Kumar explained that India has already started the construction of multi-modal terminals at Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh), Sahibganj (Jharkhand) and Haldia (West Bengal) on the Ganga River, known as National Waterway and which is expected to divert the freight traffic from Haldia port.

Dr Posh Raj Pandey, chairman of SAWTEE also urged the policy makers to take advantage of India’s aggressive push into inland waterways by developing navigation within Nepal so that Nepal could be ready to access the high seas through the waterways.

During the interaction, Mr Ajay Dixit, executive director of Institute for Social and Environmental Transition (ISET-Nepal), said that domination of political economy of automobile and surface transport in Nepal has stunted development of alternative mode of transport. He also added that commercial navigation may be possible in the lower stretch of the large rivers. But that too would require massive river engineering, be it constructing embankment or canalizing the river.

Water resources expert, Dr Dwarika Nath Dhungel recalled that attempts were made to develop multi modal transport system to connect hilly areas two decades ago but impetus on road construction diverted the focus to surface transport only. He pointed out a need of conducting a study to gauge how complementary is the water transport to surface transport –especially in terms of long haul transport.

Mr Madhav Belbase, joint secretary, Water and Energy Commission Secretariat, pointed out that not only a dedicated body to govern navigation, Nepal also lacks expertise in water transport. He added that Nepal's water resource is dependent on the rains during four months of monsoon. If we consider commercial navigation then maintaining depth and channel is crucial so without constructing dams, we cannot expect to develop a waterway, he said.

While pointing out how the inland navigation could facilitate trade, transport logistics expert and former president of Nepal Freight Forwarders Association Mr. Rajan Sharma admitted that water transport is considered to be the cheapest form of transport but movement on water may be less but cost of insurance and liabilities coverage and cargo handling at harbor adds to the cost of trading. Considering the cost of transporting cargos through river for landlocked countries like Nepal, cost of freight movement depends on the transit providing country as well, he added.

The event saw participation of about 30 experts representation government agencies, private sectors and experts working in the water resources in Nepal.