

Regional Connectivity: BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity: Summary of event proceedings

SAWTEE, with support from the Asia Foundation, organized a virtual meet on “**Regional Connectivity: BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity**” on 23 September 2022. The meeting discussed connectivity in the BIMSTEC region, with a special focus on the recently published BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity. The meeting was the first among a series of civil society forums to raise awareness and deepen dialogue among civil society organizations in South Asia and the Bay of Bengal region so that they can understand and effectively contribute to deliberations and decisions in formal, official cooperation platforms. The important aspects of the master plan, its gaps, implementation challenges, and way forward for the effective implementation of the master plan for a deeper BIMSTEC integration were vigorously discussed in the meeting.

Dr Ganesh Prasad Pandeya, Secretary, Office of the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers, Government of Nepal, delivered inaugural remark, which was followed by a special remark by Mr. Thiam Hee Ng, Director, Asian Development Bank (ADB). Professor Prabir De, Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), New Delhi, and Mr. Rabi Shanker Sainju, Trade Facilitation Expert, Kathmandu (former Joint Secretary, Ministry of Industry, Commerce, and Supplies, Government of Nepal) delivered presentations to provide comprehensive overview of the master plan. The presentations were followed by deliberations from Mr. Achyut Bhandari, Co-founder, Centre for Research on Bhutanese Society, Thimphu. This followed by informative discussions during the questions and answers session. Dr. Posh Raj Pandey, Chairperson, SAWTEE, moderated the event. The virtual meeting saw participation from several civil society organizations in the region, with discussants encompassing distinguished practitioners, experts, and academics from the region.

Dr Ganesh Prasad Pandeya, in his inaugural remark, highlighted the prospects and challenges of regional integration in the BIMSTEC region. He emphasized that regional integration and connectivity shall offer the member states ways to resolve issues that are more difficult to resolve in the wider multilateral context. He also pointed out that ample room exists for greater regional integration. Moreover, he asserted that transport connectivity is the fundamental prerequisite for regional integration and hence the ‘BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity’, which provides a comprehensive 10-year strategy and action plan for improving the region’s transport linkages, could provide strategic framework to guide action and create synergy among various connectivity initiatives in the region. Finally, he stressed that the political will and the commitment of the member states are keys to the success of this master plan.

Dr. Thiam Hee Ng, in his special remark, provided a brief introduction to BIMSTEC and offered an overview of the important components of the master plan. He emphasized that fostering regional cooperation is one of the three priorities of ADB and as such ADB fully promotes a deeper, wider, and more open BIMSTEC regional integration, especially since BIMSTEC connects two sub-regions—South Asia and Southeast Asia. He mentioned that since BIMSTEC lags behind in transport connectivity, which limits the potential for greater intra-regional trade, the master plan can be instrumental in enhancing the much needed transport connectivity in the region, which he portrayed as the lynchpin of regional cooperation. However, the master plan does not include a detailed financing proposal and upon subsequent study by ADB it has been found that the financing requirement is tremendous, and hence the successful implementation requires bring in other avenues of funding besides ADB, including the private sector, concluded Dr. Ng.

Professor Prabir De provided an overview of the master plan, gaps in the document, and way forward for the robust implementation and deeper regional integration. He started his presentation by highlighting the concept of connectivity— “connectivity is an attribute of a network and is a measure of how well connected any one node is to all other nodes in the network”—, the importance of connectivity—it contributes to economic growth, supply chain efficiency, and resilience—and the relation of the master plan to connectivity. He then explained how BIMSTEC lags in connectivity framework—no integration/harmonization exists among BIMSTEC member countries in the area of harmonized and integrated road and railway network, maritime and waterways network, aviation policy, one ‘customs’, transit, and paperless trade. While acknowledging the important components of the master plan and the significance of political commitment shown by the leaders of seven member states in agreeing to a common master plan for transport connectivity, he portrayed the master plan as having some glaring gaps. While the BIMSTEC master plan seems comprehensive on the surface, it is a political document that takes a piecemeal approach to connectivity; there is the need to upgrade the master plan to a higher level, with a special focus on meaningful trade facilitation, asserted Prof. De. He portrayed high trade barriers (non-tariff measures and procedures); absence of FTA in effect; and negligible intra-regional investment as the major challenges to further regional integration in BIMSTEC. He proposed developing high-level coordination among member states, strengthening BIMSTEC secretariat with professionals, bringing a wide group of development partners in the implementation of the master plan, setting up a dedicated knowledge centre on BIMSTEC (including a nodal think-tank on BIMSTEC in each BIMSTEC country), and implementing the FTA as necessary measures to elevate the master plan to a higher level and to bring about a deeper and meaningful regional integration.

Mr. Rabi Shankar Sainju, in his presentation titled *Trade Facilitation for implementation of BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity*, delved on the importance of trade facilitation for better connectivity in the region. He also pointed necessary gap assessments that need to be carried out to be able to properly implement the master plan—this includes gap assessment in the area of institutions and governance system; level of automation; ICT infrastructure (standard, operating procedures, disaster recovery plans, etc.); Business process reengineering; Data harmonization and standardization; capacity (knowledge, resource, skill sets, etc.); paperless transit (international transit regimes, regional agreements, etc.); cross border mutual recognition; authorized economic operators; legislative frameworks (related to electronics transactions and signatures, and paperless trade and single window); and other cross-border aspects.

Mr. Achyut Bhandari, the panelist of the event, emphasized the need to prioritise the important projects out of all the proposals put forth in the master plan in order to move forward. He also pointed out some gaps in the master plan, which includes the lack of clarity on who does the overall coordination. Since political will does not necessarily translate into action during the implementation of the master plan, the implementation requires clarity on coordination modality; and since there are programs and actions that cross borders, there is the need for clarity on the roles and responsibilities of each member country in implementing the master plan, stressed Mr. Bhandari. Likewise, he mentioned that the master plan is a framework that requires more detailing, while being implemented in stages. He expressed concern over the tardiness in implementation of the master plan as almost five years have already passed and only five years remain for the implementation of the plan which was introduced for the period 2018–2028. Hence, to achieve something by the end of 2028, we need to prioritise projects, mobilise funds, and agree on implementation modalities as soon as possible, asserted Mr. Bhandari.

The event concluded with an informative discussion during the question and answer session, which saw proactive participation from the moderator and the participants.