

Executive Summary

VISION FOR THE SUNDARBAN REGION

RATIONALE AND STRUCTURE FOR JOINT ACTION: FINAL DRAFT

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 final draft of the Vision document being presented today describes the evolution of a vision for an emerging ecological partnership between Bangladesh and India as envisaged by the members from the ORF, IDSA and PRI (ORF plus group). The mandate for the ORF plus group was to engage with Track I level stakeholders to facilitate implementation of the objectives of Memorandum of Understanding between India and Bangladesh on Conservation of the Sundarban signed on 6th September 2011 through shared or coordinated action by Bangladesh and 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.

The means to 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.

The rationale is that an institutional framework could lend more vitality, cohesion, and continuity to the provisions of the 2011 MOU which are comprehensive in identifying the needs of the people and the needs of the ecosystem in which they live. An institutionalised framework may also lead to an internationally recognized profile and identity for the Sundarban region that could potentially attract the attention that the region deserves.

An institutional arrangement will:

- i. Facilitate continuous progress on objectives and goals of the 2011 MOU
- ii. 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

- iii. 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
- iv. Evaluate the performance of projects of joint interest.

Some of the common themes identified for joint action from a social perspective were:

- 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

Some of the common themes identified for joint action from an ecological perspective were:

- 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)

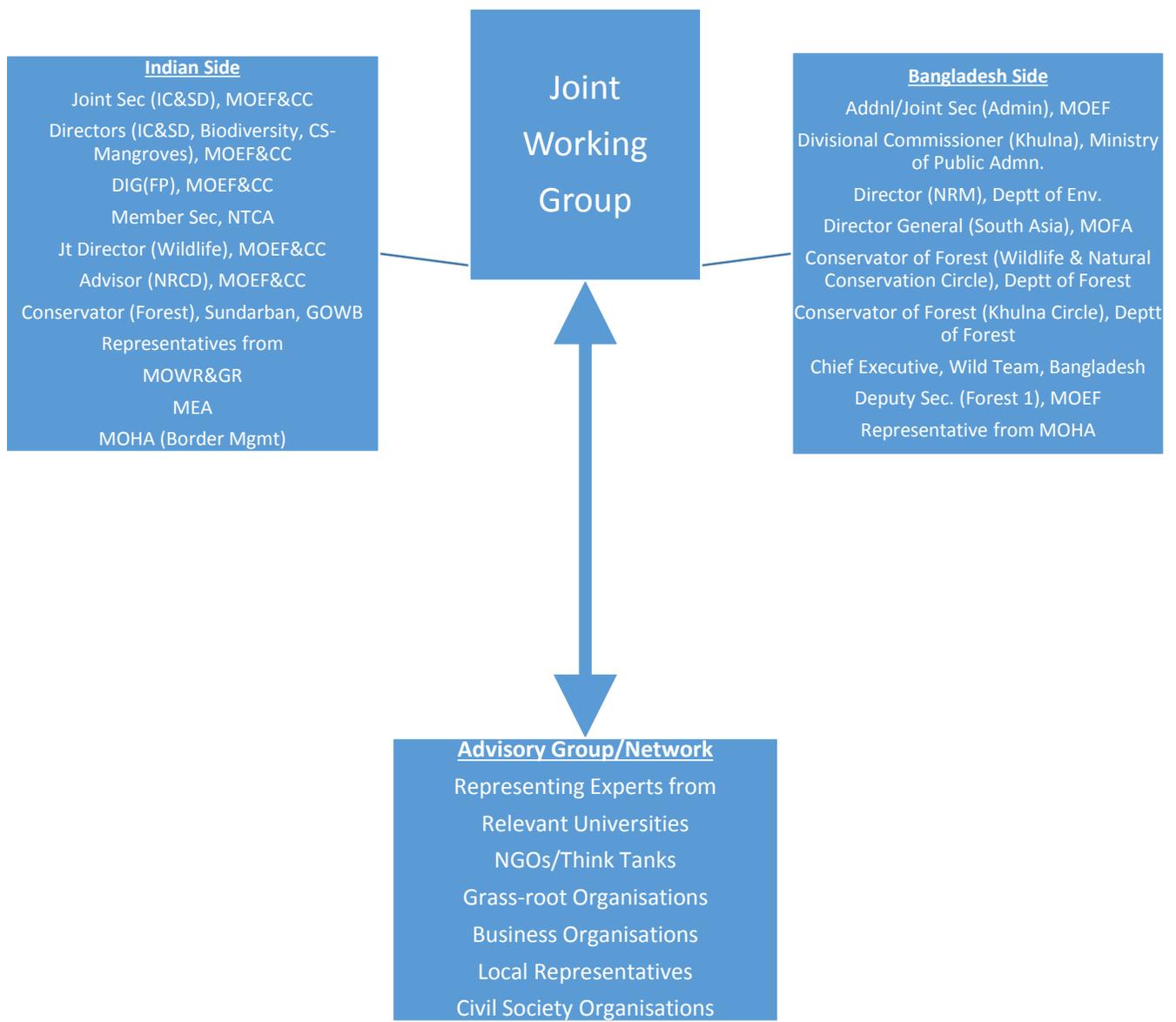
Key Recommendations

Based on the inputs received from interactions with stakeholders the ORF plus group came to the following conclusions that served as the basis for the proposed structure (see chart):

- i. The meeting of Ministers of External or Foreign Affairs under the provisions of the 2011 MOU will remain the highest decision-making body. It will establish the basic common policy guidelines, supervise and evaluate the general conduct of the cooperation process.
- ii. The joint working group (JWG) formed by high-level bureaucratic, technocratic and diplomatic representatives of the GOB, GOI and the GOWB from relevant Ministries such as the MOEF&CC, MEA of the GOI and the MFA, MOEF of the GOB as well as representatives of relevant departments of the GOWB are responsible for supervising compliance with the objectives and provisions of the 2011 MOU and will take decisions on the performance of joint initiatives.
- iii. The state or local level representatives of the Government (the Department of Irrigation and Waterways, GOWB, the Department of Sundarban Affairs, GOWB, the Department of Disaster Management, GOWB and corresponding authorities in the GOB) are responsible for the

- implementation in their respective territories of the initiatives identified under the 2011 MOU as well as of the decisions taken by the meetings of Ministers of External / Foreign Affairs and the JWG.
- iv. An advisory group devoted to the study of specific problems or subjects concerning the Sundarban region consisting of independent technical and scientific experts may be suggested to the JWG by the BI-SRCI consortium. The advisory group could potentially contribute towards coordination and follow-up of the approved programmes and projects and for the submission of new proposals of common interest in the context of the Sundarban region as decided by the JWG.

Draft Joint Institutional Platform



The ORF plus group proposes setting up of a dedicated advisory group / network to offer inputs to the JWG in a systematic manner and engage in new studies (or evaluate and compare existing studies by academic and other research organisations in Bangladesh and India) on scientific, ecological, technical and social and other relevant issues concerning the Sundarban region. The advisory group will be a trans-border knowledge network that will promote the exchange of information and knowledge between the various bodies and institutions working on ecological conservation and human development in the Sundarban region.

The advisory group may also promote mobilization of entities and sectors responsible for the policies and actions of Bangladesh and India that would add momentum to action on provisions in the 2011 MOU. In addition the group may also prepare bilingual (English and Bengali) information bulletins (online and offline) and their distribution to government entities, academic and research institutions interested in the Sundarban, regional and state governments, members of National Parliaments, NGOs, the media and private enterprises interested in the development of tourism in the Sundarban.

The future of the Sundarban region, a subject on which there persist differences, may be gradually approached by existing vertical state institutions (MFA of the GOB, MEA of the GOI and the GOWB) while horizontal cooperation will continue to be consolidated by the advisory group. The results of this process, based on dialogue and exchange of information, could potentially have a favourable impact on the adoption of common approaches and policies regarding technical cooperation, the use and conservation of natural resources and implementation of projects in the region.

Gradually, agreement on concepts and standards for physical and scientific information acceptable to both sides of the Sundarban region can be achieved so as to facilitate deeper understanding of the complex character of biological diversity and ecological sustainability as trans-border phenomena.

This group will be strengthened when, as a result of the evaluation of the projects and actions that are implemented, the accumulated experiences are systematized; common operational criteria for the projects are defined; sustainable development models adapted to the unique characteristics of the Sundarban are applied; and sustainable development policies and their national, regional, and international inter-relations are analysed and updated.

The key conclusion at this point of the project is that though there is broad consensus among stakeholders that the protection of the ecosystem and livelihoods of the people of the Sundarban, is important, institutionalising the ecological partnership between Bangladesh and India captured in the 2011 MOU will require deeper engagement with stakeholders. Reconfiguring space with the integrity of the Sundarban eco-system assigned precedence over existing political borders between India and Bangladesh, in terms of policy formulation and direction (such as in the case of the International Commission for the Protection of the Rhine or the Amazon Treaty Organisation discussed earlier) is a challenging concept that would require dedicated resources for consensus building.

In the near term, diplomacy between Bangladesh and India is likely remain diplomacy whether it is related to border disputes or ecological habitats. Contrary to expectations it is unlikely to follow a less

complex and less adversarial path than diplomacy as it is understood in general despite the undisputable common interest in protecting the Sundarban region. Though common interest in protecting the interests of the Sundarban region is reiterated by key stakeholders it is yet to gather strategic significance to script a new track for diplomacy that would facilitate joint or shared institutional arrangement.

In order to pursue the mandate of institutionalising the relationship under the provisions of the 2011 MOU, nuances in the positions of stakeholders could be leveraged. There are stakeholders deeply concerned about environmental degradation who think that the interaction between Bangladesh and India in the context of the Sundarban region needs to be ‘diplomacy related to environmental issues’. However, there are also traditional practitioners of diplomacy, who consider the same as diplomacy using the environment as an instrument. The challenge for the BI-SRCI consortium in general and the ORF group in particular would be to convince stakeholders that the former rather than the latter perspective would lead to outcomes that favour ecological and social interests of both nations in the longer term.¹

Note: A summary version of the draft vision document (around 24 pages) as well as a detailed version of the draft vision document which includes inputs on issues that may be addressed through joint action between Bangladesh and India (more than 90 pages) are available. Please contact Akhilesh Sati at akhileshs@orfonline.org if you would like a copy

¹ Iyer, Ramaswamy. “Hydro-Diplomacy for Hydro-Harmony”, in Genesh Pangare (ed) Hydro-Diplomacy Sharing Waters Across Borders, IUCN, Academic Foundation, New Delhi 2014