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A civil society vision for connecting the people of the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) river basin

A common ecosystem, a shared heritage, and a joint destiny

The global significance of the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) river basin is profound and far-reaching. With a total area of just over 1.7 million km² and home to more than 630 million people, the GBM river basin is one of the largest and most populated river basins in the world. Flowing from the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal, the GBM river system is considered to be a single transboundary river basin, whose rivers join just a few hundred kilometres upstream of the mouth of the Bay of Bengal. Shared by Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India and Nepal, the GBM is truly transnational.

The GBM river basin is the third largest freshwater outlet to the world's oceans; over 1,000 km³ of water per year are discharged into its common outlet, the Bay of Bengal. The GBM river basin is also one of the world's most biologically diverse river basins, second only to the Amazon and the Congo. This biological richness is exemplified at the Sundarbans World Heritage Site, which supports the largest mangrove forest in the world and is an important habitat for globally endangered Bengal tigers (*Panthera tigris*) and vulnerable Irrawady dolphins (*Orcaella brevirostris*). The GBM river basin is also home to a number of other threatened species, including the Gangetic river dolphin (*Platanista gangetica*), the gharial (*Gavialis gangeticus*), and the white-bellied heron (*Ardea insignis*) as well as to economically important species such as the hilsa (*Tenualosa ilisha*).

The aquatic ecosystems of the GBM river basin provide vital life support services to over half a billion people, providing them with the means to run fisheries, set up inland navigation ways, and supply water for drinking, agriculture, industry, and energy.

The importance of the GBM river basin, however, extends far beyond its biodiversity and its water resources. From China to Bangladesh, the rivers of this vast basin are the thread that binds a vast diversity of cultures, art, faiths, and ethnicities. The GBM river basin has been the cradle of civilizations, shaping them and nurturing not mere life but also rich traditions and spirituality. It has given birth to myriad rituals, celebrations, songs, and myths.

The GBM river basin is a paradox. Although endowed with rich natural and human resources, it is among the poorest and least-developed regions in the world. Its population density is high and increasing steadily, thereby exacerbating the likelihood that poverty will become yet more pervasive. The natural habitats of the GBM river basin are critically threatened by a wide range of pressures such as industrialization and urbanization; the resultant degradation and destruction have adversely impacted not only biodiversity, but also the livelihoods and economies of communities and even entire countries which depend on the basin's ecosystems. Urbanization and encroachment on floodplains



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inevitably modify ecosystems, reducing the quality of services they provide and their resilience to change.

Numerous projects, including infrastructure development proposed, underway, and completed, threaten the unique and fragile balance of the GBM's ecosystems by changing the structure of water bodies and their natural flow, impacting their capacity to hold water and exacerbating water scarcity. Deforestation and unregulated mining are changing basin morphology by increasing erosion and landslides in upstream regions and downstream delta regions are sinking. Coupled with increasing pollution, these changes inevitably degrade the GBM's ecosystems and the quality of their services, a result which, in turn, leads to impoverishment, migration, social unrest, and a serious depletion of resilience. Climate change is exacerbating these pressures in all countries of the GBM river basin. In fact, the basin has been identified as one of the most vulnerable regions in the world to the impacts of climate change. With the rise in temperature, the melting of Himalayan glaciers is increasing, thereby increasing the likelihood of associated disasters, such as glacial lake outburst floods. This glacier melting also foreshadows the future drying up of this globally important water tower, one which feeds most of the sources and tributaries of GBM rivers. Droughts are already critical in some areas of the GBM river basin and adversely impact local livelihoods and natural habitats.

The peoples of the basin also share a common legacy of flooding. This has never been felt more acutely than today, when the nations of the region are struggling with the largest floods of the century. In 2017, hundreds died as a result of devastating floods and landslides in parts of northern India, Nepal, China and Bangladesh; thousands were marooned, and many millions more were otherwise affected. The sea level is rising more dramatically in the delta of the GBM river basin than in other parts of the world, directly threatening millions of people. This rise, combined with the decrease in freshwater in the Ganges, places wetlands such as the Sundarbans in grave danger. The rest of the basin, its people, and its economy are no less at risk.

Despite these common challenges, the GBM nations struggle to find joint solutions and approaches. Instead, their relationships reflect the relative power differences between upstream and downstream countries. A number of bilateral agreements have been signed and commissions established, but these have failed to adequately address the pressing issues confronted by the region. With the troubled history of the region weighing heavily on people's minds, and with the current asymmetric power relationship between countries, the level of mistrust is high. Trust can be restored only by addressing the multifarious issues facing the region by pursuing a wise, multilateral vision for the cooperative management of the transboundary rivers of the GBM river basin by all the concerned riparian governments.

There are no multilateral joint operational strategies for the management of the GBM rivers, nor is there much sharing of knowledge or strategies for dealing with uncertainties such as floods, despite the opportunities that many recent global and regional compacts have offered and despite the fact that recent floods have reinforced the importance of regional cooperation to find solutions and build genuine GBM unity. That said, the waters and ecosystems of the GBM could be successfully used and managed as the basin's arteries and life-support system to promote water connectivity, security, sustainable economic development, and peace-building.

In recent years, GBM countries have begun a discourse on regional cooperation through cooperative platforms such as the *Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN)* Initiative, the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Forum for Regional Cooperation (BCIM), and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). The governments of the GBM countries



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are also committed to a number of multilateral environmental agreements, such as the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Ramsar Convention, and the Convention on Migratory Species, all of which involve a certain level of transboundary cooperation. They have also designated several protected areas (including Ramsar and natural World Heritage sites) in the GBM basins as a sign of commitment toward the conservation of natural resources and biodiversity. In addition, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a new framework for sustainable development. In particular, SDG 6 targets the implementation of “integrated water resources management at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation as appropriate,” as well as the protection and restoration of “water-related ecosystems, including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes.” All the GBM countries have also committed to implementing the Paris Agreement, which marks a milestone in tackling the global threats caused by climate change. Even if their commitments are “nationally decided,” given how interdependent the countries of the GBM river basin are, those commitments cannot be translated into actions without the real and productive cooperation of all GBM nations.

There are opportunities to go beyond political and administrative boundaries to establish new and innovative ways to cooperate and change the narrative. Most of the countries in the GBM river basin have vibrant civil society organizations (CSOs) and a diverse array of local and national groups that engage in development activities related to water and rivers. CSOs offer the benefits of informal and formal knowledge-sharing and have the capacity to support decision-making, implement frameworks, and creatively encourage their respective governments to engage. A number of documented community efforts and local initiatives in the management of water and other natural resources in the GBM river basin could successfully support a regional dialogue, thereby enabling the replication of lessons learned. These facts suggest that CSOs could collaborate in a manner that would enable them to act as catalysts of change in the GBM river basin and contribute toward new avenues of peaceful and constructive cooperation.

In view of the urgent need to foster regional cooperation and to include it as part of the dialogue process, supported by the Building River Dialogue and Governance in the GBM initiative (BRIDGE GBM), a group of CSOs came together and initiated a network guided by a common vision: *“To ensure that the rivers and freshwater ecosystems of the GBM river basin are well-protected and healthy and that they are economically and socially sustained on the basis of the equitable and reasonable utilization of natural resources through consensus and people’s active cooperation at local, national, regional, and international levels.”*

In pursuit of its vision, this nascent GBM CSO network commits to a common objective to cultivate a sustained “culture of transboundary cooperation” among the countries of the GBM basin with the aim of creating an enabling environment for enhanced cooperation for the conservation, long-term economic growth, livelihood security, and sustainable management of the GBM rivers through an ecosystem-based approach.

The GBM CSO network will follow and uphold the principles of inclusivity, equity, no harm, reasonable use of resources, and protection of ecosystems. It will work to protect important local ecosystems vital for the GBM river basin, including Himalayan glaciers, the Sundarbans, and Chalabil, and explore the economic rationale and the potential for mutual benefit through collaboration. The network will adopt a constructive approach towards engaging with governments, one based on mutual respect and trust.



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The participants of the GBM CSO network commit to collaborate and engage with all relevant organizations to deliver on five themes – transboundary cooperation; policy and legislation; research and knowledge; capacity-building; and communication, outreach, and advocacy — using the following cross-cutting actions:

Transboundary Cooperation

1. **Initiate the development of a CSO cooperation mechanism** at the transboundary and national levels on the conservation and sustainable use of the rivers and wetlands of the GBM river basin through action research, capacity-building, and communication;
2. **Support cross-border exchange for people of the river to engage in direct dialogue** facilitated by the CSO network;
3. Work towards the **institutionalization of a GBM CSO network** by establishing **working groups at both regional and national levels through interaction with government counterparts**;
4. **Develop and promote a CSO Regional Strategy for the GBM river basin linked to a harmonized set of country-level CSO action plans** contributing to the conservation and utilization of critical ecosystems in the GBM, including Himalayan glaciers, the Sundarbans, Ramsar sites, World Heritage sites and rivers and wetlands, while creatively engaging with stakeholders in national and local development policy and planning frameworks;

Policy and Legislation

5. **Apply ecosystem-based approaches** to scientifically assess current ecological conditions and their linkages with water and land-use regulations and the adequacy of current conservation and management frameworks;
6. **Propose, contribute to, and provide advice on river zoning and land-use controls** which balance the needs of both local and national socio-economic development;
7. **Review existing legal and policy frameworks** with a view toward designing strategies for restoring ecosystems with a focus on climate change adaptation, disaster risk reduction, and navigation;
8. **Review existing customary laws and indigenous knowledge related to natural resource management** in order to identify lessons learnt and advocacy elements for policy uptake;
9. Support the **development of a harmonized legislative and policy base relevant to the GBM river basin** based on a regional review which identifies gaps and inconsistencies and make recommendations for amending existing national laws and regulations;



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Research and Knowledge

10. **Begin compiling existing research and sharing public data** among CSOs working on GBM management and initiate the development of a regional public database which gathers knowledge relevant to hydro-diplomacy and water governance (including data on climate change and water pollution and their impacts on social and ecological systems) from CSOs in all five GBM countries;
11. Identify gaps in research and knowledge and **initiate joint action research projects involving stakeholders from across borders using community-based participatory action research and monitoring mechanisms** and turn the learning into transboundary practices;
12. **Develop regional guidelines based on the best practices in ecosystem services conservation, management, natural-resource use, disaster risk reduction, and climate change** to integrate into policies, use to improve existing legal frameworks, and operationalize at the transboundary, national, and local levels to build the resilience and adaptive capacity of local communities in the GBM river basin;
13. **Promote ecologically and culturally sustainable activities** that benefit local communities and support the conservation of riverine ecosystems, including the development of possible transboundary social, cultural, and economic collaboration; ecotourism circuits; and an annual regional calendar of river-based festivals and events;
14. **Ensure that sustainable indigenous local knowledge and practices are documented and that they support decision-making** for the sustainable management of the GBM river basin;

Capacity-building

15. Initiate a capacity-building needs assessment, identify key priority areas and **develop and/or promote the use of training modules on transboundary water governance and management** (including a legal framework for cooperation) that take into account gender, social inclusion, and poverty and emphasize the principles of equity and the reasonable use and sharing of shared water resources;
16. **Build CSO capacity to facilitate grassroots engagement**, including communication, advocacy, and negotiation skills for the members of the GBM CSO network on shared water diplomacy and governance supported by training-of-trainers programmes on the common strategies and concepts promoted by this vision;
17. Support peer-to-peer learning by arranging regular **exchange visits and organizing regular water/river-basin forums, meetings, and workshops.**



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Communication, Outreach and Advocacy

18. With the participation of river communities, **develop and implement a regional GBM CSO communication and awareness strategy** that is linked to national-level strategies and focuses on gender, social inclusion, and poverty;
19. **Support the promotion and coordination of regional cultural festivals** in which all five countries participate in order to promote people-to-people interaction and to build bridges of empathy and understanding;
20. **Advocate and lobby for legal reforms and benefit-sharing approaches** based on national and international standards, regional research, and dialogue;
21. **Promote innovative use of multi-channel communication, traditional and popular culture, and social media** to help raise awareness of the value of cooperation in the GBM river basin.

GBM CSOs that contributed to the development of the BRIDGE CSO Vision:

Abhiyan Nepal; ActionAid Bangladesh; ActionAid India; ActionAid Nepal; Asian Confluence, India; Association for Protection of Environment and Culture (APEC), Nepal; Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA); Bhutan Water Partnership; Brotee, Bangladesh; Center for Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge (CBIK), China; Center for Natural Resource Studies (CNRS), Bangladesh; Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW), India; CUTS International, India; Development Alternatives, India; Indian Environmental Law Organisation (IELO); Institute for Social and Environmental Transition (ISET), Nepal; Koshi Victim Society, Nepal; Nav Jagriti, India; Niti Foundation, Nepal; Office of International Affairs, China Biodiversity Conservation and Green Development Foundation, China; Oxfam Bangladesh; Oxfam India; Riverine People, Bangladesh; Royal Society for Protection of Nature (RSPN), Bhutan; SaciWATERS, India; SEE Foundation, China; Shan Shui Conservation Center, China; TARAYANA, Bhutan; Union for Culture, Human and Environment Protection (UCHEP), Nepal; Waterkeepers Bangladesh; WWF Bhutan; Yunnan University, China.