

INJAF



Supported by



RIVERS OF CHANGE

Oxfam India's TROSA program in the
Brahmaputra and Sharda river basins.

June 2019



Supported by



Acknowledgments

Published by: Oxfam India, Shriram Bhartiya Kala Kendra, 1, Copernicus Marg, New Delhi – 110001 [www.oxfamindia.org]

This work was carried out as a part of **Trans-boundary Rivers of South Asia (TROSA 2017-2021)** – a regional water governance program supporting poverty reduction initiatives in the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) and Salween basins. The program is implemented by Oxfam and its partners in India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Myanmar and is supported by the Government of Sweden.

Views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not represent that of Oxfam, its implementing partners or Government of Sweden.

Author: Shailendra Yashwant

with inputs from- Animesh Prakash, Vinuthna Patibandla, Mukunda Upadhyay (Oxfam India), Raju Narzary, Dahal Narzary (INERSWN), Wilfred Topno, John Tirkey (IPAD) and Chandan Dubey (GDS).

All photographs ©Shailendra Yashwant / Oxfam India
Design and layout: Roopa Rampura (Interactive Solutions)

Reproduction of this publication for educational or other non-commercial purposes is authorized without prior written permission from the copyright holder provided the source is fully acknowledged.

Citation: Yashwant S. Rivers of Change Oxfam India's TROSA program in the Brahmaputra and Sharda river basins.

Contents

1.	About TROSA.....	03
2.	Rivers of Change.....	05
3.	Red River turns Black.....	07
4.	Women of TROSA – Aruna Das.....	13
5.	Whatsapp for disaster warning.....	15
6.	Women of TROSA – Minoti Ekka.....	17
7.	Women of TROSA – Prathibha Brahma.....	25
8.	Women of TROSA – Sandeep Kaur.....	27
9.	About Partners.....	29



The Trans-boundary Rivers of South Asia (TROSA) is a five-year (2016–2021) regional programme being jointly implemented by Oxfam and its partners in Nepal, India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar to understand and address challenges related to trans-boundary rivers, and work together to create conditions to reduce poverty of communities living in the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna and the Salween river basins.

Oxfam believes that empowered communities having access to and control over water resources can significantly contribute to reduce poverty and inequality, and achieve prosperity. To make it happen, Oxfam is implementing the TROSA project in collaboration with governments, private sector, and civil society networks and alliances at all levels, in those four countries.

The TROSA project aims to propel positive change in the lives of marginalized and vulnerable riparian communities. The ultimate goal (impact) of the project is: reduced poverty of marginalized and vulnerable river basin communities through increased access to, and control over water resources.

Oxfam envisions that the implementation of the TROSA programme will lead to increased level of communities involvement in equitable and sustainable water resource management at local and regional level. Trans-boundary Dialogues between community, Governments and other stakeholders is a key prerequisite to achieve sustainable solutions at regional levels.

The context and challenges are so interlinked and interwoven between the upstream and downstream communities that it cannot be dealt with in isolation and taking the river basin approach is essential for collective action towards sustainable solutions. In this regard, Oxfam India along with its partners, Aranyak, GDS, NERSWN and PAD is working with the poorest of the riparian communities in the Sarabhangha, lower Brahmaputra and Sharda River Basins with the objective of reducing poverty and marginalisation of vulnerable river basin communities by increasing their access and control over riverine water resources.

The project aims to achieve the following five results:-

- 1 Government policies and practices in management of water resources should become more inclusive of community concerns and meet national and international standards
- 2 Practices adopted by private sector organisations must include respect community access to water resources actively contributing to reduce conflict.
- 3 CSOs should increase their participation and influence in trans-boundary water governance, women inclusion and resolution of water conflicts.
- 4 - Equip local communities in ways to help them become better able to reduce their dependance on water resources arising as a result of conflicts,
- Empower local communities to have more secure access and control over their water resources
- 5 Enable and empower Increased participation and influence of women in trans-boundary water governance policies & processes

The project in its second year of implementation has already created several institutional structures to engage with the relevant stakeholders at the local and regional levels to:-

- Improve policies and practices of governments that help protect the rights to water resources, of communities living along the Sharda/Mahakaili, Sarabhangha and Brahmaputra river basins.
- Improve policies and practices of private and other sectors, to ensure that the rights of riverine communities to water resources are honoured and maintained at all times.
- Improve capability of river basin communities and civil society to influence trans-boundary water resource management.
- Expand women's profile and their influence in dialogues and decision-making with regard to water management and water infrastructure.



Women play a prominent role in the productive use and management of water resources, in agriculture, forestry and fisheries. They possess in-depth knowledge about issues regarding usage and sharing of water resources. They play a major role in dissemination of knowledge, raising awareness through their various networks and educating the next generation.

In the remote rural and tribal riparian communities of Sharda and Brahmaputra river basins, women divide their time between household chores, fetching water, cooking, cleaning, washing and work on their farms by engaging in agriculture, pisciculture, horticulture and sericulture. Almost all their activities involve utilization of water. Their understanding of use, conservation and sharing of water resources is key to better water governance both on local and trans-boundary level.

Oxfam India's TROSA program in Sharda and Brahmaputra river basin works with women and men of marginalized and vulnerable river basin communities, by providing information, making them capable and influential while engaging with decision-makers, to increase their access to and control over water resources.

Half way through the 5-year project of Trans-boundary Rivers of South Asia [TROSA] program, spear-headed by Oxfam India, we gladly present a compilation of stories of change, titled **Rivers of Change**. They are stories reported from on-the-field. Stories about the role of Oxfam and its partners in empowering women, utilising women's knowledge, skills and experience about water management to alleviate poverty, drive innovation and find cooperative solutions in trans-boundary settings.



Bisani Narah shows the concentration of silt in the Ranganadi water since February.

Ranganadi means red river. But Ranganadi ran black and turbid on Rongali Bihu, the Assamese New Year's Day, this April.

The people living along the banks of the river in North Lakhimpur district of Assam could not bathe their livestock in Ranganadi on this special day. Forced to forego a tradition among the Mising tribe to which they belong, residents bathed their cattle and goats in water pumped up from tube wells, ignoring the dangerous level of arsenic in the groundwater.

On February 9 this year, an unprecedented amount of silt and muddy water was released from the Ranganadi dam of North Eastern Electric Power Corporation (NEEPCO)'s 405 MW Ranganadi Hydro Electric Project (RHEP) near Yazali in Arunachal Pradesh.

A major tributary of the Brahmaputra, Ranganadi starts in the Nilam, Marta and Tapo mountain ranges of Arunachal Pradesh, a state in which the river is called Panyor. It is a major source of irrigation water and fish in both Arunachal Pradesh and downstream Assam, where it joins the Brahmaputra.

Shortly after the sudden release of silt by NEEPCO, scores of dead fish of different species and sizes were seen "lying at the bank of the river at Lichi, Upper Sher, Lower Sher, Boda, Upper Jumi and Komaski village areas," according to a statement by local NGO Jumi, Komaski, Cher Green Plus Society (JKCGPS). The NGO has lodged a complaint to the police against the head of RHEP, holding him responsible for the destruction of aquatic lives. It has also threatened to launch a movement.

The amount of silt flowing down the Ranganadi seemed unusual even for 74-year-old Bisan Narah of Shantipur village downstream. "Although the dam releases silt from time to time for maintenance, this time the silt and contaminants are really thick in the water. That Ranganadi dam is like the governments curse upon our people. In monsoons the floods have worsened because of the dam, in winter the river dries up because of the dam. Our paddy fields are affected by the floods and now there is no fish in the river. The water is unusable for even washing anything."



Ranganadi dam at Yazali, Arunachal Pradesh



Women Water Users' Group of Joinpur Village in a meeting

When RHEP became operational in 2001, it was hailed as the first run-of-the-river project in North East India, which would produce electricity without impounding water and displacing people.

But several academics in Assam have since documented that the channelling of the river's water through a tunnel on the adjacent hillside has dried up the riverbed the entire length of the channel, effectively stopping the movement of all aquatic life up and down the river, except in the monsoon when the torrential rain common in the area still leads to the river breaking its banks. Guwahati-based environment researcher Mirza Zulfiqar Rahman describes them as "run-away-with-the-river" projects.

As with all hydroelectric projects, RHEP engineers have to get rid of the silt before the water hits the turbine blades – the silt would ruin the blades otherwise. So the water is led to a settlement chamber from which the silt is periodically flushed out and dumped on the riverbed below the dam. It was this dump that was flushed out on February 9 by opening the dam gates. The result is a river that still flows black and turbid.

Women Water Users' Groups

There are many traditional new year's day festivities slated for the day, but it is also a holiday, so there is a meeting of the local Women Water Users' Group (IWWUG) convened by the Trans-boundary Rivers of South Asia (TROSA) programme of the NGO Oxfam in Joinpur village, a stone's throw from the recently rebuilt embankments that are supposed to protect the village from rising waters of the Ranganadi during the flood season.

Recalling the incidents that led to the current predicament, the women recount how the RHEP was scheduled for complete shutdown for maintenance earlier this year and had indeed communicated the same to the local authorities, who in turn passed on the information to local communities.

Downstream community organisations like JKGPS in Arunachal Pradesh and many other representatives from the WWUGs in Assam demanded that before shutdown NEEPCO must select a site for dumping the silt.

NEEPCO promised a delegation of NGOs that it would not release silt but on the night of February 9, the state-owned company opened the dam gates releasing massive amounts of silt into the river downstream.

"Did you know that in its shutdown circular, NEEPCO said that it will 'not take any responsibility for any loss/damage to life and property etc. in case of any accident owing to violation of the notice.' What kind of company is this, and what kind of government allows them to get away with it?" asked Rachna Padun, President of Joarkhat village WWUG. There were many groups at the meeting.

"They cannot blame everything on climate change and unpredictable weather. Everyone here knows that the floods are caused by release of excess water during peak monsoon season by the dam. When they do, the water comes with really great force, greater than the normal rise of the river during monsoon. Last year 11 houses in our villages were washed away because the force of water breached the embankments. But no one took any responsibility," said Barnali Taid, WWUG's water champion from Jurkha Dambigal village.



Barnali Taid sits next to what was her paddy farm and is now a permanent pond due to siltation from floods, near her house in Joipur.

After last year's floods that killed 11 people, the outrage against the dam forced NEEPCO to make a statement, claiming that the situation would have been much worse without the dam. The claim has been contested by scientists and downstream communities alike.

"We haven't had a chance to rehabilitate our rice farms that are destroyed in successive floods. We seem to be building and rebuilding every year and all the dam does is make some electricity that we will never benefit from," said Aruna Das, an Anganwadi (government-run creche) teacher and survivor of the 2017 floods that washed away her house and all their belongings. "We don't have any factories, so we now grow one crop of rice and a few vegetables. Many farmers have tried pisciculture, but the floods level it all, even the fish farm tanks, year after year. That dam has made our lives impossible."

"We are supposed to trust these embankments, but they have breached time and time again. The force of water when dam releases it together with the rains is too much for the embankments," she pointed out.

"What is the point of making electricity, when there is no water to drink or food to eat and when we are living in the constant fear of our houses being washed away?" asked Barnali Taid. "The least they can do is to give us an early warning. Everyone knows that the floods are caused by the dam. The dam authorities should alert us before they release the water, so we have time to react, at least take our children and cattle to higher ground."

At the Joipur meeting, the WWUGs prepared a charter of demands that they wish to present to the district commissioner, with whom they are seeking an appointment to appraise him of their problems.

Clean drinking water tops the list, in a region severely affected by arsenic contamination of groundwater. That is followed by a long list of dam-induced problems for which they seek redressal – clean-up of the river from the ongoing contamination, an early warning system in the flood season, reparations for agricultural and fisheries losses to floods and inclusion of women in dam, floods and embankment maintenance related meetings at the district level.

After more animated talk, the women decided to reiterate the last demand in the introduction. "Women's water related work is invisible in the current water paradigm though women are primary victims of degradation of nature and water scarcity," said Gita Rani Bhattacharya, director of the Mahila Samata Society of Assam. "Water entitlements, water technology and infrastructure and voice or decision making in the water related institutions are mostly vested in men."

"There are hardly any men in the villages, as all the young and able bodied have migrated out for work due to failure of agriculture and fishing here in Lakhimpur. Clearly there is a need to empower women to participate in water related decision-making," said Vinuthna Patibandla, Oxfam India's programme officer. "As part of the TRDSA programme, we have formed Women Water Users' Groups in 21 villages. They are an integral part of the village development management committee of the Panchayat, and interacts with district officials on matters relating to water governance."

While leaving the meeting, Aruna Das asked a question that is on everyone's mind but rarely expressed. "If these are the difficulties due to one small dam on Ranganadi, what will happen when a much bigger dam, the 2,000-megawatt dam on the Subansiri river, is made operational?"

Barnali Taid is quick to respond, "First let the women take control of this situation. Then we will deal with the big dam." Everyone giggles at the phrase "take control" as they disperse to resume new year celebrations.



Aruna Das [40] lives on the banks of Ranganadi river, a tributary of Brahmaputra river in Joinpur village of North Lakhimpur in Assam.

Aruna's life was swept away when Ranganadi breached the embankment protecting her village and everything in its way downstream. She was marooned on top of a table, on top of a cot, inside her house, for over 36 hours before her family was rescued and taken to relief camp. When she returned to her village, she had to start life anew, rebuilding their houses, clearing their farmlands, ponds, vegetable gardens and waiting for relief, aid, and funds. Moved by the tragic state of her neighborhood, Aruna decided to volunteer in the relief operations being carried out by Oxfam and their local partners People's Action for Development (PAD).

An enthusiastic and committed participant, she was the first secretary of the WASH committee of Joinpur village. Following basic training on how to access immediate government aid, she ensured that all the affected families received Rs. 8000 that the government was distributing. Emboldened by the success of her first ever engagement with "government", she went on to organize village women to meet representatives of Public Health Engineering Department (PHED) for provision of clean drinking water to their villages.

Next, she began a campaign for completion and strengthening of the embankments. She recalls how there were two different contractors, who had begun work on the embankment from two different ends, one upside of her village and other on the downside. Unfortunately,

they did not complete their work in scheduled time and the middle part of the embankment was abandoned. During TROSA River day celebrations of March 14 2018, she raised the issue of the incomplete embankment with the women participating in the program and they decided that together they will confront the contractors for completion of the embankment. Initially the women of upstream embankment areas were reluctant to join the campaign but Aruna Das was able to convince them and finally they went together and met the authorities and the contractor together and place their demands, the contractors caved in and the embankment was completed in time ahead of the monsoon season.

I always thought floods is a problem, drinking water is a problem, getting work is a problem, debt is a problem, government is a problem. Now I know that the real problem is our lack of knowledge. We are the problem. How will government know what we want or what affects our lives if we don't go tell them ourselves? How will we get proper schemes if we don't know who is making them? How will we benefit from those schemes if we don't know how to access them?"

Now I know that when women come out and take responsibility and lead, the work will certainly be done, this embankment is a clear example of that. Says Aruna, who has recently registered a Joinpur Mahila Society to promote social forestry. They want to start Noonli (Mulberry plantations) on barren lands to supplement their income. "Planting trees will protect us from the worst affects of climate change, give us shade and income, all of which will help the community in the future."



Aruna Das presenting her intervention at the state level consultation on 'Mainstreaming gender in water governance in Brahmaputra basin, Assam' in Guwahati.



Minoti Ekka (28) lives on the banks of Saralbhanga river, a tributary of Brahmaputra river in Pipargaon village of Kokrajhar district of Assam.

Minoti lost her mother when she was 3 months old. She was six when her elder sister was killed in the ethnic riots of 1996. After that Minoti lived in relief camps all of her childhood raised by her cousins. After completing her matriculation, she married and moved to Pipargaon. She has four children, three girls and a boy. The eldest three go to school. She had to sell one of their cows to pay for her children's admission fees of Rs. 2650. The monthly school fees for each child is Rs. 700 per month, a cost they can hardly afford but she is determined to give her children good education.

Minoti started working with NERWSN as part of the TROSA project in 2019 as a community mobiliser. The first training she received was on 'Women and Water' a gender training conducted by Mahila Samata Society in Dhubri, where she learnt that to tackle her community's problems, women need to take the lead and organize themselves. Since then she is working tirelessly to organize the first women's Self Help Group (SHG) and Women Water User Group in her village.

A training was organized for the villagers about organic farming as part of livelihood program conducted by NERWSN. She noticed that most of the men farmers in her village were skeptical and reluctant to start experimenting. To lead by example, she plants leafy vegetables,

tomatoes, brinjals and chillies, on her small plot. Two months later copy-cat vegetable patches have sprouted in all the backyards of her neighbourhood.

Ekka Minoti wants to address three urgent issues impacting her community - access to piped clean drinking water, better schools with a functioning mid-day meal scheme and helping her community break through shackles of poverty by growing and selling organic vegetables.

"Our people are naturally resilient. We have survived floods, droughts, massacres, relief camps, the uncertainties of everyday life in this difficult place, between mountains and forests and a moody river. We know people of Bhutan also suffer the same problem as us. But the people of Bhutan are educated and that is why they are more safe and well to do. Its all about good education, good food and decent livelihood. Our women deserve that life too and now I know we can have it too. I don't want to be a leader, I want to be an example."

Ekka Minoti is part of a network of women who are being groomed by Oxfam India to organize, train and empower women across trans-boundary settings in remote regions of Indo-Nepal and Indo-Bhutan borders to bring their voices and demands of women to water governance, both local and trans-boundary, from planning to implementation stages.



Ekka Minoti speaking at Women and Water Governance consultation in Guwahati.



Bhutan's Sarbhong Chu river is called the Sarabhangha after it crosses into India to meet the Brahmaputra river.

In the last few weeks of June 2019, a series of WhatsApp messages were sent from Bhutan to India to warn “cross-border friends” downstream of the Aai, Saralbhanga and Manas rivers about cloud-bursts, swollen rivers and possible flash floods affecting people in the Indian state of Assam.

Although originating from officials, these messages were not sent via official channels. That would involve the dzongdag – the administrative head of the dzonkhag, or district – in Geluphu passing information to the officials in Bhutan’s capital Thimphu, who would then inform officials in New Delhi, the capital of India. They would, in turn, inform officials in Guwahati, the capital of the Indian state of Assam, who would pass the warnings on to Kokrajhar district headquarters. In the final stage, these messages would be relayed from there to villages along the India-Bhutan border.

In most cases this circuitous channel would take too long, with information either critically delayed or unclear, and of little use to most river bank communities in downstream Assam.

Now, though, the communities are relying on these “WhatsApp early warnings” routed through members of Bhutan-India Friendship Association (BIFA) to friends in NGOs like the North East Research & Social Work Networking (NERSWN), who pass the information to their network. Messages are forwarded within minutes, giving the villagers precious lead-time to prepare and escape the wrath of the suddenly rising rivers.

“It is difficult to predict when the flash floods will occur. In case of water released from dams the Bhutanese government sends early warning to New Delhi but even then some times, by the time we receive the information and pass it onto villages along the border it is too late. The challenge is lack of communication infrastructure in the area. There are no cell towers on the Indian side and most villagers on the border surreptitiously use Bhutanese SIM cards. Those WhatsApp messages probably save lives of hundreds,” said Kamal Kishor Hazarika, project officer at the District Disaster Management Authority (DDMA) in Kokrajhar.

“It’s costly, using internet, but for emergency all the villagers depend on WhatsApp,” agreed Aniram Basumatary of Saralpara village. “Communication is important, especially in monsoon season. Anything can happen, and getting advance warning will help us to be ready. We have suffered enough because of lack of warning.”

Decades of militancy in this corner of India has led to a complex situation, where communications infrastructure is seen as both a threat and an opportunity, making it a politically challenging decision to strengthen communications in the area.

Banglajhora is a small village on the banks of Saralbhanga river in Kokrajhar district of Assam. The village faced three devastating floods in 2012, 2014 and then again in 2016. Since then, every monsoon the fear of floods is palpable among its residents, who belong to the Bodo indigenous community.

The cost of no warning



Manas river in spate, near Geluphu, Bhutan

Satyaraj Narzary recalled the floods of July 16, 2012, “When I woke up in the morning, there was no water. Nor were there any signs of flood. But around 8 a.m., the water started rising and before we realised what was happening, the whole area was flooded. About 10-12 houses were washed away. Many families lost their cattle in the floods, their standing crop of paddy was destroyed and considerable amount of land was lost due to erosion. We have not been able to farm on that land ever since.” He said that the floods happened following heavy rains in the foothills of Bhutan when the Saralbhanga river broke a temporary embankment.

In August 2014 Banglajhora was inundated again without warning, when the gushing waters of Saralbhanga eroded the Saralpara-Patgaon bund and several hectares of paddy and private properties in the area were destroyed. The local residents had to take shelter at a relief camp for over a week.

The floods of 2016 were the worst. Heavy rains caused flash floods in most of the tributaries of the Brahmaputra. Nearly 1.8 million people were affected in 22 districts across Assam. Lower (western) Assam’s Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon districts were the worst affected, and the villagers of Banglajhora faced the brunt of it all.



Kamal Basumatari at Banglajhora village in Kokrajhar

"We had to run with our children and the few belongings we were able to gather. One contingent of the Army rescue team was deployed to rescue us with lifeboats but the force of water was such that the first lifeboat turned turtle in the middle of the river and the villagers ended up rescuing the soldiers," said Kamal Basumatari.

"After that we made a raft with few tyre tubes and bamboo to ferry women, children and a few belongings across the river with great difficulty. I have never seen Sarabhangha so furious. The water was also very cold," he added.

WhatsApp for disaster warning

"Floods, both riverine and flash floods, are the most common hazards in the Hindu Kush Himalayas and account for 17% of people killed and 51% of the damage. Unlike riverine floods, flash floods occur rapidly with a very short lead time for warning. They can arise following intense rainfall events, or as a result of breaching of natural dams formed by landslides or from glacial lakes formed behind end moraine dams (glacial lake outburst flood or GLOF)," said Neera Shrestha Pradhan of the International Centre for Integrated Mountain development.

"In recent years, increasingly erratic and unpredictable monsoon rainfall patterns and increased climate variability have led to severe and frequent flood disasters in the region. There may be some information sharing between governments on major rivers, but tributaries

are largely ignored. This is where social relations between trans-boundary communities are critical for any early warning systems to deliver. Clear and timely communication, proper functional network and preparedness reduces human casualties. Even a short lead time will save lives," she added.

"Bhutan is in a high rainfall zone but in the last 15-20 years, there have been more and more cloudbursts, resulting in severe flash floods that destroy everything in their path with alarming regularity in Bhutan and then down river in Assam. The floods of July 2016 in Sarabhangha river wiped out the entire Sarpang town in South Bhutan before unleashing havoc in Assam. Bhutanese experts have said that this is due to climate change and is in line with IPCC reports," said Kripalijyoti Mazumder, state project officer at the Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA).

While the Bhutanese have responded by building mitigating structures and preparing their populations, the downstream communities along the border in India can only hope for timely information, seamless evacuation and minimum damage to their homes, cattle and crops.

For this the key elements of disaster risk reduction like risk knowledge, monitoring, analysis, warning generation, dissemination and communication of warning and preparedness for timely response have to work in sync.



Building early warning networks, NERSWN staff and volunteers at Banglajhora village

"Getting timely early warning is not enough; the preparedness of the communities is important as well. Already NERSWN has begun a Hazard Risk Vulnerability Assessment (HRVA) mapping of the river basin villages and identified volunteers in all villages to ensure that the early warnings from our friends in Bhutan reach the last mile families, even those who do not have access to WhatsApp or mobile phones," said Raju Narzary of NERSWN.

"Already this year, the WhatsApp warnings from BIFA to the last mile family has travelled within 10 minutes of being sent out. The delay was due to the fact that the last family ran out of phone batteries, so when we didn't see the ticks going blue, I borrowed a motorcycle to alert the family. Mobile phones are warning systems but you need motorcycle for sure, as there are always those without mobile phones," said Aniram Basumatary, who does not own a motorcycle but is saving up for one.

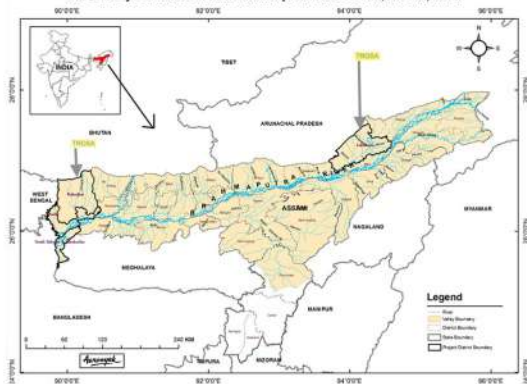
Kokrajhar call for action

Building on these relationships between BIFA and NERSWN, 14 civil society organisations from Bhutan and India, including the Bhutan Transparency Initiative and Aaranyak – a leading NGO in Assam – under the stewardship of Oxfam India's Trans-boundary Rivers of South Asia (TROSA) programme came together on June 20-21, 2019 in Kokrajhar. These consultations were designed to strengthen people-to-people ties, and help safeguard the rights of riparian



Kinzang Dorji, former Prime Minister of Bhutan, addressing the two-day conference on "Trans-boundary cooperation for effective management of water risks between Bhutan and India"

TROSA Project Districts in the Brahmaputra River Basin, Assam, India



communities upstream and downstream by supporting community-led cross-border ecosystem management and conservation practices.

"The biggest threat to peace is lack of effective management of our water resources, especially along our borders. Some of the poorest people live on trans-boundary waters of little known tributaries in remote parts of the Indo-Bhutan region, easily the most vulnerable to vagaries of climate change unfolding in these parts. Awareness, empathy, people-to-people networks supported by appropriate technologies, and timely and quality early warning information will go a long way in reducing risks to these communities," said Pankaj Anand, programme director of Oxfam India, during his inaugural address.

"Early warning is the moral responsibility of people living upstream towards people living downstream. What you are seeing in Kokrajhar district goes beyond the official friendly ties between Bhutan and India. In fact this informal but friendly collaboration for early warning and sharing of our water resources between border communities of Bhutan and Assam is a model for peaceful relationships between countries at a time when peace around the world is threatened by the scarcity of water and climate change induced disasters," said Kinzang Dorji, who served twice as Prime Minister of Bhutan, and is now the chairperson of the Bhutan Transparency Initiative.



Pratibha Brahma grew up on the banks of Kanebhar river, a tributary of Brahmaputra river in Chirang district of Assam.

Now she lives in Kokrajhar on the banks of Saralbhangra river. "Did you know Saralbhangra river is also known as Swrmanga, that translates into "who is the thirsty one?", based on an ancient legend about three rivers and a greedy king".

Pratibha Brahma is a social activist and former teacher who uses stories, myths, legends about rivers in her training programmes for emerging leaders from three TROSA project districts including Saralpara, Bilasipara and South Salmara in the state of Assam in Brahmaputra basin.

She represented NERSWN and the efforts of Oxfam India's TROSA program at the Women and River Congress in Nepal and since then has been leading from the front to bring trans-boundary women leaders under the umbrella of one forum. Her efforts led to the initiation of Indo-Bhutan women's forum which is formed with a vision to expand its scope to all political boundaries where TROSA is operational.

"The people of Bhutan and people of Assam have shared a long history of friendship and cooperation that itself is based on foundations of trade and transit from ancient times through the 18 passages or gateways Dooars or Duars at the foothills of the Himalayas. We need to build upon these traditional social relationships, we need to add a layer that shares best practices

to survive climate change adversities, better livelihoods, more happiness." Pratibha Brahma said at the 2 day Indo-Bhutan Consultation for inclusive trans-boundary governance.

Pratibha Brahma is also the Vice chairperson of Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation Ltd (TRIFED) and is **naturally** interested in exploring commonalities across borders, using culture, tradition and shared histories to find innovative methods to engage and ensure women's effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making around resources management, including in trans-boundary platforms and institutions.

"For better trans-boundary relationship for riverine communities, we must recognize the value of traditional and indigenous knowledge, which women are often well-placed to hold and disseminate, and make use of it alongside "modern" knowledge in policies and projects."

"For riverine communities, the river is their shared destiny. Any changes in the river are immediately manifest in the lives of her people. An angry flooded river doesn't recognise any borders, to survive her, people to must forget their political borders, their ethnicities and their race, and rise above it all to help each other."





Sandeep Kaur (24) lives on the banks of Sharda river in Nagla village of Lakhimpur Kheri district of Uttar Pradesh.

Sandeep is a community mobiliser and documentation officer for TRDSA program with Grameen Development Services in Palia Kalan. She is in-charge of coordinating activities of three Gram Jal Prabandhan Samiti (Village Water Management Group) in Bajpur, Paraspur and Lagdahan, villages. The main focus of her work is to ensure full participation and representation of women and their needs and demands in the local level planning processes, such as inclusion of water related measures in the Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDs).

Sandeep grew up in the neighbourhood of Palia Kalan. She is familiar with the difficulties of the women of her villages. As a youngster growing up in Nagla she witnessed her community's misery due to constant floods in monsoons and acute water scarcity in summer months. She has witnessed how women are the ones who are constantly trying to find ways to cope with disasters, the frequent changes in the climate and the insecurity of financial constraints.

"Women are clever, they might be illiterate, but they are smart, they know all the tricks, how to collect and conserve water, how to grow food, how to cook food, how to stretch the rupee, They make alliances easily, because of shared fate maybe, but women come together easily, for meetings and for trainings. They are eager to learn, they are keen to have their voices to be heard. Women have solutions. We have to find ways of including more women in decision making."

Recalling her first trip outside of her village to a Women in Water Governance training program conducted by Oxfam in Guwahati, Assam, "I was impressed by the success stories of women who were practicing alternate livelihoods like fish rearing and cashing in on organic agriculture markets. I made friends with them, we had long chats about how they did it and have come back with ideas that we can easily implement in our project villages."

She claims that she is a direct beneficiary of gender training program that was conducted for Sharda Nadi Nagrik Manch. According to her the workshop influenced her enough to push back "marriage plans" being imposed upon her by her family. Seeing her determination and passion, her father relented and now is an ardent supporter of her work.





Grameen Development Services

Grameen Development Services (GDS) was founded in 1993 and registered under the Societies Registration Act, 1860. GDS works with its head office at Lucknow (U.P.) and strives for the economic and social empowerment of the socio-economically disadvantaged sections of the society. GDS works in regions characterized by structural poverty and extreme social and economic backwardness. Apart from its head office, the field offices are located at 9 locations in north India region. GDS presently operates in three poor states of India; Uttar Pradesh (UP), Bihar and Rajasthan.



North Eastern Research and Social Networking (NERSWN)

The North East Research & Social Work Networking (NERSWN) is registered as society based in Kokrajhar district of Bodoland (Assam), India. Through transparency & participatory means, NERSWN strives to realize development & rights of the marginalized through building capacities of communities & strengthening knowledge technology & networks. Currently, the NERSWN is involved with six thematic areas viz. Health, Education, Livelihood, Women Empowerment, Advocating for the Rights of the Marginalized and Research & Networking. The organization also plays supportive role for other civil society organization through training, workshop, lending support to other small organization and being part of the various peaceful & democratic campaign of those organization.



People's Action for Development (PAD)

Peoples Action for Development (PAD) was formed on 25th December, 2001 at Mission Baligaon in Gogamukh, Assam, with the aim of socio-economic development of socially backward classes, mainly Adivasis and tribal.

PAD seeks to achieve equal and just society through empowerment of the Marginalized Adivasis and tribal people by organizing them into SHGs, building their capacity and enabling them to utilize available resource and creating awareness about environment.



Aaranyak

Aaranyak is a registered society working in the field of nature conservation in North East India since 1989. Its strength lies in applied research in biological and social field and its thrust area of work is the North Eastern India and Eastern Himalayas. It is being recognized as a Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (SIRO) by the DSIR of Ministry of Science and Technology, Govt. of India. Our mission is to foster conservation of bio-diversity in Northeast India through research, environmental education, capacity building and advocacy for legal and policy reform to usher a new era of ecological security.

INJAF

Indo Nepal Joint Action Forum

Indo Nepal Joint Action Forum is a working group for joint interventions in matters of trans-boundary issues concerning people and their environment, human rights, social justice and public affairs.



Oxfam India

Oxfam is celebrating its 68th year of humanitarian service in India. In 1951, Oxfam Great Britain launched its first full scale humanitarian response to the Bihar famine. In the past six decades Oxfam has supported civil society organisations across the country. In 2008, various Oxfams in India joined forces to form Oxfam India. Registered as an independent organisation, Oxfam India has indigenous staff and board members. We are a member of the global confederation of 20 Oxfams.