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Report on
The webinar on
BBIN CONNECTIVITY
WAY FORWARD

February 28, 2022

As part of its institutional endeavours, the Institute of Social and Cultural Studies (ISCS) organized a web-based discussion on “BBIN Connectivity: Way Forward” on February 28, 2022. The Webinar was addressed by distinguished policymakers and scholars from Bangladesh, Nepal, and India. It was moderated by Prof. Sachin Chaturvedi, Director General, Research and Information Systems India who suggested that along with trade and connectivity, cultural integration holds importance in sub-regional co-operation. Digital and technological factors can support infrastructural development or connectivity, but it cannot develop a cultural convergence. Therefore in order to attain people-to-people reach and to give BBIN a better shape, a significant importance should be given to social ethos and community sensitivity. Prof. Chaturvedi added that BBIN should think beyond physical connectivity and emphasize on aspects like digitization, SDGs, environment, and climate change. He also suggested that the policy mechanism should be shaped in a way that it leads towards a cost effective access for respective governments through privatization and merger of regional financial institutions.

Four speakers participated in the Webinar, including Dr Mahfuz Kabir, Research Director, Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) Dhaka; Purushottam Ojha- Former Commerce Secretary of Govt of

Nepal; Dr. Posh Raj Pandey-Chairman, South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment(SAWTEE); and Prof. Sanjay Bhardwaj- Centre For South Asian Studies, School of International Studies, JNU.

Dr. Mahfuz Kabir mentioned that Bangladesh through the BBIN approach is inclined to develop and improve its infrastructural layouts. Through the Motor Vehicle Agreement (MVA), BBIN countries would improve connectivity and also work on its carbon emission plans. The Speaker added that BBIN itself is extremely beneficial in developing footprints for Bangladesh in landlocked Nepal and Bhutan via India. His deliberation did quote about the financial assistance received through World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB) in supporting Bangladesh towards transcending connectivity through roads, rails, waterways, coastal gateways, etc. also harnessing the process of Digitization in multiple folds towards development. Dr Kabir urged the BBIN countries to implement projects in a time-bound manner and through cost-effective sources of funding.

Mr. Purushottam Ojha mentioned that the BBIN initiative remains significant as it dates back to the late 1990s when the concept of sub-regional integration was a burgeoning one. The speaker further added that BBIN through multi-modal approach remained signatory to attain connectivity via developing highways, coastal routes, roads, etc. Highlighting the way forward for BBIN, Mr. Ojha stated that documentation and procedures with regards to transit and connectivity needs to be simplified and modernization in transportation and infrastructural layouts should be prioritized. Moreover inter- and intra-industry linkages need to be focused upon. As Bangladesh and India become manufacturing hubs for the world, Nepal and Bhutan can lay support as decentralized production bodies and compliment India and Bangladesh through ancillary



production units, i.e., through production of motor parts, agro-products and support the inter-country industry linkages. Nepal can also help through developing electrical grids and replace dependency on coal and natural resources with regards to energy and power buildouts. Lastly, Mr. Ojha added that the four countries within the BBIN framework share a common culture and history, and therefore tourism packages should be developed and marketed to help nations in their economic gain and developmental partnerships.

The third speaker of the session Dr. Posh Raj Pandey stated that BBIN should not be considered as a medium for Sub-regional integration in isolation but instead should be viewed in a larger context of BIMSTEC and SAARC. Connectivity should be given a multi-modal stand, energy if produced should also be distributed subsequently. Dr.



Pandey added that along with physical connectivity, digital connectivity should be prioritised. As digital connectivity reduces time, processing documentation cost at the same time indulges paper-less trade and also facilitates quick exchange of data, experience, knowledge etc. Therefore,



along with reformation in the policy, its mechanism in terms of digital skills should be harnessed, existing facilities should be upgraded, and the workforce should be trained to handle digital methods in order to attain benefits in timely and cost effective ways.



Prof. Sanjay Bhardwaj mentioned that countries clubbed within the BBIN framework along with shared history and culture also has a common ecological organic system, which can enhance connectivity and a better outreach among the countries altogether. He further added that India had a lot of importance to Look and Act East to stretch out its developmental advocacy towards northeast India as well. In a way BBIN as a policy from time to time can emulate and help India reach its goal. Indian modules like better reciprocity, multilateral instead of bi-lateral approach, constructive unilateral didactics, resource sailing formula instead of resource nationalism, will lead the nation towards a better partnership and development fundamentals for itself through policy perspectives.

Dr. Chaturvedi summed up the discussion at and of the webinar.

12 points recommendations of the webinar:

1. A composite effort is required in terms of our partnership to provide a comprehensive approach in a robust and rigorous manner.
2. An institutional shape to BBIN is required. Institutionalisation beyond the 3 working groups – on energy, connectivity and MVA.
3. MVA carbon footprint in Agenda 2030.
4. Cargo-handling – extremely important in terms of enhancing efficiency and effectiveness of our trade cooperation of the regional corridors.
5. Important to adhere to a timeline in completing projects.
6. Multiple level of connectivity is required in BBIN – expansion of roadways, railways, inland waterways, modernisation of ports, simplification of procedures, intra- and inter-industry linkages, etc.
7. Focus on grid connectivity.
8. Focus on inter and intra-tourism, including creating joint-tourism packages.
9. BBIN early-harvest trade pact can be explored in line with local demands and providing scope for local livelihood and security.
10. Emphasis on digital connectivity for real-time data sharing and cost-effectivity trade.
11. Common ecological balance needs to be jointly tackled.
12. BBIN should also focus on water-management.

The discussion remained extremely interactive and marked its end with a Vote of Thanks by Mr. Arindam Mukherjee, Director, ISCS. He extended his gratitude to all the Distinguished International participants and audience for their remarks and consolidating their observations that would add value in instrumenting the policy in coming times.



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