

Bangladesh faces a very vulnerable position in terms of climate change impacts due to its location, and our quality of water is extremely dependent on water use and management practices upstream. Therefore, there is a need for regional cooperation and the development of basin-level integrated governance approaches jointly by the countries sharing the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna (GBM) basins. This is challenging considering the region lacks a legal and institutional framework to facilitate regional water cooperation in the GBM Basin.

The water challenges of Bangladesh stem from three levels. From a global level, we recognize that we are a vulnerable part of a global order that has accelerated the process of climate change, making us helpless victims of earth warming, increased sea level rise, and severe salinity and frequent cyclones and storms that pollute our water systems and erode the economic and social gains we make.

From a regional perspective, Bangladesh, being a lower riparian, is a victim of water policies of the upper riparian countries. With no multilateral regional water agreement in sight, the quality and quantity of our water and the efficient and equitable management of this common resource remain a major challenge for Bangladesh.

Finally, at the national level, the factors that hurt our rivers and water resources stem from mismanagement and a lack of accountability and rule of law, as well as inadequate conservation and management of the sweet water sources that we still hold in our control. Large-scale industrial waste, pollutants both from upstream and within, and the building of illegal structures on river land and its foreshores are all drivers that are suffocating our rivers. In spite of good water policies and legal directives, the government and the non-government sector both remain inadequately driven by nature-based policies and rivers largely remain subject to harsh structural impediments.

We choose to work with communities, with a strong focus on women and youth, to address their challenges linked to drinking water supply. Nearly 60 out of the 64 districts have their ground water contaminated by arsenic. The coastal region is fast losing its sweet water sources as salinity increases with increased frequency of tidal bores. This means more than 60% of our population is affected and access to safe drinking water is at a disastrously low level. We have two drinking water models from surface sources: 1. the river or large water body model for the dry, Barind arsenic-affected area of North Bengal; 2. the pond or the small water body model for wetland conservation in high saline coastal areas. In both cases, we have successfully provided safe drinking water for the past ten years, to 15 villages in Gabura on the South West coast, a victim of climate change, and to communities in Chamagram in drought-prone North Bengal. Our approach is action research, community-driven, and nature-based. Our lens is human rights and water is a basic human need.

The second thing we've done at the village level is to promote the application of nature-based solutions approaches in water preservation and management, through active participation of communities, to achieve water security in Shatkhira Khulna. The cyclone Alia in 2009 destroyed water bodies in the coastal region, and there was no safe drinking water available for the local people. We initiated conservation of small water bodies and ensured equal participation of women and men. We selected a small coastal area and initiated a wetland preservation movement. This movement restored salt affected natural water bodies using nature-based approaches. Today, hundreds of families living around these reclaimed wetlands have improved access to safe water. The project demonstrated the need for the equal participation of women and men in sustainable water management. Generally, women are the ones who carry water by themselves and take most of the burden linked to ensuring the sustainable drinking water supply for a family. However, just after the Alia disaster, we saw a shift in gender dynamics, with men playing an equally important role and fully supporting the women of the family in securing the supply of safe drinking water, due to the long distances that had to be covered and the heavy loads that had to be carried.

I would also like to mention Bangladesh's highest court judgement, in July 2019, granting rivers the same rights as that of a legal person or living entity. This is a hallmark judgement and will ensure the preservation of our rivers in the long-term. The court identified the National River Conservation Commission (NRCC) as the legal guardian for all rivers. Being a Member of NRCC and supporting the implementation of the judgement, we have formed an alliance of river activists and civil society organisations and institutions in Bangladesh. In addition, our organisation, Brotee, is a member of the BRIDGE GBM civil society organisations (CSOs) Network facilitated by IUCN, and funded by Oxfam's Transboundary Rivers of South Asia (TROSAs) programme, which includes more than 25 CSO members from five GBM countries. Therefore, in short, we are working at the local and regional level, and mobilising people and institutions to ensure cooperation and conservation of rivers and water resources.

If you do not work with nature, you will not sustain any goal. For example, technology is not an alternative to nature, but nature-based technology is extremely important for us to resolve the problems of today's world. For Bangladesh, a nation born out of rivers, the improvement of the river condition will contribute to several SDG targets, including the SDG5 (Gender Equality) and SDG6 (Clean Water and Sanitation). If you look at the health goal, the poverty goal, even the employment goal, water security is an important factor. Therefore, the improvement of the health of our rivers through inclusive water governance practices and application of nature-based solutions can help us address almost all the SDGs.