



## A ROUNDTABLE ON

### Riverine Communities – Climate Vulnerability – Environmental Justice Towards Inclusive River Basin Governance in the GBM Basin

#### Concept Note

#### 1. Background:

- 1.1 The Ganga–Brahmaputra–Meghna (GBM) Basin sustains millions of human lives who depend directly on the ecosystem services of these large river systems for livelihoods, habitation and their cultural identity as riverine communities. Yet, riverine communities particularly those inhabiting *Chars*, *Diaras* (*riverine islands recognized as temporarily cultivable and habitable under the state land and revenue laws*) as well as those along the river banks remain largely excluded from the river basin planning and decision making despite being directly concerned by the decisions that impact vulnerability to floods, erosion, natural changes in the river regime and recurrent displacement.
- 1.2 In certain instances riverine communities are disproportionately burdened with the negative environmental impacts of water resources development outcomes, often as a result of agreements between two or more states or the two countries sharing the GBM Basin - the environmental degradation in the *Terai* region of Bihar due to excessive siltation and water logging in the Kosi Basin is a case in point. At the same time the inclusion of riverine communities in river basin planning, management and water allocation decisions could be helpful in enhancing ecosystem services, river conservation, demand side water management and resilience to extreme climate events thus enhancing the acceptance and legitimacy of decision making as well as human security and disaster risk resilience. The inclusivity in the river basin management and decision making, it is argued, is also desired to overcome multi-dimensional poverty and human insecurity.

#### 2. The Roundtable:

- 2.1 The *Roundtable on Riverine Communities – Inclusive River Basin Governance* aims at exploring the key question: How the river basin planning, development, management and allocation decisions made at the inter-state/national and international level be made more inclusive and participatory so as to translate into socially and environmentally acceptable outcomes at the local community level?

2.2 In the course of exploring, the above question, the Roundtable is aimed at exploring all the dimensions of ‘Inclusive River Basin Governance’ from the participatory perspectives as a component of integrated river basin management, development and cooperation across the basins at all levels viz. local, sub-national, national and international. The Roundtable will also deliberate upon the role of established principles of environmental law such as the principles of inter-generational equity, pre-cautionary principle; the polluter pays principle and the doctrine of public trust in informing the inclusive river basin governance. More importantly, the potential of principles and procedures under International Water Law especially the UN Water Convention, 1992 and the UN Watercourses Convention, 1997 in shaping the scope of cooperation and governance so as to include riverine communities, may be explored.

3. **The stakeholders - A multi-disciplinary forum on Inclusive River Basin Governance:** The Roundtable, conceived as a multi-disciplinary platform, aims at bringing together the perspectives from academicians, practitioners and experts from various disciplines such as river basin planning and development, water resources management, disaster risk reduction, livelihoods, environment protection, climate change, flood mitigation, labour welfare, social sciences, diplomacy, water cooperation, human rights, gender justice and national and international water law.
4. **The Entry Points:** The deliberations at the Roundtable are expected to inform the larger discourse on inclusive river basin management in the GBM Basin and in particular will contribute to the shaping of following policies, laws and agreements:
  - i) India Water Vision, 2047
  - ii) (Draft) National Ganga Island Riverine Policy, 2024
  - iii) (Draft) Brahmaputra Riverine Policy, 2026
  - iv) (Draft) National Policy on Mitigation and Rehabilitation Measures for People Displaced by Coastal and River Erosion, 2022
  - v) (Draft) River Basin Management Bill, 2018
  - vi) The Ganga/Ganges Waters Treaty, 1996

**5. Key Framework Questions that the Roundtable will explore:**

The Roundtable aims at deliberating upon the following key questions of governance:

- i) Do the existing frameworks on water, disaster risk reduction, environment, land resources and human rights favour and support inclusive river basin governance?
- ii) Who are main actors and stakeholders and how the relationship between them could be evolved to facilitate inclusion, representation and/or participation in decision-making on river basins in an organized manner?

- iii) How can community perspectives such as of riverine people inhabiting river islands be meaningfully integrated into national policies such as the National Policy on Mitigation and Rehabilitation Measures for People Displaced by Coastal and River Erosion 2022 and towards strengthening India Water Vision 2047?
- iv) What legal and institutional mechanisms can enable recognition of riverine rights, livelihoods, and displacement concerns within existing and future cooperation frameworks?
- v) What lessons can be drawn from the good practices on inclusive and participatory approach to river basin management and international water law principles to inform the planning and decision making agencies?