

Report of Proceedings

Webinar: Expert Group Meeting

**Border Haats: Tool to Reduce Informal Cross Border Trade
Between India and Bangladesh**

Date: June25, 2020

1. Background & Objectives:

The COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected not only public health across the world but also, other sectors including trade and connectivity. The pandemic has compelled governments to suspend/restrict cross-border movement of people and cargo. Since the border haats are junctions where people from both sides of the border connect, they were also suspended for an indefinite period of time. Given that the border haats provide important sources of employment and livelihood to communities inhabiting remote border areas, even temporary closure of border haats will adversely impact socio-economic aspects of the lives of these communities.

Currently, there are four border haats in operation; two of these are in Tripura (namely, Kamalasangar - Kasba and Srinagar - Chhagalnaiya) and the other two haats are in Meghalaya (namely, Balat - Dolora and Kalaichar - Baliamari). Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, the four border haats were closed for an indefinite period of time.

It is apprehended that prolonged closure of the haats will lead to economic impoverishment of the local communities in both India and Bangladesh. This in turn may force the local communities to re-engage in informal cross border trade, which was substantially curtailed, thanks to border haats. In this context, the expert group sought to discuss the impact of border haats on local communities; and contemplate strategies to upscale the border haats and make them sustainable in the long run.

The Expert Group Meeting was organized jointly by CUTS International, India and Unnayan Shamannay, Bangladesh with the support of Department for International Development, UK. The meeting was organized as a part of the project titled “**Border Haats: Tool to Reduce Informal Cross Border Trade between India and Bangladesh**” (for details, please visit <http://bit.ly/2OG6zYM>) jointly implemented by CUTS International, India and Unnayan Shamannay, Bangladesh with the support of Department for International Development, UK.

A brief report of proceedings has been presented in the following sections:

2. Report of Proceedings

2.1. Opening Session

The session commenced with welcome remarks by Bipul Chatterjee, Executive Director, CUTS International. Dr. Atiur Rahman, Chairperson, Unnayan Shamannay, presented the opening address which was followed by special remarks by Mohit Sippy, Senior Programme and Policy Manager, Asia Regional at Department for International Development (DFID), UK.

Key takeaways from the opening session:

- Border haats along India-Bangladesh border could play an instrumental role in ensuring Peace, Security, Stability and Prosperity in the border areas between India and Bangladesh. Thus, there is an urgent need, not only to reopen the border haats, but also to establish more border haats along India-Bangladesh border, and upscale the existing ones.
- The border haats have played an important role in reducing informal trade between India and Bangladesh resulting in reduced tension in the border regions and better border management. In addition, border haats are not only addressing local demands for essential commodities, but are also facilitating socialization and people-to-people connect at the grassroots level, which needless to clarify, is enhancing cross border peace and security.
- Border haats entrusted the local people with greater decision-making powers in implementing various developmental plans meant for their areas. In a COVID stricken world, diplomacy has largely moved away from a top-down approach towards a bottom-up one, where local considerations are looming large in policymaking. In this regard, the role of border haats in improving lives and livelihood of the border population, including women; creating people-to-people connectivity; and fostering Peace, Security, Stability and Prosperity among local communities on both sides of the border can hardly be exaggerated. The need to re-open the border haats is imminent, but of course with due regard to protocols for ensuring the hygiene and health of the participants.
- There is an urgent need to view the border haats, not as a standalone strategy, but rather, as an important component of the foreign policies of both India and Bangladesh.

2.2. Technical Session

Representatives from CUTS and Unnayan Shamannay made a joint presentation on the key findings from the field research, and offered suggestions regarding re-opening the border haats. The presentation was followed by inputs from the experts who participated at the meeting. The session was moderated by Indranil Bose, Consultant, CUTS International.

Survey Findings

- **Reaffirmation that Border Haats reduce informal trade:**

It needs to be re-iterated that one of the professed advantages of border haats lies in respect to reduction of informal trade. The decline in informal trade post establishment of

border haats was primarily due to the creation of local employment opportunities and the permission subsequently granted for trade in commodities through border haats, which was earlier done through informal and often risky informal channels.

The survey found that informal trade is predominant in the sanctioned and proposed locations because these are less connected with prominent markets within their own countries compared to nearby markets in their neighboring countries. Such connectivity challenges are manifest in both intra-country as well as cross border price differentials with regard to essential commodities, which further exacerbates informal trade between the two countries.

- **Positive impact of Border Haats on lives and livelihood of local communities:**

The border haats not only played an important role in creating new livelihood opportunities in the distant border villages, but have also helped in providing additional income support to the grassroots stakeholders. As a result, there has been a significant reduction in out-migration. In addition, the border haats also played an important role in creating cross border value chains, as evident from the case of arecanut trade that takes place through the Kalaichar-Baliamari border haat.

- **Border Haats contribute to empowerment of women:**

Border haats have facilitated participation of women in trade activities and contributed towards their empowerment. The average annual income of women vendors from haats has increased in the last two years. Women were found to derive greater incomes from the border haats as compared to non-haat days. Border Haat income of women vendors for Bangladesh was found to be more than that of Indian women vendors. During the survey, it was found that a number of socio-cultural and religious constraints inhibit women's participation in economic activities particularly among orthodox Hindu families of Tripura and orthodox Muslim families in Bangladesh. However, such deterrents were found to be absent in the matrilineal tribal villages of North East India. In a few societies women can hardly make decisions regarding purchase of commodities for the household without the consent of their husbands or family members, let alone the option to visit local haats to sell products. Moreover, lack of availability of usable separate washrooms for women and non-availability of women personnel in BGB for security-check of the women vendees have also deterred participation of women in the border haats. While border haats have redefined the gender dimensions of trade and facilitated women empowerment to some extent, differences in the degree of women empowerment were noticed between women who are members of Self-Help Groups (SHG) producing various handicraft and handloom products; and women who are homemakers and are not part of any SHG. In this context it was further highlighted that women SHGs face a number of challenges while marketing their products like dependence on middlemen for selling their products at unfairly low prices. Border haats can provide them a much-needed platform for selling their produce directly to consumers at remunerative prices.

Recommendations to upscale the existing border haats and facilitate long term sustainability of the upcoming border haats, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

Recommendations for the Immediate short term

- **Developing Standard Operating Protocols for reopening border haats:**

Closure of border haats in the wake of the global pandemic has aggravated the economic impoverishment of the local communities. In this regard, there is urgent need to reopen border haats with adequate safety protocols. It was felt that if the protocols are enforced and trade through border haats happens with due diligence for safety of health and hygiene of all participants, then this could well become a model for other haats between India and Bangladesh.

The Standard Operating Procedures for reopening Border Haats during COVID-19 has been provided in Annexure – A.

- **Promote sale of essential commodities:** Vendors at the Haats should be encouraged to sell essential food and agricultural commodities as against FMCG (Fast moving consumer goods) products to take care of food and livelihood security of local communities.
- **Allow trading of protective devices:** The border haats should encourage and include trading of health and hygiene products such as face masks, personal protective equipment, soap, hand sanitizers, which are either not available in border villages or are costly. Bangladesh, which has a comparative advantage in the readymade garments sector, can produce face masks and personal protective gears at a lower cost, compared to India. Similarly, there is a dearth of supply of soap and hand sanitizers on the Bangladeshi side, which India can plug. Such mutually beneficial and complementary trade needs to be encouraged.

Recommendations for the Medium term

- **Increase in the number of haat days:** There are 25 stalls for vendors from each of the two countries – that is, 50 altogether. In order to avoid over-crowding, it may be useful to increase the number of Haat days from once-a-week to twice-a-week and limit the number of participating vendors to 25 on a particular haat day.
- **Removal of the five kilometer radius restriction:** The Border Haat Management Committee could remove the five kilometer radius restriction; this will increase the footfall of vendors on each Haat day and partly compensate the losses incurred by the vendors as a result of the closure due to the Covid-19 and the proposed new limit on the number of participants at the Haats. Also, this will enable a greater number of vendors, whose incomes are also negatively affected by the Covid-19, access essential commodities at cheaper prices at the Haats. In addition, the border haats could continue to function as tourist centers which would add to the incomes of the vendors and support service providers.

Recommendations for the long term

- **Considering border haats as centers of promoting cross-border Peace, Security, Stability and Prosperity among local communities**—India and Bangladesh share a number of historical, socio-economic and cultural similarities. Border Haats have played

a crucial role in strengthening people-to-people contact and reducing tension among the border residents on both sides. This ultimately facilitated improved border management on the ground. Thus, Border Haats should be considered as an important component of the overall framework for international cooperation, since it puts forth a pragmatic approach towards ensuring border security.

A note on the need for considering border haats as a tool to ensure Peace, Security, Stability and Prosperity in the border areas of India and Bangladesh has been provided in Annexure – B.

- **Border Haats as Retail Trading Zones** – There is a need to upscale the existing border haats to ensure their long-term sustainability. In this regard, it is imperative to consider the border haats as retail trading zones which would greatly improve consumer welfare of the local communities on both sides of the border by making available a wider variety of goods, at more competitive rates, and through formal channels that would eliminate informal trade which dominates such exchange of goods in the sanctioned and proposed locations of border haats. It was suggested by the experts that such upgrading may not be necessary for all border haats. However, a location specific and nuanced approach needs to be adopted while selecting border haats for upgrading and upscaling.
- **Border Haats as platforms for creating cross border value chains in agriculture**– After the lockdown was partially lifted in India and Bangladesh and trade was allowed to resume, Bangladesh imported 1,500 MT of high yielding paddy from India. The variety yields one (1) MT more than Bangladesh's local variety. Similarly, there are a number of agriculture and/or horticulture crops, indigenous to Bangladesh, that has greater yields. There is need to identify these varieties and allow their trade through the border haats for the benefit of farmers in both the countries.
- **Making border haats gender balanced**- Border haats have opened different avenues for income generation for local people. But surveys need to be conducted to identify contextual needs and capacities of women belonging to societies, with different religious and cultural backgrounds; as their vulnerabilities and needs differ, so must the way to approach or address them. This approach will help to encourage more women participation in border haats. Moreover, in the post COVID world dependence on digital platforms, to conduct different activities, has increased therefore there is need to identify the gender constraints on ICT utilization.

2.3. Areas of future intervention

- **Skilling and upskilling local communities**–It emerged from the field survey that many of the stakeholders, engaged with border haats, are also engaged in a number of non-haat activities like agricultural activities, 100 day-employment guarantee scheme under MGNREGA, running businesses, etc. In addition, a number of women SHGs were found to be engaged in manufacturing of various handicraft and handloom items. It was suggested that by imparting essential skills among local communities, and providing them with the required financial assistance, it is possible to encourage the local communities to engage in various manufacturing activities. If these products are permitted for trade through the border haats then that will help generate additional incomes for the local communities. However, such skilling would need to take into account demand complementarities both within the country as well as in the neighboring countries.

In the Indian context, such skilling and/or upskilling could facilitate greater uptake of the Make in India initiative among the grassroots communities.

- **Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on health and economic vulnerability of the local communities, especially women** – The COVID-19 pandemic had an adverse impact not only on physical health of the population, but also on their mental health. The impact on women is expected to be even more given the restrictions on their movement and the increasing burden of their household work. The fear of an increase in domestic violence, under the circumstances, is not entirely out of place. In this regard, there is the need to conduct a study on how COVID-19 impacted local communities to better understand their health-related and economic vulnerabilities. It was also suggested, that the governments might think of setting up counselling centers near/at border haats to address mental health issues of local communities, especially women. Border haats can also be treated as a platform for medical tourism.
- **Feasibility studies for establishing border haats along India-Myanmar border** – Myanmar shares her border with four North Eastern states of India, namely – Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland. These locations along India-Myanmar border are generally underdeveloped and prone to insurgencies. In this regard, potential for establishing border haats in these areas for the benefit of the local communities could be worth exploring in the future.
- **Understanding trade-diversion effects of border haats**–Trade in various agriculture, horticulture, spices, and plasticware takes place through the border haats. To understand the impact of border haats at a more macro level, experts considered that it could be interesting to understand the trade diversion effects. For example, a number of seasonal fruits like orange, apple etc. are traded through the border haats. In this context, it might be worthwhile to explore whether Bangladesh’s import of these seasonal fruits from other countries has reduced/declined due to increasing/improved trade through border haats.

3. Conclusion

Border Haats are crucial to sustaining and improving the lives and livelihood of the local communities residing in the remote border villages. By offering new livelihood opportunities, reducing informal trade, and empowering women to some extent, the border haats have helped create vibrant economies at the local level. In addition, by strengthening people-to-people connect, the border haats have played an important role in facilitating better border management.

Given this context there is a need to both establish more border haats, and at the same time upscale the existing ones. In this regard, the need of the hour is to take a more holistic view of the border haats, by considering them as key drivers of cross-border Peace, Security, Stability and Prosperity.

Re-opening of India-Bangladesh Border Haats

Standard Operating Procedures during the Covid-19

1. Background

1.1 India-Bangladesh border haats play an important part in the lives and livelihood of the border communities. Not only do they provide additional income support to the local communities but also facilitate their access to essential commodities at cheaper prices, and thereby contribute to livelihood security of the local communities.

1.2 Moreover, the haats have been successful in reducing cross-border informal trade at the local level. The decline in informal trade post establishment of the border haats was primarily due to the creation of local employment opportunities and the permission granted for trade in commodities through border haats that was earlier done through informal and often risky informal channels.

1.3 If the haats remain closed for an indefinite period of time, it will not only lead to economic impoverishment of the people who are directly dependent on the haats, but would also force some of the border residents to re-engage in cross-border informal trade.

1.4 The haats operate once a week for a specified period of time. On a haat day, on an average, at least 25 vendors from each of the two countries participate at the haats and each vendor is accompanied by two to three helpers. In addition nearly, 1,000-1,500 vendees visit the haats for buying products.

1.5 While it is essential to combat the spread of the Covid-19, it is also necessary to gradually consider re-opening of the border haats. At the same time, the concerned authorities should ensure the adoption of essential and precautionary health measures like social distancing, use of face masks, hand sanitizers, etc.

1.6 Therefore, this document outlines a set of specific measures, which are to be adopted at the border haats in order to guard against the spread of the Covid-19. Such measures will ensure that the lives as well as livelihoods of the border residents are saved, while at the same time creating a more enabling environment for Peace, Security, Stability and Prosperity in the border areas between India-Bangladesh..

2. Specific Measures

- Persons above 65 years of age, pregnant women and children below the age of 10 years should not be allowed to visit the haats. In addition, persons with common cold and cough, fever should not be allowed to enter the haat premises.
- Along with the Customs Officials, Border Security Force of India, Bangladesh Border Guard, Banking staff, Local police, there should be a designated staff from the State/Upazila health department inside the border haat for monitoring all health related issues of the participants and visitors.

- Vendors, BSF, BGB, Banking Staff, Customs officials, local police, etc. must wear hand gloves and face masks during all operations.
- Washing hands with soap and water and/or use of hand sanitizers should be mandatory for all participants, prior to their entry to the haat premises. In addition, the body temperature of persons entering the haat should be checked with the aid of thermal scanners. The Border Haat Management Committee (henceforth, the Committee) ought to make the hand sanitizers and thermal scanners available to the BSF/BGB personnel for ensuring compliance with these steps. This Committee should also consider the setting-up of 'Disinfectant Tunnels' at the entry gate of the border haats.
- Cleaning and regular disinfection (using 1% sodium hypochlorite) of frequently touched surfaces should be mandatory at the border haats.
- Use of face covers/masks should be mandatory. No person without a face mask should be allowed to enter the haat premises.
- Proper crowd management outside the haats, viz. managing the queue with due concern for social distancing norms, should be ensured by BSF/BGB personnel.
- Required precautions while handling supplies, inventories and goods at the haats should be ensured. Designated personnel must also be on vigil inside the haat premises to ensure that there is no crowding in front of stalls, and all vendees should observe social distancing and sanitisation norms.
- Each and every vendee will have to carry an umbrella while entering the border haat, so that when it rains, crowding under one shade is avoided.
- There should be a temporary ceiling on the number of vendees within the haat premises. The Committee may consider admitting 200 vendees at a time and allow the next batch of 100 vendees to enter the haats after a specified period, say 45 to 60 minutes, once the previous batch of 100 vendees has left the haat premises and basic sanitation activities like the cleaning of washrooms have been performed.
- Physical distancing of at least six feet is to be followed within the haat premises.
- Respiratory etiquette is to be strictly followed inside the haat premises. This includes the practice of covering one's mouth and nose while coughing/sneezing with tissue/handkerchief/flexed elbow/back of the hand and disposing off used tissues in covered bins made available for the purpose.
- Spitting at the haat premises should be strictly prohibited. There should be penalties imposed on participants violating such norms.
- Washrooms are to be frequently cleaned and running water is to be made available in the haat premises. The Committee may also consider the option of installing temporary toilets outside the haat premises, in case it is time-consuming to repair the existing washrooms within the haat premises.

- Posters/standees/audio-visual mediums on preventive measures about the Covid-19 should be displayed prominently and/or announced regularly during haat hours to promote awareness among the participants about the preventive measures to the Covid-19. In this regard, displaying large posters in **local languages** at the entry point of the haats conveying the following messages should be made mandatory:

General Practices to be followed inside the Haat

- ✓ Frequent hand-washing
- ✓ Wearing masks inside the haat premises
- ✓ Maintaining social distances and avoiding physical contacts
- ✓ Prohibiting the participants from spitting inside the haat premises
- ✓ To complete purchases within 45 minutes so that others can also participate at the haats

General symptoms of COVID-19 and what should be the immediate steps

- ✓ Running high temperature, undergoing the Covid-19 test, self-quarantine, etc.
- Specific markings should be made with necessary distance to manage the queue and ensure social distancing at the entrance as well as inside the haat premises.
- No food stall should be allowed inside the border haats.

3. Other Proposed Measures

- Increase in the number of haat days: There are 25 stalls for vendors from each of the two countries – that is, 50 in total. In order avoid over-crowding, it may be useful to increase the number of haat days from once-a-week to twice-a-week and limit the number of participating vendors to 15 instead of 25 on a particular haat day.
- Remove the five kilometre radius restriction: The Border Haat Management Committee should remove the five kilometre radius restriction, which will increase the footfall of vendees on each haat day. This will partly compensate the losses incurred by the vendors during its closure due to the Covid-19 and owing to the proposed new limit on the number of participants at the haats. Also, this will enable a greater number of vendees, whose incomes are also negatively affected by the Covid-19, access essential commodities at cheaper prices at the haats.
- Promote the sale of essential commodities: The vendors should be encouraged to sell essential food and agricultural commodities as against FMCG (fast moving consumer goods) products to take care of food and livelihood security of local communities.
- Allow the trading of protective equipment: The border haats should be used for the trading of health and hygiene products such as face masks, personal protective equipment, soap, hand sanitisers, which are either not available in border villages or are costly. Bangladesh, which has a comparative advantage in the readymade garments sector, can produce face masks and personal protective equipment at a lower cost compared to India. Similarly, there is a dearth of supply of soap and hand sanitisers on the Bangladeshi side, which India can plug. Such mutually beneficial and complementary trade needs to be encouraged.

Border Haats Yes but with Health and Hygiene Safety

1. Introduction

1.1 India shares with Bangladesh a border that stretches over 4,096 kilometres. Yet when one delves into the history of this piece of political engineering, one realises that the border was a rather artificial construct which ran through people's houses, hearts, lives and living and split people living socially, culturally and economically integrated lives into two communities with different badges of national political identities.

1.2 The disruption of pre-partition synergies and bonding among the border inhabitants made them more vulnerable and led to the proliferation of cross-border crimes - smuggling of arms, narcotics, cattle, informal trade, illegal migration, trafficking of women and children. Initially both the governments sought to strengthen military security and fenced the border. But, unfortunately this failed to address the core issues of the inhabitants of these remote border areas – absence of livelihood opportunities, access to necessary commodities at reasonable prices, markets for their produce as well as connectivity with relations across the border.

1.3 No wonder then, a worldwide trend is discernible among countries to look upon their international borders no longer exclusively in terms of military security, but rather as meeting points where two adjacent communities can meet up and interact and exchange. Not that security is unimportant or even secondary, but such meeting grounds can facilitate people-to-people connect and cultural exchange which can contribute to improved relations at the grass-root levels between people and communities inhabiting geographically contiguous areas. The more under-developed border areas are, more are they vulnerable and prone to harbour illegal activities, which only adds to the insecurity of such remote regions.

1.4 The gradual realisation of this reality induced the Governments of India and Bangladesh to come to a consensus about establishing meeting points where people of the two nations could engage in mutual trade of commodities produced locally, without having to navigate through documentation processes that are usually entailed by international travel and trade. Such fora would not only boost livelihood opportunities for the local communities, usually poor and marginalized, but also open up avenues for socialization and cultural exchange. The result was the establishment of India-Bangladesh Border Haats.

1.5 'Border Haat' is a rough-and-ready market, which allows local people from both the countries in those areas to trade in vegetables, fruits, spices, food items, agri-implements, cosmetics, toiletries, garments, melamine products, aluminium products, bamboo products, plastic products, fruit juice, processed food items and other such indigenous products. Such haats or markets are located on the zero line of the border between India and Bangladesh and each buyer is allowed to buy commodities up to US\$ 200 a day.

1.6 Currently, there are four border haats in operation, two of which are in Tripura (namely, Kamalagar-Kasba and Srinagar-Chhagalnaiya) and the other two haats are in Meghalaya (namely, Balat-Dolora and Kalaichar-Baliamari). The first border haat has been functioning since July 23, 2011 at Kalaichar (India)-Kurigram (Bangladesh) in the West Garo Hills of Meghalaya. The three other haats that followed are located at Balat (Meghalaya, India)-

Dolora(Bangladesh) in 2012, Srinagar (Tripura, India)-Chhagalnaiya (Bangladesh) and Kamalasagar (Tripura, India)-Kasba (Bangladesh) in 2015. Additionally, six locations were also sanctioned for establishment of border haats

1.7 In this context, it is important to mention that the Department of Border Management, Ministry of Home Affairs of the Government of India has been implementing the Border Area Development Programme (BADP) through the State Governments as part of a comprehensive approach to Border Management. The programme aims to meet the special development needs of the people living in remote and inaccessible areas situated near the international border and to saturate the border areas with the essential infrastructure through convergence of Central/State/BADP/Local schemes and participatory approach.

1.8 Therefore, given the historical relationship and synergies between the border residents, establishment of the Border haat is a pragmatic, people-sensitive, inclusive (involving local communities) border management approach by both governments. These border haats are playing a positive role in ensuring Peace, Security, Stability and Prosperity in the border areas between India and Bangladesh.

2. Value of the Border Haats

Exploring Peace

2.1 Border haats entrusted the local people with greater decision-making powers in implementing various developmental plans meant for their areas. They also ensured a secured people-to-people connect between the two sides of the border by facilitating socialisation and cultural exchange. The fact that people are keen to re-connect and strengthen their bonds across the border that separates them is borne by instances like the ‘*Milan Mela*’. This is a fair organized jointly by India and Bangladesh once a year, to the north of West Bengal that enables Bangladeshis and Indians to meet their relatives across the barbed wire fencing. Thousands of residents from nearby villages flock along their respective sides of the fence and manage to exchange greetings and gifts (sweets, sarees, hilsa, soap, home-made goodies, etc.).

Enhancing Security

2.2 It needs to be re-iterated that one of the professed advantages of border haats lies in respect to reduction of informal trade. The decline in informal trade post establishment of border haats was primarily due to the creation of local employment opportunities and the permission subsequently granted for trade in commodities through border haats, which was earlier done through informal and often risky informal channels.

2.2.1 Informal trade was earlier rampant in Meghalaya and Tripura border even after the erection of fencing. For example, prior to the commencement of Kalaichar-Baliamarahaat, trade between the Indians and the Bangladeshis flourished through the well-known channel of Mankachar, situated at a distance of 15-20 kilometres from Kalaichar. The goods that used to flow through Mankachar included cows, wine, local tobacco products like *Biri*, spices like *Jeera*, sarees and garments, sugar and tea. The goods that flowed into India from the Bangladesh side included biscuits and bakery items, local fruits, vegetables and fish.

2.2.2 Subsequent to the establishment of this haat, the volume of goods that used to flow to Mankachar has substantially decreased; whereas, in other places like Dalu, where there is no border haat, informal trade continued to flourish. The institutionalization of trade through formal channels like border haats alongside the diminution of informal channels shows that trade of unwelcome commodities like drugs and explosives have substantially diminished if not eradicated altogether.

Instilling Stability

2.3 In all the locations where border haats are established, agriculture is the main source of livelihood of the residents. The landless either used to work as labourers or they migrated to towns and cities in search of livelihood opportunities. Border haats have created different avenues of income for these poor and marginalized people by offering them employment as vendors, transporters, labourers and support service providers.

2.3.1 Border haats have also created earning opportunities for vendees who buy products from the haats and sell them in their local markets and thereby manage to earn some profit. These border haats have been instrumental in not only boosting trade but also in generating livelihood opportunities for residents in these remote border areas. Many of these stakeholders associated with border haats are the sole income earners for their families and the border haat is the only source of livelihood for them.

2.3.2 In the Balat-Dolora border haat the Indians get fresh vegetables and fish from Bangladesh at half the price and on the other hand Bangladeshis get spices, fruits and other items at affordable prices. For example, while *Jeera* costs around US\$ 5.31 per kilogram in Bangladesh, the vendees can buy the same product at US\$ 3.30 per kilogram at this haat. Border haats have, thus, instilled stability in the lives of border residents by ensuring them steady incomes, a reliable market for their produce and access to essential products at affordable prices.

Ensuring Prosperity

2.4 Given the significance of the border haats and their positive impact on the local communities, prolonged closure will be detrimental to the interests of border residents of both India and Bangladesh as it may force many people below poverty levels due to a decrease in income opportunities and non-availability of essential commodities that were available at affordable prices at the border haats.

2.4.1 Additionally, this can also result in migration of border residents as income opportunities are limited in these border areas. The situation will be even more critical for women as their mobility is restricted given their domestic responsibilities and security concerns - a consequence of occupational segregation due to socio-cultural norms prevalent in patriarchal societies like Tripura on the Indian side and the villages in Bangladesh that are adjacent to the Border Haat.

2.4.2 It has been observed that the incomes derived by women through participation at the haats, allow them to invest in health and education which raises their standard of living. Border haats can also buttress income-earning opportunities for the people, particularly women traders, by serving as a marketplace for various local handicrafts. Women SHGs are engaged in home-based manufacture of items like traditional dresses, bags and cane and

handicraft items; Mats, caps, bags, flower vases etc. using stems of the Water Hyacinth plant (*Kochuripana*) are handcrafted by women in Satrasal (Assam). All these products can find markets in the border haats.

2.4.3 Therefore, border haat can serve as a model of shared prosperity among the border residents. In the event of indefinite closure of Border Haats it is logical to be apprehensive that the pangs of unemployment and hunger might even drive a few towards informal trade which was predominant in these areas before the establishment of the haats. Once re-opened, the haats can serve as a market for new products like face mask, hand sanitisers, personal protection equipment etc. Local womenfolk who are engaged in tailoring can produce face masks and sell them through the border haats, which will buttress income opportunities even further.

3. Conclusion

3.1 Given these inevitable adverse consequences of suspension of the operations of the border haats due to the Covid-19, it is an imperative re-open them at the earliest. However, it is to be noted that the Covid-19 pandemic is going to stay. As per projections of contemporary medical expertise the world over, it seems that we have to reconcile ourselves to the 'new normal' where we will be required to abide by various practices pertaining to the maintenance of hygiene, sanitization norms and physical distancing.

3.2 In view of the importance of the border haats for the lives and livelihood of the local communities, there is an urgent need to re-open the border haats, but with necessary on-the-ground measures for the health and hygiene safety of the participants. In this regard, there is a need to include an addendum to the existing protocols for their functioning on the ground. Indefinite closure of the Haats in view of the prevailing pandemic might well amount to throwing away the baby with the bathwater.



UnnayanShamannay

Agenda

Expert Group Meeting

Border Haats: Tool to Reduce Informal Cross Border Trade between India and Bangladesh

Thursday, June 25, 2020, 16:00 – 17:30 IST
(Online meeting through Zoom)

<p>16:00 - 16:15</p>	<p>Welcome Address - <i>Bipul Chatterjee, Executive Director, CUTS International</i></p> <p>Opening Remarks –<i>Dr.Atiur Rahman, Chairperson, Unnayan Shamannay</i></p> <p>Special Remarks – <i>Mohit Sippy, Senior Programme and Policy Manager, Asia Regional at Department for International Development (DFID)</i></p>
<p>16:15 – 17:15</p>	<p><i>As part of the Session, key findings and policy recommendations that emerged from the field survey would be discussed. The purpose is to initiate a dialogue to tailor the recommendations to be made relevant for the post COVID world.</i></p> <p><u>Presentation</u> – “<i>A journey across Border Haats:Major findings of the study and key recommendations</i>”- <i>Arnab Ganguly, Assistant Policy Analyst, CUTS International; Robert Shuvro Guda, Senior Research Associate, Unnayan Shamannay; and Bijaya Roy, Senior Research Associate, CUTS International</i></p> <p><u>Panel Discussion:</u> “<i>Identifying strategies to effectively operationalize, sustain and upscale the border haats in a Post-COVID 19 world -The Way Forward</i>”</p> <p>Moderator:<i>Indranil Bose, Consultant, CUTS International</i></p> <p>Inputs from members of the Expert Group</p>

17:15 – 17:30	<p>Summary of Discussions - <i>Arnab Ganguly, Assistant Policy Analyst, CUTS International</i></p> <p>The Way Forward - <i>Anu Sareen, Programme Manager, Asia Regional, Department for International Development (DFID)</i></p> <p>Vote of Thanks - <i>Shaheen Ul Alam, Project Coordinator, Unnayan Shamannay</i></p>
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List of the participants

01.	Mr Mohit Sippy Senior Programme and Policy Manager Asia Regional at Department for International Development (DFID)
02.	Ms Anu Sareen Programme Manager Asia Regional at Department for International Development (DFID)
03.	Mr Biswajit Chakrabarty Director Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industries North-East Advisory Council Guwahati, Assam
04.	Mr Subir Bhowmick South Asia Correspondent & Senior Editor BD News24
05.	Dr Pritam Banerjee Logistics Specialist Asian Development Bank
06.	Dr Joyeeta Bhattacharjee Senior Fellow Observer Research Foundation
07.	Dr Ashish Nath Professor Department of Economics Tripura University
08.	Mr Sujit Chakraborty Bureau Chief Indo-Asian News Service Agartala, Tripura
09.	Mr Biswajit Das General Secretary Federation of Chamber of Commerce and Industries of North Bengal (FOCIN) Siliguri West Bengal
10.	Mr Sabyasachi Dutta Founder-Director Asian Confluence
11.	Dr A K Enamul Haque Professor Department of Economics East-West University
12.	Dr Mahbuba Nasreen Sociologist Professor & Director Institute of Disaster Management and Vulnerability Studies (IDMVS) Dhaka University
13.	Mr Sudhir Chandra Nath Business Director-ACI Seed Advanced Chemical Industries Ltd

14.	Dr Nazneen Ahmed Senior Research Fellow Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS)
15.	Mr Asjadul Kibria Plan Editor The Financial Express Dhaka
16.	Mr Monoj Roy Former Additional Secretary (FTA) Ministry of Commerce Government of Bangladesh
17.	Dr Tania Haque Professor Dept. of Women and Gender Studies Dhaka University
18.	Mr Ruhul Amin Rasel Senior Reporter Business & Trade Bangladesh Protidin
19.	Mr Tarek Mahmud National Communication Officer Communication & Public Information Unit International Organization for Migration (IOM)
20.	Dr Atiur Rahman Chairperson Unnayan Shamannay
21.	Mr Bipul Chatterjee Executive Director CUTS International
22.	Mr Udai S Mehta Deputy Executive Director CUTS International
23.	Ms Veena Vidyadharan Fellow CUTS International
24.	Mr Arnab Ganguly Policy Analyst CUTS International
25.	Mr Shaheen Ul Alam Project Co-ordinator Unnayan Shamannay
26.	Mr Indranil Bose Consultant CUTS International
27.	Mr Sumanta Biswas Senior Programme Officer CUTS International
28.	Mr Mahabub Hasan

	Senior Research Associate Unnayan Shamannay
29.	Ms Bijaya Roy Senior Research Associate CUTS International
30.	Mr Robert Shuvro Guda Senior Research Associate Unnayan Shamannay
31.	Mr Abdullah Nadvi Senior Research Fellow Unnayan Shamannay
32.	Mr Shaswata Mukherjee Programme Assistant CUTS International
33.	Mr Raisul Islam Research Associate Unnayan Shamannay
34.	Mr Sweepthish Jayan Assistant Director CUTS International
35.	Ms Deepmala Ghosh Research Associate CUTS International
36.	Ms Kajal Sarda Research Associate CUTS International