

# Multi-stakeholder Dialogue for Collaborative Actions on Sustainability and SDGs in the North Eastern Region

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GUWAHATI,  
INDIA





## Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue for Collaborative Actions on Sustainability and SDGs 31<sup>st</sup> May 2023, Guwahati, Assam

### 1. Introduction

Centre for Responsible Business (CRB) and Media Management Group for Literacy and Development (MMGLD), with support from the EU Delegation to India, organized a multi-stakeholder dialogue on collaborative actions on sustainability and SDGs on 31 May 2023. The event was held at the Parampara Hall, Lily Hotel, Guwahati. The event was part of a series of four roundtable dialogues being organized in four cities across India by CRB in partnership with credible local partners. The aim of the roundtables is to explore opportunities for deepening collaboration between CSOs, businesses, government, and other key stakeholders on sustainability and thereby accelerate the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The event, which had the facility for both online and in-person participation, was attended by 50-plus persons that included senior central government officials, senior state-level practitioners representing CSOs, businesses, state government, distinguished academics, public policy research scholars, development practitioners and other key stakeholders. The dialogue was designed to explore opportunities for deepening collaboration between stakeholders on sustainability and SDGs. The event was divided into three sessions and concluded with some specific action items to help accelerate progress on the SDGs in the North Eastern region.

### 2. Summary of Proceedings

#### **2.1 Inaugural Session**

Opening the session, **Shri Atul Dev Sarmah, Secretary General**, MMGLD warmly welcomed the distinguished participants led by Shri Lok Ranjan, IAS, Secretary, Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (MDoNER); Dr. Arun Kumar Sarma, Director General, North East Centre for Technology Application and Reach (NECTAR); Laurent le Danois, Team Leader, Cooperation Section, Delegation of the European Union to India and Bhutan; Dr Meera Mitra, Member, CRB Governing Body; distinguished panelists; prominent Civil Society leaders; persons from the academia; thought leaders and development practitioners.

In his brief welcome address, he touched upon the CRB-MMGLD collaboration which was designed to engage with the North Eastern region at a deeper level and how the



collaboration has fruitfully progressed through several round tables involving active stakeholders.

The highlight of the inaugural session was the keynote address delivered by **Shri Lok Ranjan, IAS, Secretary, Ministry of Development of the North Eastern Region**. While presenting an overview of the Ministry's engagement with SDGs in the North Eastern region, he shared that the north-east was the only place in the country where the SDGs are defined at the district level. In contrast to other parts of the country where the framework evaluates at the state level. The reason being the vision of transformative development of the North Eastern region, which is accelerated and sustainable to inclusively afford ease of living to all its citizens. This, he said, was a meaning-impregnated vision – each of the words is nuanced and loaded with purpose. For example, when one says transformational, there are areas and activities which are identified to have a transformational impact. These include sustainably linking up the forest resources to local livelihoods as well as sustainably restoring the international connectivity that naturally existed in this region prior to larger geo-political developments.

However, all of these are being attempted where the development deficits are well recognized. The resources for this, therefore, are needed to be assessed and mobilized further if needed. Acceleration will certainly require an impelling force not only in terms of monetary resources but also expertise, implementation systems and local capacities etc. The use of SDGs, therefore, is very crucial, especially for the North Eastern region. First, the locations with development deficits need to be identified with the help of the SDG framework. While this has been drilled down to the district level, the effort has to go even further. In supplement with the SDG index that has been published with the help of NITI Aayog, together with UNDP and MDONER for the North Eastern region, multi-dimensional poverty factors or even finer assessment of development deficits at the block level are being looked at.

Shri Ranjan said this is what the Ministry is collaboratively pursuing along with interested stakeholders and the Ministry is looking at partners to bring in the resources in terms of expertise and implementation capacities towards building capacities of the communities. He also referred to an education institution-based model in Mizoram, which is being up-scaled in the other States of the North East. He also shared details of the Ministry's SAMBHAV program for reaching out to communities at the grassroots in the North Eastern region.

Secretary, MDONER hoped that the details shared and also what has been laid out here for discussion in the conference, will be deliberated upon by the experts and stakeholders attending the round table, towards generating feedback. He also urged the stakeholders to join and strengthen the Ministry's SDG agenda.

**Shri Rijit Sengupta, CEO, Centre for Responsible Business (CRB)** in his address welcomed all participants, panelists and speakers, and presented an overview of work done by CRB in the area of sustainability and SDGs. Introducing CRB as a think tank, he spoke of



CRB's core area of interest on how the private sector can play a lead role in transforming and leading on sustainability across different sectors, thematic areas and geographies. He touched upon the CRB-MMGLD mutual passionate bond concerning the North East, and the collaborative work so far through four round tables to capture ideas coming from some of the leading voices and minds representing the stakeholders. These stakeholders have suggested critical areas of engagement that CRB-MMGLD can pursue going forward. CEO, CRB also talked about the immense potential that the North Eastern region in areas such as - natural resources, minerals, people, tourism, agriculture etc. and women entrepreneurship, a topic that would be part of the Guwahati deliberations. He said CRB was very happy to be in Guwahati facilitating this exchange of ideas and the effort would be to identify 2-3 critical ideas and carry these forward.

. He closed his address after welcoming everyone again, hoping that the event will see rich deliberations, as part of the sustainability and SDG agenda set for the day.

**Laurent le Danois, Team Leader, Cooperation Section, Delegation of the European Union (EU) to India and Bhutan**, expressed interest in cooperation, not just in terms of financial assistance but also in technical expertise. He also indicated an interest in responsible business behaviour, as well as business processes that are financially, environmentally and socially sustainable. He explained the EU's Global Gateway Strategy, which aims to boost sustainable connectivity and investments. While he stated that it remains to be seen how different types of European stakeholders can bring value within the North Eastern region, he briefly touched upon a range of such actors. One among them was the European Investment Bank, which is able to invest billions of euros. This would be especially helpful in long-term infrastructure projects requiring significant investments. He mentioned other stakeholders which are able to fund medium and small-sized projects, including Development Financing Institutions (DFIs). These include the German KfW Development Bank and the French Development Agency (AFD). He pointed out that as a result of India's development into a middle-income country, very few European member states' development agencies, except for GIZ, now have a presence in the country. He suggested that certain European research institutions collaborating with think tanks and banks may also be a source of possible solutions for local communities. He expressed his hope that the EU develops a strong partnership with India despite the challenges posed by the dynamic transitions in the world today. In the end, he stated that going forward, the priority investment needed in the North East must be identified. Further, what different partners from Europe can bring to the North East in collaboration with Indian stakeholders must be determined.

**Dr. Arun Kumar Sarma, Director General, North East Centre for Technology Application and Reach (NECTAR)** while introducing NECTAR (an autonomous organization under the Department of Science and Technology with its headquarter in Shillong.), made a presentation on its work on technology dissemination for societal development, including in the sectors of water and sanitation, plant management as well as communication and information and technology among others.



The Centre works extensively at the block and community level in the North Eastern region.

The power point also presented the technology sectors that NECTAR works on – Bamboo and Allied activities; Geo-Spatial activities; Water and Sanitation; Flood Management; Communication and Information Technology Application; Agriculture and Allied activities; Food Processing; Livelihoods Development activities; Health and Allied activities; Textile; Art and Crafts and Capacity Building. He also mentioned about drone technology, taken forward by the Guwahati Centre for students, and using its own drone infrastructure, for further up-scaling in the rest of the country.

Reference was also made to two schemes under which NECTAR funds projects – Bamboo Application and Support Scheme (BASS) and Technology Outreach and Service Scheme (TOSS). Details were also provided regarding the application process. In the presentation, a bird's eye view was provided on the sector-wise status of NECTAR-supported projects in the North Eastern region. Visuals and details were indicated on a wide range of small sustainable projects based on indigenous technology across the North East.

While concluding his presentation he mentioned two large projects under the Prime Minister's development initiative in the north-east, implemented by NECTAR:

- o 100% Utilization of the Banana tree
- o Scientific Organic Farming in the north-east using the technology developed by BARC

He concluded his presentation underlying the collaborative approach among various stakeholders.

**Dr. Meera Mitra, Member, CRB Governing Body** delivered the concluding remarks of the inaugural session. She stated that collaboration is crucial at this stage of the SDG progress. Further, she recommended imbibing an "MBA" approach mentioned by Shri Lok Ranjan, which refers to 'Moving Beyond Academics'. She stated that going down to the grassroots and reviewing local capabilities is desirable and experiments being conducted at the grassroots level must be supported, rewarded and highlighted. The positive externalities from such experiments may spill over to other regions as well. She highlighted the potential of micro-innovations and appropriate technology at the grassroots level to bring transformative changes, such as the development of entrepreneurship. For example, the linkage of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) with banks was an idea first incubated by the small NGO Myrada, before being taken up across India. She suggests that the government should facilitate micro-innovations at the grassroots level and allow them a chance to grow without interference. In terms of business, she suggests that assistance from the Government is required to retrain actors of existing initiatives, re-act in new ways and refrain from interfering more than required.



She lauded the indigenous technology-driven local projects implemented by NECTAR in the North Eastern region.

## **2.2 Panel Discussion**

The topic of the panel was ***“Multi-stakeholder Collaboration on Sustainable Development Goals, emphasising Women’s Leadership and Entrepreneurship in the North Eastern Region: Experiences and Future Pathways”***. The panel consisted of ***Ms. Sentila Yangar***, Padmashree & Founder, Tribal Weave, Nagaland; ***Ms. Jahnabi Phookan***, Director & Co-founder, Jungle Travels India; ***Mr. Alay Barah***, Executive Director, ICCO India; ***Dr. Sanjeeb Kakoty***, Associate Professor, IIM Shillong and ***Dr. Abhinandan Saikia***, Assistant Professor, TISS.

The following pointers were provided to the panelists:

- What are the possibilities for enabling effective and impactful collaboration between stakeholders to accelerate SDGs in the North Eastern Region? What could be some of the priority areas (sectors or themes), for such collaboration to happen?
- What role has businesses and government played in promoting the socio-economic empowerment of women and girls in the region (specific reference to SDG5) – could you illustrate with some examples?
- What lessons can we draw from the region about women’s participation and leadership in climate action (agriculture) and in green enterprise and value chain development (SMEs, small enterprises, FPOs)?
- To what extent can stakeholder collaboration support the advancement of women's entrepreneurship further in the region?

**Fig 2: Panel Discussion**



L-R- **Mr. Alay Barah**, Executive Director, ICCO India; **Ms. Sentila Yangar**, Founder, Tribal Weave, Nagaland; **Mr. Rijit Sengupta**, CEO, CRB; **Ms. Jahnabi Phookan**, Director & Co-founder, Jungle Travels India and **Dr. Abhinandan Saikia**, Assistant Professor, TISS. Not pictured: **Dr. Sanjeeb Kakoty**, Associate Professor, IIM Shillong.

**Mr. Rijit Sengupta**, CEO, CRB began the panel discussion by welcoming all panelists and speakers. He briefly introduced the efforts thus far of collaboration and engagement towards identifying points of action in the Northeast.

**Mr. Alay Barah**, Executive Director, ICCO India, pointed out the need for breaking down silos and towards that end, a multi-stakeholder platform in the North East to meet the following goals:

- To achieve sustainable development goals
- As a resource centre for various programmes, such as skill-based training and capacity building
- As a space for knowledge management, dialogue and decision-making
- As a means of feedback for government policy

He advocated for the structural inclusion of women in activities that are traditionally male-dominated. This is in the context of the dominance of male-run enterprises in the North East. He called for more pro-women policies to be introduced by the government, for gaps in current policies to be addressed as well as the awareness creation and advocacy.

**Ms. Jahnabi Phookan, Director & Co-founder, Jungle Travels India**, stated the need for inclusive growth and gender mainstreaming for any intervention to be successful. She further discussed the tourism sector, which is an SDG under Target 8.9, but also encompasses all SDG goals. She also stressed the need for a collaborative, not a competitive spirit. She pointed out that the North East is entirely nature-based and any development must also include the protection and preservation of nature. She called for more engagement with the Government, the protection of small businesses and the breaking of the current silos within which different stakeholders work.

She suggested that the North East take the lead in sustainability efforts. She put forth tourism and handloom sectors in the North East as sustainable livelihood models for women's economic upliftment and called for Government assistance in terms of tools and training for the same.

**Ms. Sentila Yangar, Founder, Tribal Weave, Nagaland** discussed the growing community of women entrepreneurs in the State, with special reference to the Women Entrepreneur Network of Nagaland. She called for more rural-based initiatives and greater collaboration among organisations on the ground as well as between Government departments when planning and implementing welfare schemes. Ms. Yangar also discussed other success stories in Nagaland, such as low rates of crimes against women. However, she pointed out the challenges faced by women in Nagaland, which include the patriarchal structure of society.

She discussed feminisation in the workplace and gender pay parity in Nagaland. As an example of community-led development, she shed light on the role of the women of the Chakhesang community in Nagaland in successfully convincing the Chakhesang men to accept the idea of equal pay for men and women. Lastly, she touched on good practices from the agricultural sector in Nagaland.

**Dr. Abhinandan Saikia, Assistant Professor, TISS**, discussed the multi-layered manner of conception and implementation of developmental policies in the North East. He stated that while the UN's Agenda 2030 contributed all 17 SDG goals, it has had the unintended consequence of fragmenting these developmental goals into isolated silos. It does not focus on the interconnection between them, or the contribution of one SDG to another. Keeping in mind these interrelationships can benefit the pursuit of sustainable development in the North East. He urges for a link between the global and the local agendas for sustainable development or a focus on the "glocal". Further, he suggested that development does not



refer to the speed of progress, but the incorporation of speed breakers to prevent potential accidents.

He suggested having the community at the centre, with collaboration between industry, academia and government. He mentioned the company Amul, from the state of Gujarat, as an example of such an undertaking. In the context of the North East, he put forth that the relationship between the environment, gender and decision-making needs to be studied further to enable a greater contribution to the economy. A special focus on bio-economy, entrepreneurship of women and climate change is also recommended when creating a roadmap for the North East region.

Further, he stated that the fragile and complex agri-ecology system in the North East, as well as its rich biodiversity, require attention from all stakeholders. Thus, a multi-stakeholder platform would allow for synergy and act as a one-stop solution in the context of the North East.

**Dr. Sanjeeb Kakoty, Associate Professor, IIM Shillong** discussed a need to focus on the process of achieving sustainability goals, not merely the goals themselves. Without this, any discussion on achieving SDGs would be incomplete, especially in the context of the stark inequalities that exist today. He further pointed out that the responsibilities of businesses towards achieving SDGs are not defined and must be done so for progress towards sustainability. He also shed light on the concept of the 'Nine Planetary Boundaries', which refers to nine quantitative boundaries, beyond which the risk of generating large-scale abrupt or irreversible environmental changes increases. He stated that humanity has already breached over 50% of the planetary boundaries and that the world is currently in a crisis situation. In this context, he appeals for the adoption of a sustainable way of life in a holistic manner. He also introduced the relevance of the community sector as a third sector, apart from the public and private sectors, to bring about transformation and sustainable development in the North East.

**Mr Rijit Sengupta** invited comments and questions from the audience, which were responded to by the panellists:

1. There are a lot of gaps between policies and practices in the North East. Access to finance is one of the biggest issues in the North East, despite liquidity in the banking industry. This points to a lack of willingness on the part of the banking industry to extend timely credit to our entrepreneurs. The credit-deposit ratio in North East India is very low, which is a subject of concern for the governments of all North Eastern states for the last 40 years. On responsible business in the region, there are legacy issues and historical perspectives. Business is considered unethical and risky. The banking sector must come forward to help set up enterprises and responsible businesses, as well as help bigger entrepreneurs integrate themselves into the global value chain. They must also provide customization of loan products in conformity with the requirements of the region. Collaborations must be able to leverage the

core competencies of individuals and organizations in a win-win situation.

2. When talking of sustainability and SDGs in the North East, we must factor in the ecological sensitivity of the region. In two reports conducted at the National level, the region was flagged as one of the most climate-vulnerable regions of the subcontinent. Thus, a one-size-fits-all approach cannot work for the North East. We may not be doing enough towards becoming net-zero as a region. Although this may be due to the fact that the North East does not have as many industries as the rest of the country, however, we must still be proactive players.
3. On bringing forward the producer companies and marginalised communities, such as those living in tea estates, **Dr. Abhinandan Saikia, Assistant Professor, TISS** stated the need for awareness and a participatory model where leaders in the community share their stories. The voice of the masses must be heard for participatory democracy to be experienced at large.

The following **highlights** emerged from the panel, and floor interactions:

- For the real impact of SDG programmes, awareness must be generated among stakeholders, so they view sustainability goals as a source of empowerment and a chance towards inclusive development.
- It is not enough to discuss the SDGs. The concept of the Nine Planetary Boundaries must be discussed as well. It is important to remember that ‘the house is on fire’ and we must move forward keeping in mind the gravity of the situation.
- Moving back to an authentic, simple way of life as per the region’s traditional living holds benefits in the context of sustainable development. Respect for the communities, as well as a commitment to take them along in the developmental journey, is crucial.
- Development with speed breakers is desirable, to avoid accidents.

### **2.3 Breakout Groups**

Participants in this session were divided into 2 groups to work on **“Enabling Business-CSO- Government Collaborative Actions for SDGs”** to make a presentation on *types of collaboration, details of the idea, specific target SDGs, anticipated outcomes, the objectives, potential partners, challenges and opportunities, required support.*

The Breakout Group session was one of the highlights of the program, the participants came up with collaborative ideas in types of collaboration including Business-CSOs-Government. The ideas of collaboration presented were innovative and insightful, and truly justified the purpose of the program to *exercise the practice of making efforts in attaining SDGs in businesses through Multi-Stakeholder collaborations.* Below are their collaborative ideas:

#### Group 1:

- The group focussed on the following SDG targets: SDG 1 (zero poverty), SDG 3 (good health and well-being), SDG 9 (innovation, industry, infrastructure), SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production), SDG 13 (climate action), SDG 15 (life on land) and SDG 17 (partnership for the goals).
- Collaborations are crucial for the last-mile delivery of services to the community, which are often hindered by bottlenecks.
- An important focus is to improve the incomes of the people, which will also allow them to have access to a healthier diet. Potential partners in this endeavour can be Tata Trust, Impulse, NE Greens and the North East Network.
- To boost CSR support in the region to attain the various SDGs, private sector companies with a turnover of over 2 crores per year and a low footprint in the North East must be encouraged to expand operations in the region.
- Companies based outside the North East must be encouraged to invest in the region.
- Encourage climate-smart innovation based on indigenous knowledge.
- Other partners may include NABARD, FICCI, the Indian Chamber of Commerce, AIDC India and NECTAR.

#### Group 2:

- All SDGs must be worked on simultaneously as part of a larger plan for holistic sustainable development.
- International, national and sub-national NGOs and development agencies can be potential partners.
- An effort must be made not to replicate current government schemes. Instead, civil society and other partners must assist the government in expanding the reach of these programmes so their benefits may reach the most marginalised communities.

**Fig 3: The event in progress**



### 3. Conclusion

Some **key takeaways** from the event were as follows:

- Collaboration is the key when it comes to attaining SDGs in the North Eastern region.
- The community must be at the heart of any intervention or programme. Indigenous knowledge and a traditional way of living can contribute to inclusive and sustainable development.
- The speed of attaining SDGs is less important than the quality of the output and outcome. 'Speed breakers' may seem undesirable, but preventing unnecessary accidents is an important consideration.
- Not just SDGs, but the process of their attainment must be the subject of discussion. Without it, any attempt to achieve SDGs has a lower chance of success.



- The North East is unique in terms of its environment and ecology. This must be factored into any plan for development in the region.
- Mainstreaming gender into all considerations is crucial to attaining inclusive development. The challenges faced by women must be taken into consideration when designing programmes and policies.

**Fig 4: Participants at the event**

