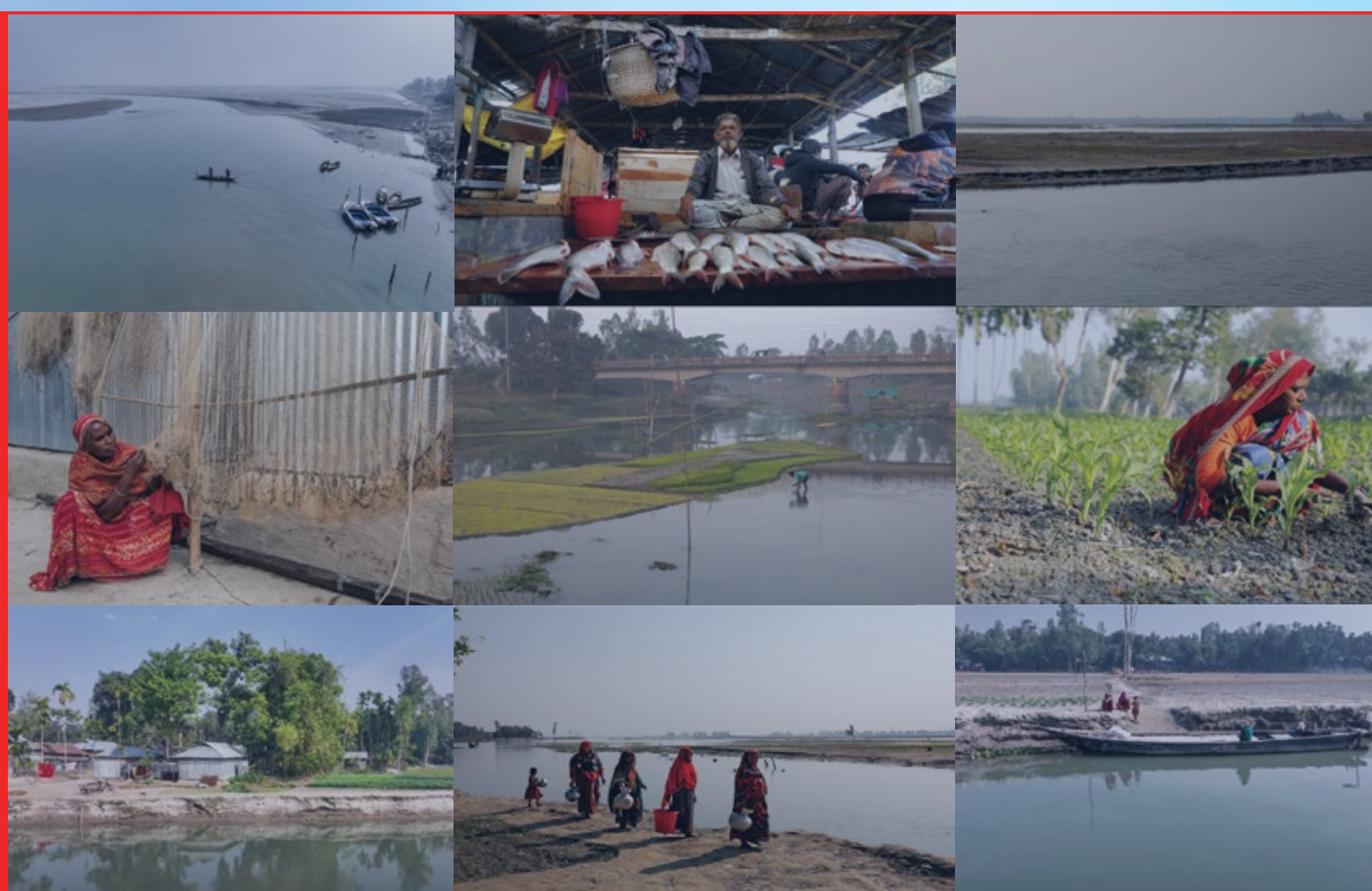


A summary of International Water Conferences of **ActionAid** Bangladesh



Time to Care Before River is Rare

Water is one of the most critical and precious natural resources, but it is often taken for granted. Be it due to lack of awareness, or indifference or some other reason, people mostly do not realise that proper attention and management is required to ensure optimal availability of water. River, a big source of water is losing out, their significance made irrelevant by the argument of the need for development. Despite being a predominantly riverine country, where the economy, society and culture of the people are shaped by around 700 rivers flowing through its lands, there has been a lack of adequate initiatives to protect these rivers in Bangladesh. On this backdrop, ActionAid Bangladesh in 2014 established the water museum to bring the issue to the table, building critical awareness and inspire conservation and policy revitalization efforts. To accelerate this on-going advocacy movement, ActionAid Bangladesh have been hosting yearly International Water Conferences since 2016.

Objectives of Water Conference

1. To create a space for sharing ideas and innovations, encourage dialogues, foster trans-border activism, and build alliance.
2. To advance transnational advocacy and activism on water commons from local to a global level from a rights perspective.



From 2016-2021, ActionAid Bangladesh successfully organised six International Water Conferences on various thematic issues such as Right to Water and Defending Commons, Water Democracy, Water Roots Innovation etc. Through the conference ActionAid encourage peoples' voice to protect water resource and pledges support to peoples' initiatives.

The First Conference

Right to Water and Defending Commons
15-17 March 2016
Kalapara, Patuakhali

To carry forward the agenda of Water Commons, the conference "Right to Water and Defending Commons" took place where the focus was to uphold the issue of river and its water outside political bias and establish the need to re-imagine river from a humane and ecological point of view. Kuakata Declaration 2016 is the outcome of the first conference in 2016 that reflects peoples' voice on water agenda.

The Second Conference

Water Democracy
25-26 January 2017
Kalapara, Patuakhali

Millions of South Asian People living on riverbanks and coastal areas mostly depend on natural water flow. But obstruction to and diversion of natural flow of water, faulty river management, unpredictable flooding, extinction of fish/ aquatic species, scarcity of water and pollution are some of the major concerns of riverine economy and eco-system. Moreover, re-emergence of river-linking project and emphasis on infrastructure led development initiatives in this region has put the eco-systems, life, and livelihood of millions of riverine people at risk. Therefore, free flow of water across the region is a critical concern for the environment and a pertinent factor to climate change. With this backdrop the second conference took place with the slogan of "Water is a Natural Resource; Its Rightful Use & Conservation is Our Own Responsibility".

The Water Advocacy Agenda of ActionAid

- Ratify UN Law on Non-Navigational use of Water Course 1997
- River basin management agenda in SAARC
- Set a regional River Commission instead of JRC
- Set basin wide management Authority
- Enact a River law considering supreme court order that River is a living being
- Ensure free flow of river without contamination
- Industries to be shifted far from river
- Sewerage lines to be disconnected from river & water bodies
- Increase forestation and stop deforestation
- Increase surface water based irrigation instead of ground water
- River is a Living Being



The Second Conference

Key Findings

- Water right should be given utmost importance as it is directly connected with life.
- Local indigenous knowledge should be taken into serious consideration while planning on water.
- Role of women should be increased in water management system.
- Urgent steps should be taken to save water from pollution and river centric livelihood, biodiversity and salinity issues should be addressed immediately.
- While implementing structural interventions, care should be taken so that they do not hamper the flow of river.
- Unplanned construction of dams and embankments on rivers should be prohibited.

The Third Conference

Water Roots Innovation

9-10 February 2018

Kalapara, Patuakhali

The concept of "Water Roots Innovation" ideally connects water bodies, community, and their innovations to improve the water management and the lives of people living around water bodies. The third conference was organised with the objective to facilitate and promote the existing innovations around water justice; deepen the understanding of activism around water governance and build connectivity with the scientific community and 'think tanks' for challenging false solutions.

Key Findings

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The Third Conference

The Fourth Conference

River: A Living Being

29-30 January 2019

Kalapara, Patuakhali

The conference emphasized on the recognition of "River As A Living Entity". It considered the cases of New Zealand and India where river was granted same legal rights as human being through enactment of laws and court rulings. The Whanganui, Ganges and Yamuna rivers now have a legal personality, meaning it must be treated as a living entity. This multidisciplinary conference covered a range of thematic areas namely water as - 'WEBS' (Water, Energy, Biodiversity and Sediment), climate justice and people's initiatives for the rights of the rivers.



The Fourth Conference

Key Findings

- Transboundary rivers being a major support system to the lives and livelihoods of people, it is crucial to protect the rivers through sustainable and long-term solutions.
- More focus should be given on sustainable solutions such as river training and managing sedimentation process instead of relying on temporary solution such as river dredging.
- Any infrastructure development maintaining 20% of flow regimes could have minimal impact on river health and its biodiversity.
- Sharing of transboundary hydrological data should be practised among countries. Use of modern technologies, such as satellite remote sensing can be a good solution.
- Peoples' Initiatives to save rivers and establish their rights should be prioritized. Atreyee Bachao Andolon (India) and Teesta Bachao Andolon are the example such initiatives.
- Local communities, dependent on rivers, should be engaged in community monitoring of government projects, and should be consulted and updated in every step of development.

The Fifth Conference

Legalising River Rights: People, Politics, and Practices

29-30 January 2020

Kalapara, Patuakhali

This year's conference focused on people's initiatives, the politics, and the real-life practices around the legalisation of the rights of rivers in Bangladesh and around the world. One new and emerging approach is the use of legal personality to protect water systems. The key areas of discussion revolved around ground level community initiatives, policy reforms, education around the health and conservation of rivers, and water museums.

Key Findings

- While talking about hydro-diplomacy, all elements – politics, economy, technology, culture and psychology should be taken into consideration.
- Life within rivers includes fish and underwater ecosystems which is directly linked with sediments.
- Distinct policies should be formulated for water management in urban areas.
- Educating children and youth for river preservation is important.
- River related laws and acts should be implemented properly.
- Proper implementation of the Water Act and Act to Protect the River signed in 2013 should be ensured.



The Fifth Conference

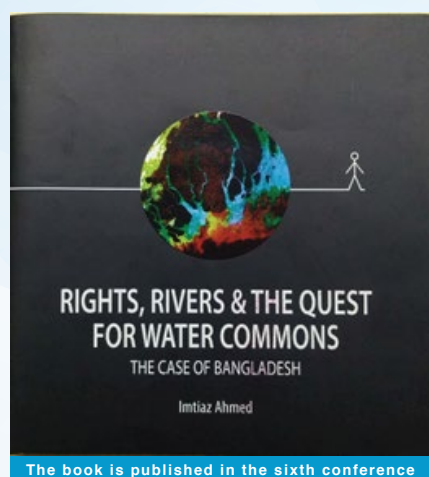
The Sixth Conference

Water, Climate and Justice in the Wake of COVID-19

27-29 January 2021

Virtual

The COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected all aspect of human life, also the river. The sixth conference focused this interlinked relation. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this year's conference was held virtually with the focus on water, climate, and justice in the wake of the pandemic. The key areas of discussion revolved around Water Commons: Lessons from COVID-19, Water, Gender and COVID-19 Nexus, Rights of Rivers and Water and Climate Grassroots Innovation.



The book is published in the sixth conference





Key Findings

- In early July 2019, Bangladesh became the first country to grant all of its rivers the same legal status as humans.
- While adhering to the basic practices of precautionary protection, sanitisation and good hygiene during the pandemic, people must be aware of the level of water consumption and wastage as it might lead to water scarcity and pollution.
- Discussions on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) particularly in low-income countries, should include issues of water infrastructure system, particularly in informal settings where access to adequate water is already a challenge.
- The local community in the riverine areas lose their ability to discuss their rivers on their terms. Rivers can't have their rights since they don't have a voice.
- To solve the intertwined challenges of water and climate, grassroots centric approach is essential to get a balanced ecosystem.
- Water risks are perceived and responded differently by men and women. Therefore, their needs should be addressed differently.
- Simple stories of the riverine people can become more meaningful than an attempt to fathom the fate of a river by policy experts, engineers and academics sitting miles away.

The Seventh Conference

 Teesta River Basin: Overcoming the Challenges

 20-22 January 2022

 Virtual

ActionAid Bangladesh is going to organise the 7th International Water Conference 2022 titled “Teesta River Basin: Overcoming the Challenges” was held as a continuation of ActionAid Bangladesh’s advocacy on pro-people water justice and people’s indigenous rights to the rivers, the conference goes beyond disciplinary boundaries to recognize the need for equity and ethics of water governance. The aim of this conference is to draw attention of the international community, national policy makers and duty bearers on the existing challenges faced by the communities and eco system along the Teesta riverbank and solicit solutions to the overcome the water disputes. The session will also stock take on the anthropogenic impacts of the river morphology and regional disputes.



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