WEATHERING RISK
PEACE PILLAR

Impact Synthesis: Bay of Bengal Project

Bay of Bengal Maritime Dialogue

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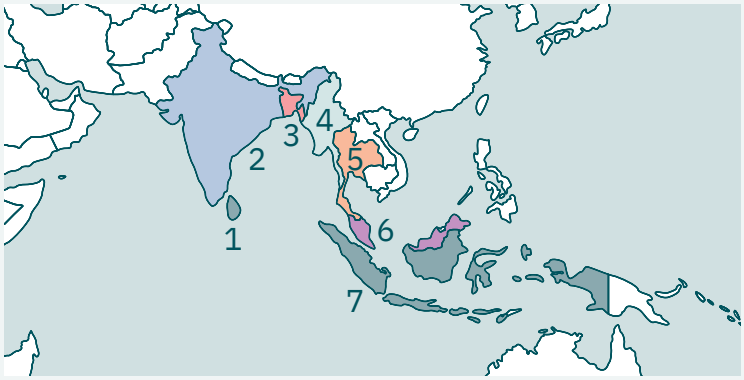

Project locations:

1. Sri Lanka
2. India
3. Bangladesh
4. Myanmar
5. Thailand
6. Malaysia
7. Indonesia

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- **Science diplomacy is a proven tool** to address regional tensions driven by climate change. By providing a space for conducting joint research and creating a marine science network anchored in regional institutions, the project fostered environmental cooperation and contributed to building trust between the littoral states. The network helped facilitate a shared understanding of climate change impacts on fisheries, coastal communities and marine ecosystems in the region, and lays the basis for future joint action and environmental protection.

- By establishing a regional dialogue platform for the littoral states, the Bay of Bengal Maritime Dialogue has enabled **discussions on challenging issues that are difficult to address bilaterally**, such as illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, and enforcement efforts across jurisdictions to address IUU fishing. This has resulted in the littoral states developing a set of guiding principles on the conduct of maritime law enforcement agencies during interaction at sea, which was formally adopted by BIMSTEC[1].

- By deliberately **integrating the perspectives of women, marginalised groups and local communities** from the various littoral states into high-level policy discussions, the Dialogue facilitated more inclusive discussions on **maritime policies and fisheries management**, especially regarding the role of women in the fisheries sector.

1 Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) – a regional organisation including seven member states, namely Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

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KEY OUTCOMES

Increased regional trust by engaging more than **150 key stakeholders across environmental, political and security sectors** in targeted policy discussions.

Facilitated the **adoption of the Kochi Declaration on Marine Science Cooperation**, which resulted in the establishment of a **collaborative network** of over 50 marine researchers from 25 different regional institutions.

Enhanced cooperation among littoral state maritime law enforcement by supporting the **adoption of two major regional maritime coordination instruments.**

Advanced the role of regional organisations – including **BIMSTEC** and **BOBP**[2] – in maritime governance and multilateral discussions by facilitating dialogue and knowledge-sharing among member states.

REAPING THE BENEFITS OF COORDINATED ACTION

In 2025, Bangladesh and India moved to coordinate the timing of their 65-day fishing ban in the Bay of Bengal for the first time, which - while not directly attributable to the Bay of Bengal Maritime Dialogue – aligns closely with its aims. Research conducted before and after found that catch volumes rose significantly following the ban, indicating a clear recovery of fish stocks. Community leaders described a shift in compliance from fear of punishment towards voluntary adherence once fishers began to see a tangible benefit.

Project Overview

Environmental degradation, declining fish stocks and climate change are severely affecting the Bay of Bengal – a region home to a quarter of humanity. As the littoral states depend heavily on the shared marine environment, risks to food security, livelihoods and economic development are mounting. Competition for dwindling resources is exacerbating existing tensions, further intensifying conflicts over access to marine resources.

Recognising the growing risk of conflict over shared marine resources and the need for stronger regional cooperation, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) initiated the *Bay of Bengal Maritime Dialogue* in 2021. The project aims to prevent the escalation of maritime related disputes and foster trust among a diverse range of stakeholders across the

2 Bay of Bengal Programme (BOBP) – a regional fisheries advisory body including Bangladesh, India, Maldives and Sri Lanka as member states, with Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand cooperating as non-contracting parties.

region. The Dialogue brings together representatives from coastal communities, academia, think tanks, and government agencies responsible for fisheries, environment, maritime security and disaster management across Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand. It also engages key multilateral organisations, notably the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).

Through structured dialogue and expert exchange, the project provides a neutral and impartial platform to identify and address shared maritime challenges, including disaster coordination, environmental degradation and IUU fishing practices. The initiative also supports the development of practical mechanisms, such as standard operating principles, to manage resource disputes and strengthen regional cooperation.

Key Outcomes and Insights

An outcome evaluation of the project (2022–26) found that the Bay of Bengal Maritime Dialogue effectively advanced regional cooperation on maritime security, environmental protection and conflict prevention in the Bay of Bengal.[3] The initiative fostered new partnerships, enhanced institutional coordination and generated momentum for collective action on shared maritime challenges.

FOSTERED TRUST THROUGH A NEUTRAL AND IMPARTIAL PLATFORM

The Dialogue provides a trusted and recurring space for more than 150 stakeholders from across government, civil society, academia and regional organisations to engage in open conversations on sensitive maritime issues.[4] During the evaluation period, the Dialogue convened officials from key ministries, naval and coast guard personnel, legal and fisheries experts, and leading think tanks from all Bay of Bengal littoral states. The platform enabled frank exchanges on difficult topics, ranging from maritime communications to IUU fishing, helping clarify national positions and promote mutual understanding and trust. The Dialogue's informal setting was frequently cited by participants as essential to fostering candour and confidence among diverse actors.

> **[The Bay of Bengal Maritime Dialogue is the] only platform looking at the Bay of Bengal in a holistic sense … [and] provided insights into [the] entire spectrum of issues in the Bay. [It has] high relevance in relation to policymaking on non-traditional security and environmental issues. Immense scope to bring about a positive change in the Bay.**
>
> – Captain Anurag Bisen, Senior Fellow, Vivekananda International Foundation

3 The evaluation employed a contribution analysis approach to understand whether and how HD's interventions supported the desired project outcomes. The methodology included collecting and analysing qualitative data, primarily drawn from interviews with HD-facilitated dialogue participants and supporting written documents.

4 Read our impact story: Voices from the Bay – Making a Fishing Ban Work in the Bay of Bengal.

STRENGTHENED OPERATIONAL COOPERATION ON MARITIME CONFLICT PREVENTION

Through sustained engagement with the maritime law enforcement agencies of the littoral states and the BIMSTEC Secretariat, the Dialogue has supported the development and adoption of regional coordination instruments, including the *BIMSTEC Guiding Principles on the Conduct of Maritime Law Enforcement Agencies during Interaction at Sea*[5]. The Principles' formal adoption represents an important step in continued regional coordination and cooperation on interactions at sea and is expected to reduce the risk of violent maritime incidents. By regulating the use of force by maritime authorities when dealing with foreign fishing vessels, the Principles also support humanitarian issues, such as the wellbeing of fishers.

> **The Dialogue enhanced knowledge and information sharing between coast guards ... building a mechanism for immediate actions to deal with future threats and incidents on environmental degradation.**
>
> – Captain (G) U.P.K Vithanage, Commanding Officer SLCGS Suraksha, Sri Lanka Coast Guard

> **The Bay of Bengal Maritime Dialogue series has been instrumental to the launch of BIMReN and also contributed to the discussion on managing the hitherto unmanaged resources in the high seas. This platform has been unique in consistently discussing the issue of IUU fishing in the region, thus contributes to gauging perspectives and discussing options.**
>
> – Dr Pandian Krishnan, Director, Bay of Bengal Programme – Intergovernmental Organisation (BOBP-IGO)

ADVANCED INSTITUTIONAL COLLABORATION ON FISHERIES AND MARINE ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

The Dialogue played a key role in shaping regional discourse and collaboration on transboundary fisheries management and environmental degradation. Through expert discussions and sustained engagement with research institutions, it catalysed the Kochi Declaration on Marine Science Cooperation,[6] which resulted in the establishment of a regional research network under the auspices of the Bay of Bengal Programme (BOBP) in 2023. These science diplomacy efforts laid the groundwork for a collaboration between BOBP and India's Ministry of External Affairs, which in February 2024 led to the launch of the BIMSTEC-India Marine Research Network (BIMReN). BIMReN is an institutional research mechanism coordinated by BOBP and backed by more than 50 marine scientists from across the region, which aims to strengthen regional research capacity to address the escalating transboundary fisheries challenges the region faces, including climate change, overfishing, IUU fishing and fisher safety. In addition to BIMReN, the Dialogue has also supported the development of two additional initiatives led by BOBP: a Regional Action Plan on IUU Fishing and a Regional Framework for Fisheries Management.

5 The Principles were formally adopted by the BIMSTEC National Security Chiefs in July 2026.

6 The *Kochi Declaration: A Resolution for Marine Science Cooperation in the Bay of Bengal Region* emerged from the *2023 HD-BOBP Dialogue on the Development of a Marine Fisheries Research Network for the Bay of Bengal.*

ELEVATED THE ROLE OF REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS IN MARITIME GOVERNANCE

By integrating regional organisations into the discussion process and focusing on supporting existing regional policy frameworks, the Dialogue has helped align national and multilateral priorities while avoiding duplication of existing efforts. Senior officials from BIMSTEC, BOBP and the Indian Ocean Rim Association actively contributed to dialogue sessions, using the platform to consult stakeholders, build political will, and advance their respective mandates on maritime security, disaster response and sustainable fisheries. Their participation has also helped align the Dialogue with regional policymaking, ensuring relevance and reinforcing regional ownership.

> **The Dialogue contributes to strengthening regional cooperation in maritime governance … a combination of official and experts on [the] same subjects from each country's perspective provides useful input.**
>
> – Dr Sreeradha Datta, Professor, Jindal School of International Affairs, O.P. Jindal Global University

Lessons and Recommendations

HD's Bay of Bengal Maritime Dialogue demonstrates the value of sustained, structured and facilitated engagements in fostering trust and regional cooperation on maritime security and governance. The Dialogue's science diplomacy methodology provides a scalable and replicable model for addressing shared regional challenges, preventing conflict escalation and promoting cooperation among states. The outcome evaluation highlighted key lessons to guide the future of the Dialogue, including recommendations for programming and donor support.

LESSON 1:
SUSTAINED REGIONAL IMPACT REQUIRES INSTITUTIONALISATION AND LOCAL OWNERSHIP.

Region-specific initiatives such as the *Guiding Principles for Maritime Law Enforcement Agencies* and BIMReN have shown that shared vision and ownership among the Bay of Bengal littoral states and regional organisations can lead to better coordinated regional responses to maritime security risks and improved marine scientific cooperation. However, translating regional initiatives into institutional frameworks remains a challenge, largely due to differing national priorities and resource constraints. Strengthening local leadership in maritime governance can help enhance the legitimacy and long-term sustainability of regional cooperation efforts.

Recommendations for programming and donor support

Peacemaking actors should prioritise embedding dialogue outcomes and cooperation frameworks within regional and national institutions, supporting them to lead and sustain such initiatives over time. This means working with and through existing institutional mandates, while cultivating relevant networks to enhance regional leadership and ownership. It also requires accompanying the implementation of dialogue outcomes to enable a shift from adoption to action, supporting regional actors in operationalising policy mechanisms that translate into behavioural change.

Donors should support such efforts by facilitating and politically advocating for collaboration with national and multilateral institutions on shared maritime security priorities. These partnerships can also deepen donor understanding of regional dynamics and strengthen their own strategic engagement with local institutions.

LESSON 2:

INFORMAL DIALOGUE MECHANISMS CAN HELP MANAGE SENSITIVE ISSUES AND COMPLEMENT FORMAL DIPLOMACY.

Informal platforms such as the Bay of Bengal Maritime Dialogue create space for discussions on IUU fishing, which are often politically sensitive, and difficult to address in official forums and bilateral exchanges. Informal engagement enables parties – including fisheries departments and maritime law enforcement agencies – to clarify positions and build confidence, and can serve as a stepping stone to formal cooperation.

Recommendations for programming and donor support

Peacemaking actors should prioritise the design of flexible, informal dialogue spaces that bring together decision-makers, technical experts and regional institutions from across all relevant sectors. Linking dialogue with formal regional processes (without compromising informality) and complementing them with targeted bilateral engagements can strengthen their relevance and secure buy-in from regional actors.

Donors can support recurring dialogue mechanisms required to sustain politically sensitive conversations over time. They can also provide quiet political support by encouraging relevant government participation.

LESSON 3:

MEANINGFUL INCLUSION REQUIRES SUSTAINED STRUCTURAL EFFORTS AND INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENTS.

Women sustain coastal economies across the Bay of Bengal, making up a large share of the fisheries and coastal labour force. Yet, they frequently remain excluded from policymaking, with male-dominated maritime institutions, loosely enforced inclusion mandates and a lack of gender-disaggregated data in the fisheries sector reinforcing systemic exclusion. Achieving meaningful and sustained inclusion requires long-term structural commitments to embedding diverse voices into policy processes through institutional partnerships, inclusive agenda-setting and pathways enabling community-driven recommendations to feed into decision-making.

Recommendations for programming and donor support

Peacemaking actors should prioritise inclusion strategies that embed diverse participation across all stages of the dialogue process. This includes building networks of underrepresented actors, such as female policymakers and coastal community representatives, and ensuring their inputs shape policy discussions and outcomes. These networks can contribute evidence, propose locally grounded solutions and monitor the implementation of agreed policies.

Donors can play a catalytic role by funding and enabling these networks, and supporting the creation and maintenance of inclusive policy platforms, such as advisory groups and standing community consultation mechanisms linked to regional institutions. Promoting cross-country learning exchanges among female leaders and local actors can help build transnational networks that strengthen regional cooperation from the ground up.

LESSON 4:

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS AND THE LONG-TERM BENEFITS OF SCIENCE DIPLOMACY ARE CHALLENGING TO ASSESS WITHIN SHORT PROJECT CYCLES.

While the Dialogue supported promising marine science collaboration aimed at promoting sustainable fisheries management, and the adoption of the Kochi Declaration and the creation of BIMReN represent significant steps forward, meaningful ecological change and scientific partnerships take significant time to fully mature. Furthermore, monitoring their results requires sustained commitment and institutional continuity, thinking beyond short-term project cycles.

Recommendations for programming and donor support

Peacemaking actors should prioritise the development of long-term science diplomacy partnerships embedded in regional institutional frameworks. Strengthening coordination between researchers, policymakers and regional organisations on topics such as fish stock assessments, marine biodiversity conservation and climate resilience can reinforce scientific cooperation and enable durable and evidence-based approaches to marine ecosystem management. Assessing environmental changes over time can serve as a valuable area of cooperation for stakeholders and provide insights into the longer-term impact of peacemaking initiatives.

Donors can support these efforts by investing in regional scientific infrastructure and networks, including knowledge-sharing platforms, collaborative research grants and capacity-building programmes in areas such as marine data collection and analysis, maritime domain awareness and the use of new monitoring technologies.

Monitoring and evaluation systems need to be adapted accordingly, and financed to do so, to be able to capture both the more immediate political and the longer-term environmental outcomes.

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