



## Regional Char Convention 2021

**A call for comprehensive and coordinated development for the Char Region**

### Background

Bangladesh is a riverine country geographically located in a disaster-prone area where flooding is very common. Riverine islands are extremely vulnerable to floods, where char dwellers suffer the most. These isolated landmasses, scattered across 100 Upazilas in 32 districts, are home to more than six million people, most of whom are among the country's poorest. In particular, the chars of northwest Bangladesh cover a large part of the riverine country, and their unique geographical, environmental, economic, and demographic conditions require special attention. For the impoverished char-dwellers in the region, flooding and erosion continually disrupt the people's attempt at making a livelihood. And again, due to the remoteness and poor infrastructure, they are void of the benefits of mainland regions. Deprivation in all basic life needs, such as food security, agricultural development, health, and education, makes it almost impossible for the poor to rise above the poverty and vulnerability cycle. Women and adolescent girls are among the worst affected, as they do not get an equal and equitable share in decision-making in their families and community.

USAID's Strengthening Household Ability to Respond to Development Opportunities (SHOUHARDO III) program of CARE Bangladesh, in association with the National Char Alliance (NCA), organized the "Regional Char Convention 2021" on 5 December 2021 in Rangpur. The convention aimed to build a shared understanding among relevant stakeholders on the status of development opportunities and challenges in the char region of Bangladesh.

The Convention also focused on prioritization for the char region's comprehensive and coordinated development efforts and securing agreement among key stakeholders to formulate an Engagement Plan for Development Initiatives for the Char Region that will track the development commitments and deliveries. Three pre-convention consultations were held separately with development practitioners, civil society organizations/non-governmental organizations (CSOs/NGOs) working in the char region, private sector and business communities, and relevant government agencies to make the **'Engagement Plan for Development Initiatives for the Char Region'** more inclusive.

### Key Participants

Mr. AKM Enamul Hoque Shameem, MP, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Water Resources, Government of Bangladesh, was the Chief Guest for the opening session. Barrister Shameem Haider Patwary, MP, Member of Parliament (Gaibandha 1), Member, Standing Committee on Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, and Mr. MA Matin, MP, Member of Parliament (Kurigram 3), were present as the Chief Guests in the parallel sessions. Dr. Atiur Rahman, Chairman, NCA; Chairperson, Unnayan Shamannay, and former Governor of Bangladesh Bank was the chair in the opening session, and Mr. Ramesh Singh, Country Director, CARE Bangladesh, presided over the closing session while Mr. Marc Nosbach, Chief of Party of SHOUHARDO III, spoke in the opening session.



AKM Enamul Hoque Shameem, MP (Deputy Minister, Ministry of Water Resources, GoB) speaking as the Chief Guest at the Regional Char Convention 2021

### Significant Outcomes from the Convention

- The significant outcome of the event was an agreement amongst the stakeholders to develop an 'Engagement Plan for the Development of the Char Region'. This would be a comprehensive policy guidance reflecting key development priorities for the char region outlined for relevant stakeholders' engagements in their concerned areas.
- The key policy recommendation from the day-long discussions was to formulate a central coordination entity for the char region through



which the government will lead the overall development process in the char region. The relevant stakeholders will contribute and engage in the process in a more coordinated manner. This can be a Char Development Board or Char Development Foundation, which will have adequate authority for inter-ministerial coordination and budget for the development work regarding the char region.

- The three Members of Parliament (MPs) at the event agreed with this recommendation and committed to taking the discussion in the upcoming parliamentary sessions and relevant standing committees. They also agreed to explore possibilities of formulating a parliamentary caucus for the char region. In this case, the proposed coordination authority and the parliamentary committees can significantly influence the government's budgetary allocations and track the committed delivery of identified priorities.
- As part of the follow-up initiative, the consolidated discussion of the event and the proposition of the engagement plan will be published and shared through national dialogue among the relevant stakeholders. These will be used for continuing the advocacy pursuits and tracking the commitments from the event.

### Proposal for Formation of Char Development Board/Foundation

Building on the outcomes of the Regional Char Convention 2021, the proposed Char Development entity should have adequate authority to ensure effective inter-ministerial coordination of the development efforts in the char region and act as a coordination body for future budget allocation and investments. As discussed during the Convention in 2021, the proposed Char Development Board can be built on the experience and lessons learned from the Bangladesh Haor and Wetland Development Board (BHWDB), which was created under the Ministry of Water Resources by a Presidential order on 11 September 2000. BHWDB works with a vision of sustainable livelihood development for the population of wetlands and haor regions of Bangladesh. The key mission of this entity is to protect the biodiversity of haor and wetlands and improve the standard of living for the population by flood management and infrastructural development. Considering the experience of the existing BHWDB, an overarching vision will drive the Char Development entity with a clear mission and set of medium to long-term objectives. The vision, mission, objectives, and functions for the proposed Char Development Board is outlined below:

<b>Vision</b>	Sustainable livelihood development for the population of the char region of Bangladesh by 2041
<b>Mission</b>	Sustainably improving the overall living conditions of the char-dwellers through adequately increasing food security and enhancing their capacity and skills to cope with natural disasters socio-economic shocks and inequalities
<b>Objectives and Functions</b>	<b>1. Partnership for knowledge generation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessing the impact of development interventions in the char areas</li> <li>• Tracking progress towards achievement of the development goals</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monitoring the needs of the char dwellers</li> </ul>
	<b>2. Resolute efforts for policy changes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improved access to social safety nets and other public services</li> <li>Ensuring land rights for the landless char-dwellers</li> <li>Increased allocation in the national budget</li> </ul>
	<b>3. Coordination for improved Income-Generating Activities</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Effective support for sustainable development in agriculture</li> <li>Promoting small-scale agri-business and non-farm activities</li> <li>Facilitating private sector engagement in the char economy</li> <li>Linking the char entrepreneurs with the local and global markets</li> </ul>
	<b>4. Combined actions to combat climate change</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improving resilience to climate change and facilitating climate change adaptation</li> <li>Reducing climate change-induced migration from the char regions</li> <li>Constructing cold storage for seasonal produce</li> </ul>
	<b>5. Collaboration for financial inclusion</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensure 'last mile delivery' in financial services through innovation</li> <li>Facilitating partnerships between Banks, NBFIs, MFIs, and Fin-Techs to provide better services in the char areas</li> </ul>
	<b>6. Develop alliance for improved living standards</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improving access to quality education, healthcare, and other social services in the char areas</li> <li>Raising awareness about sustainable living practices in char areas</li> </ul>

The proposed Char Development Board/Foundation will be a **knowledge repository**. All stakeholders will share their field-level experiences related to char development with each other via this platform. Stakeholders can help each other assess the impact of the development interventions being implemented in char areas, which in turn, may contribute towards further improving the interventions or designing new ones. The stakeholders (under the banner of this entity) can work together in tracking progress toward achieving the targets (M&E supported).

The organizations working in the char areas will share their understanding/perceptions about required policy changes for improving the lives and livelihoods of the char people. This central coordinating entity will serve as a platform where these organizations can collaborate to **propose and advocate for such policy changes** (e.g., land rights, improved access to SSNPs, etc.).

Numerous IGA programs have been implemented and are being implemented in char areas of Bangladesh. The proposed central coordinating entity can facilitate better coordination among the actors **implementing IGA programs to ensure improved outputs and outcomes** (e.g., linking small agricultural entrepreneurs with private sector actors, linking char enterprises with the global market, etc.).

Digital financial services such as MFS and agents bank contribute significantly towards improving Bangladesh's access to finance. The Char Development Board/Foundation can **link organizations working in the char areas with digital financial service providers** to improve access to finance in those areas (e.g., implementing in-cash support programs using digital payment channels, paying microfinance installments via MFS, etc.).

Across all the char areas of Bangladesh, a wide array of actors (ranging from grass-roots organizations, international development partners, national level NGOs, and the government) are actively working towards **building resilience to climate change among char-dwellers**. The proposed national coordinating entity can contribute towards ensuring coherence, effectiveness, and efficiency of these climate change adaptation efforts by the said actors (e.g., learn-grow and scale)

Both government and non-government organizations already have commendable track records of implementing interventions to improve the living conditions in char areas. The proposed Board/Foundation can serve as a multi-stakeholder platform where these actors can share experiences and work collectively to improve service delivery and raise awareness.

## Conclusion

Taking into consideration the experience of the existing BHWDB, it is important to create a national entity titled Char Development Board/Foundation to develop a comprehensive **'Engagement Plan for Development Initiatives for the Char Region'** which will build on the policies and programs of the Government of Bangladesh (GoB), programs by NGOs and development partners, and investment by the private sector.

As such, a proposal to form a Board titled "Char Development Board" with a Director General and the required numbers of operational Directors and other officials and staff under the Ministry of Water Resources may be submitted to the government for their kind consideration. As suggested in the concept paper, the proposed vision, mission, objectives and functions may be added to the proposed Board.

In addition to the proposed Board, a proposal to create an Advisory Coordination and Consultative Committee (ACCC) headed by the Minister of Water Resources with other relevant ministries and the Director General of the proposed Board to act as the Secretary of the committee may be submitted to the government for their kind consideration. This committee will coordinate and provide guidance and advice for the overall activities of the Board. The committee may meet twice a year to review the progress of the Board's activities and suggest improvements. The concerned Division, District, and Upazila may have a similar type of committee with the relevant officials from the GOB and NGOs. The terms of reference of these committees and the charter of the duties of the Board may be formulated by the government.

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