Toda Peace Institute

SUMMARY REPORT

20 NOV 2026
REPORT
NO. 343



BAY OF BENGAL CLIMATE, PEACE AND SECURITY DIALOGUE

3–4 AUGUST 2026, COLOMBO, SRI LANKA

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To cite this summary report:
Vivekananda, Janani. 2026. Bay of Bengal Climate, Peace and Security Dialogue. Summary Report No. 343, Toda Peace Institute.
https://toda.org/publications/policy-briefs-and-reports/bay-of-bengal-climate-peace-and-security-dialogue

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On 3 and 4 August 2026, the Toda Peace Institute (TPI), adelphi and the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) co-hosted the **Bay of Bengal Climate, Peace and Security Dialogue** in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in knowledge partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

While Bay of Bengal littoral states have identified fisheries, the environment and climate change as key areas of cooperation, efforts to address the links between climate, peace and security (CPS) remain nascent. A more practical approach that takes into account local conflict risks and challenges is needed in the region. This dialogue capitalises on HD's longstanding and deep engagement across the Bay of Bengal region, UNDP's leadership on research and operationalisation of CPS on the ground, and TPI's established climate and conflict workstream, to accelerate the translation of CPS research and foresight into actionable regional policy.

Background and context

The Bay of Bengal is one of the world's most climatically and geopolitically sensitive maritime spaces. Environmental degradation, depleting fish stocks, and climate change are severely impacting the Bay. A high dependency on the marine environment of the Bay—in one of the most densely populated regions on earth—poses a serious threat to littoral states in terms of food security, livelihoods, and economic development. Regressing resource availability is already generating tangible tensions: illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing is a major driver of maritime disputes, most notably between India and Sri Lanka, and risks of escalation are increasing as stocks decline and competition intensifies.

The seven BIMSTEC member states (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand) share the Bay as a common resource space. Despite recognising fisheries, environment, and climate change as priority cooperation sectors, a robust, conflict-sensitive, and operationally grounded approach to the CPS nexus in this sub-region remains nascent. The HD Centre's flagship Bay of Bengal Maritime Dialogue project—implemented under the Weathering Risk Peace Pillar in partnership with adelphi and funded by the German Federal Foreign Office—has been establishing dialogue spaces between affected parties and building dispute-management mechanisms since 2022. The IPCS–HD–BIMSTEC Policy Implementation Workshop on Climate Change and Humanitarian Action/Disaster Response (Bangkok, October 2024) further demonstrated the need and appetite within the region for structured, policy-linked dialogue.

Workshop objectives

The overarching objective of the Bay of Bengal CPS Dialogue was:

To identify research gaps, consolidate existing academic and practitioner knowledge, and surface locally grounded insights on the CPS nexus in the Bay of Bengal, in order to inform and strengthen dialogue processes aimed at preventing the escalation of conflict over marine resources in the region.

This primary objective was pursued through four operational sub-objectives:

1. **Map the landscape**: Establish a shared baseline understanding of how environmental degradation, fish stock depletion, and climate change interact with peace and security dynamics in the Bay of Bengal.

2. **Identify gaps and opportunities**: Conduct a structured analysis of research gaps, policy vacuums, and underexplored entry points at the CPS nexus in the sub-region.

3. **Surface local and practitioner knowledge**: Bring academic knowledge into dialogue with practitioner and community-level experience—including from fisherfolk communities and coastal populations—to produce a richer, more actionable picture.

4. **Generate concrete recommendations**: Produce a set of prioritised, actionable recommendations for research, programming, and policy engagement, with a particular focus on feeding into BIMSTEC processes and the HD Bay of Bengal Maritime Dialogue.

The state of the Bay: environmental pressures and their security implications

1. The discussion opened by framing the Bay of Bengal's environmental pressures, including sea level rises, extreme weather, and fish stock decline, as potential entry points for cooperation, with science diplomacy identified as a key mechanism driving this shift. Participants pointed to fisheries as a potential instrument of peace, while noting that limited data on fish stocks and illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing continues to constrain consensus on the scale of the problem and the proportionality of the response.

2. Participants proposed an impartial regional process using existing institutions that agrees on standard rules and methods before results are known, transparently records data uncertainties and dissenting views, and ensures decision rationales remain fully reviewable. Existing efforts to harmonise methodologies and shared-stock assessments, such as Hilsa (India–Bangladesh) and Green Tiger Prawn (India–Sri Lanka), offer a useful foundation to build on. Participants also noted variations in terminology and enforcement practice across the region, reinforcing the case for a more harmonised regional approach to evidence-gathering. The role of fishing community unions and cooperatives in supporting community-level compliance as a complementary, bottom-up lever alongside formal enforcement mechanisms was also raised.

Local realities and research gaps: voices from the coast

3. Community-level perspectives from Bangladesh and Sri Lanka highlighted adaptive solutions emerging at the local level that existing frameworks do not yet fully capture. In Bangladesh, compounding pressures, including climate-driven fish migration, industrial pollution, and resource exploitation, are pushing fishing effort further offshore. Against this backdrop, the 2025 alignment of the fishing ban periods between Bangladesh and India illustrated the value of transboundary coordination emerging from the ground up. Participants noted the household-level costs associated with restriction periods, including lost income and disrupted schooling, and underscored the importance of strengthening livelihood support to help communities remain resilient to these pressures. Communities have proposed targeted measures to enhance the policy, including a defined 65-day restriction period, GPS-based boundary alerts, and direct community engagement.

4. In post-2004 tsunami southern Sri Lanka, coastal communities continued to adapt to displacement through livelihood diversification, out-migration, and shifts into small-scale markets or garment work, with older residents facing particular challenges in this transition. Participants observed that the region's central challenge lies less in missing knowledge than in the limited channels available to translate existing community knowledge into policy. Key research gaps identified include the divide between civilian and administrative language, the gap between policy assumptions and ground realities, the links between climate-induced migration and gender-based violence, and the limited connection between academic research and community-level realities.

The regional architecture: what exists, what can be bolstered, opportunities for collaboration

5. Participants identified BIMSTEC as a vital and effective vehicle for Bay of Bengal regional architecture, particularly across the security, disaster management, and climate domains. While disaster response has advanced following past crises, participants noted that operational gaps remain in cross-border coordination. To strengthen these frameworks, participants pointed to ASEAN as a valuable comparative model that integrates climate and security through a developmental lens, with common member states including Thailand and Myanmar offering a direct channel to draw on ASEAN's practices to bolster BIMSTEC's operational capacity and institutional coherence.

6. Participants noted that while the region possesses a dense network of multilateral mechanisms, this architecture would benefit from greater harmonisation across national and regional actors. Strategic entry points, such as trade frameworks, climate finance, and regional information fusion centres, were identified as means of unlocking transboundary cooperation without requiring institutional redesign. Participants also highlighted room to strengthen conflict sensitivity and civil-facing approaches within existing disaster response protocols, and identified the integration of gender-sensitive, inclusive approaches as a cross-cutting gap requiring greater regional attention.

Research landscape review: what do we know and what do we not know

7. Participants highlighted evidence gaps surrounding climate-related loss and damage, particularly the systemic challenge to track slow-onset processes and non-economic impacts like cultural loss, dignity, and social cohesion. Using Sri Lanka's Cyclone Ditwah as a case study, participants noted that current frameworks prioritise rapid-onset economic metrics while institutional responsibilities remain fragmented. To bridge these gaps, participants identified priority actions, including establishing a nationally mandated loss and damage coordination mechanism, building an integrated data system, and implementing gender-responsive, inclusive financing and mobility policies grounded in community reality.

8. Participants examined the critical intersection of indigenous knowledge and climate mobility, noting that global displacement metrics routinely miss complex seasonal and cross-border movements. Participants highlighted rights-based models like the Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union for prioritising cultural retention rather than mere physical relocation. Furthermore, participants identified a deep epistemological rift between top-down, universalist policy models and holistic, place-based indigenous knowledge systems. Participants emphasised that relying strictly on top-down frameworks risks eroding the native resilience mechanisms most essential for adaptation, concluding that current infrastructure captures immediate financial damage well while undercounting vital non-economic impacts.

Recommendations

RESEARCH AGENDA: FILLING THE GAPS

9. Participants called for community-level, gender-disaggregated data collection to become standard practice across the region, alongside the development of a transboundary regional climate-peace-security assessment framework built around a shared minimal dataset covering socio-economic, ecosystem, and IUU fishing indicators. Defence actors were identified as potential data partners given their existing hydrometeorological collection capabilities, offering an opportunity to bridge the current gap with fisheries ministries. The Arctic Council was also raised as a useful model for shared regional data systems, alongside the value of building an integrated loss and damage data system that incorporates impact-based forecasting.[1]

POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL ENGAGEMENT: STRENGTHENING THE ARCHITECTURE

10. Participants saw scope to strengthen BIMSTEC's regional operational footprint, proposing a dedicated subject-matter-expert function to embed technical organisations in an advisory capacity. Participants listed mainstreaming climate-peace-security considerations across all BIMSTEC sectors, alongside establishing a comprehensive regional framework for climate-induced human mobility, as key priorities. Furthermore, participants stressed the need to strengthen and harmonise humanitarian assistance and disaster response coordination across existing regional architectures. Participants further noted the value of pursuing national and regional loss and damage financing strategies, including engagement with the 2026 Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage.

[1] The Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme running since 1991 would be a relevant reference point. The Arctic Shipping Traffic Database maintained by the Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment (PAME) and its tiered data sharing agreements were also identified as useful models to explore for the region.

PROGRAMMING AND IMPLEMENTATION: FROM DIALOGUE TO ACTION ON THE GROUND

11. On implementation, participants proposed piloting an open-data *Ocean Information Services* platform as a practical first step, as well as treating marine spatial planning as an implementation priority. Additionally, exploring a joint, transboundary marine protected area as a concrete pilot for shared marine governance.

12. Emphasis was placed on engaging youth, women, and marginalised communities directly in programme design rather than consultation alone, and on documenting and publicising concrete cooperation wins to help sustain political momentum. Participants also underscored the importance of embedding gender equality and social inclusion considerations, along with accessibility, into the design of disaster response and livelihood programming.

Key outputs: from dialogue to dissemination

The Colombo dialogue is designed to generate four concrete, externally facing outputs. Together, these translate the evidence, local knowledge, and recommendations captured above into products tailored to four distinct audiences—the wider public record, the academic and donor research community, and the BIMSTEC-connected policy architecture—while maintaining a direct line of sight back to the discussion points and recommendations set out in this outcome document.

RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE GAP MATRIX

Drawing on the findings above, the following gaps have been identified by theme and geography as a starting basis for the matrix:

- **Fish stock and IUU fishing data:** Limited and contested data on fish stocks and illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing continues to constrain regional consensus on the scale of the problem and the proportionality of any response; terminology and enforcement practice also vary across littoral states.
- **Climate-related loss and damage:** Weak tracking of slow-onset processes and non-economic impacts such as cultural loss, dignity and social cohesion, illustrated by Sri Lanka's Cyclone Ditwah, where current frameworks prioritise rapid-onset economic metrics and institutional responsibility remains fragmented.
- **Climate-induced human mobility:** Global displacement metrics routinely miss complex seasonal and cross-border movement patterns in the Bay of Bengal, and no comprehensive regional framework for climate-induced mobility yet exists.
- **Indigenous and local knowledge integration:** A deep epistemological rift persists between top-down, universalist policy models and holistic, place-based indigenous knowledge systems, with a risk that reliance on top-down frameworks erodes the native resilience mechanisms most essential for adaptation.
- **Gender and social inclusion:** The links between climate-induced migration and gender-based violence remain under-researched, and community-level, gender-disaggregated data is not yet standard practice across the region.
- **Knowledge-to-policy translation:** A persistent divide between civilian and administrative language, and between policy assumptions and ground realities, limits the connection between academic research and community-level realities, as seen in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.
- **Geographic gaps:** Bangladesh—compounding pressures (climate-driven fish migration, industrial pollution, resource exploitation) pushing fishing effort further offshore, with household-level costs of restriction periods under-documented; Sri Lanka—post-2004 tsunami livelihood adaptation (diversification, out-migration, shifts into small-scale markets or garment work) remains under-researched, particularly for older residents; cross-border—the Hilsa (India-Bangladesh) and Green Tiger Prawn (India-Sri Lanka) assessments show harmonisation is possible but remain isolated bilateral examples rather than a regional system.

BEST PRACTICE AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Effective approaches identified during the dialogue:

- Harmonised shared-stock assessment methodologies, such as Hilsa (India-Bangladesh) and Green Tiger Prawn (India–Sri Lanka), offer a useful foundation for a more harmonised regional approach to evidence-gathering.
- The 2025 alignment of fishing-ban periods between Bangladesh and India demonstrates the value of transboundary coordination emerging from the ground up.
- Fishing community unions and cooperatives can support community-level compliance as a complementary, bottom-up lever alongside formal enforcement mechanisms.
- ASEAN's integration of climate and security through a developmental lens offers a comparative model BIMSTEC can draw on, given shared member states (Thailand, Myanmar) across both institutions.

Recommendations for BIMSTEC:

- Establish an impartial regional process, using existing institutions, that agrees standard rules and methods before results are known, transparently records data uncertainties and dissenting views, and keeps decision rationales fully reviewable.
- Embed a dedicated climate-peace-security subject-matter-expert function within BIMSTEC's advisory architecture.
- Mainstream climate-peace-security considerations across all BIMSTEC sectors.
- Establish a comprehensive regional framework for climate-induced human mobility.
- Strengthen and harmonise humanitarian assistance and disaster response coordination across existing regional architectures.
- Pursue national and regional loss and damage financing strategies, including engagement with the 2026 Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage.
- Use strategic entry points—trade frameworks, climate finance, and regional information fusion centres—to unlock transboundary cooperation without requiring institutional redesign.
- Strengthen conflict sensitivity and civil-facing approaches within existing disaster response protocols, and integrate gender-sensitive, inclusive approaches as a cross-cutting priority.

RESEARCH AND DATA GAPS FOR THE CPS RESEARCH COMMUNITY

Priority research and data gaps identified for the wider CPS research community:

- Establish a nationally mandated loss and damage coordination mechanism, using Sri Lanka's Cyclone Ditwah as a case study of current institutional fragmentation.
- Build an integrated loss and damage data system incorporating impact-based forecasting.
- Implement gender-responsive, inclusive financing and mobility policies grounded in community reality.
- Develop a transboundary regional climate-peace-security assessment framework built around a shared minimal dataset covering socio-economic, ecosystem and IUU fishing indicators.
- Explore defence actors as potential data partners, given their existing hydrometeorological collection capabilities, to bridge the current gap with fisheries ministries.
- Make community-level, gender-disaggregated data collection standard practice across the region.
- Investigate rights-based mobility models, such as the Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union, which prioritise cultural retention over physical relocation.
- Examine the Arctic Council and associated mechanisms (the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme and the PAME Arctic Shipping Traffic Database with its tiered data-sharing agreements) as models for shared regional data governance.

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