The EU funded Integrated Border Management in the Silk Routes (IBM Silk Routes) project seeks to promote prosperity and enhance security through supporting better intra-service, inter-agency and international cooperation on border management in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iraq, Iran and Pakistan. 21 months into the project we take stock of how border management has changed in the region during this period and assess what is coming next.

The importance of well-functioning borders was thrown into sharp relief in March 2020 by the COVID-19 pandemic and the global impact it had on cross-border mobility and trade. Efficient cooperation and coordination between border authorities was the foundation for rapidly putting contingency planning and containment measures at border crossing points into motion, and will be necessary in charting a return to normal operations at borders too.

The IBM Silk Routes project aims to support the application of the Integrated Border Management (IBM) concept in the Silk Routes countries. This concept, originally developed within the context of cooperation between the EU and third countries, seeks to develop a single, comprehensive border governance framework that ensures coordination between all relevant border agencies and stakeholders across all areas of border management. As well as the potential for such a framework to contribute to regional mobility, security and economic development, within the context of adapting to COVID-19, it also provides a mechanism for introducing a larger role for health professionals within border control processes, for efficient collection and exchange of data at a national and international level, and mobilising multiple agencies rapidly in times of crisis.
Strategic Management of Borders

In Afghanistan, the capacity of the government to strategically manage crisis at the borders, as well as improve long-term planning and day-to-day coordination has been improved through the development of two inter-agency IBM coordination bodies including eight border agencies and relevant authorities: a decision-making committee convened at deputy minister level, and a technical level working group. Since December 2019, these bodies have met regularly to jointly develop a national strategic framework for the management of Afghanistan’s borders. The draft National IBM Strategy unifies border issues from diverse strategic domains, such as border control, safety and security, trade facilitation, and migration under a single framework. Nine months into the process, the Government of Afghanistan is finalising the draft IBM Strategy and Action Plan, with the intention of adopting it and commencing implementation from next year.

Delivering Operational Impact at Borders

The IBM Silk Routes project has complemented strategic development with operational support to ensure that border agencies have the capacity to implement strategic plans, and ultimately deliver tangible results where they matter on the ground. For example, the fraudulent use of identity and travel documents represents a threat to the security of countries and their citizens, the economy, and global commerce, as it facilitates a wide range of cross border crimes and terrorism. To address this issue, border control officers based at land and air border posts in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan received Document Security training in 2019 and 2020 that provided them with the knowledge and practical experience necessary to detect forged documents, profile passengers and take a decision for further investigation during the first line document control stage.

Mitigating COVID-19 at Borders

In the first 21 months of implementation, the IBM Silk Routes project has supported countries in the region respond to COVID-19 through the provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), infrared thermometers and sanitation supplies to border authorities. This equipment allowed front-line officers working at border crossing points and land-borders in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iraq and Pakistan to continue working through the pandemic with a reduced risk of infection, as well as identify potentially infected travelers and isolate them when crossing the border.

Developing, Maintaining and Sustaining Skills and Knowledge at Borders

As well as front-line border operations, the COVID-19 outbreak disrupted many of the administrative and support functions within border agencies’ day to day operations, including the training of new recruits and serving officials. The IBM Silk Routes project pioneered the delivery of remote learning methodologies that have allowed Silk Routes border agencies to resume and continue the internal training and preparation of officials for duty. In Pakistan, so far this has meant providing training as part of a promotion programme for 60 female border officers from the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) in June 2020, and provided technical audio visual equipment to the FIA Training Academy to rapidly convert two classrooms to deliver distance learning. These rapid interventions allowed the completion of the FIA’s promotion process and subsequent transfer of these officers to front-line border control duties at international border crossings, as well as the continuation of the FIA’s Annual Training Plan with minimal disruption.
Similar support was requested from the Government of Bangladesh, and in August 2020 the IBM project began the process of designing and equipping a digital learning classroom for the Bangladesh Customs Academy. Once completed, this new e-learning suite will allow Academy trainers to deliver in-person and distance-based training, taking advantage of the latest technology and adult teaching methodologies, to Customs officials based in Customs Houses or Posts across Bangladesh without the need to travel to the Customs Academy.

In future, ICMPD’s support to strengthening border management capacities and practices will remain flexible to the individual geographic, economic and social contexts in each participating country. The development of strategic frameworks for IBM coordination in all countries, whether through the development of strategic documents, guidelines, coordination groups or Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), will be complemented by technical advice for optimised procedures, well-trained staff and well-planned infrastructure.

All of this will contribute to:

- the better national management of multiple processes that depend on well governed borders within the partner countries;
- the transit of agricultural products via cargo containers;
- international business and tourism;
- preventing the activities of international organised criminal networks;
- the humane management of people fleeing insecurity or natural disasters; and
- the empowerment of local and cross-border communities.

The IBM Silk Routes project is funded by the European Union (Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development) and implemented by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) from 1 January 2019 for 48 months. The project seeks to support the authorities of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan in building more effective and efficient border management systems.