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DSE/ICIMOD Conference in Kathmandu (31 January–4 February 2000): Growth, Poverty Alleviation, and Sustainable Resource Management in the Mountain Areas of South Asia

Together with the German Foundation for International Development (DSE), the International Center for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), Kathmandu organized a 5-day international conference on “Growth, Poverty Alleviation, and Sustainable Resource Management in Mountain Areas of South Asia,” 31 January–4 February 2000 in Kathmandu. The major objectives of the Conference were

- To analyze the nature and severity of the current crisis in livelihood needs and environmental degradation and assess the future outlook if current trends continue;
- To review experience with development strategies in mountain areas and the reasons for past successes and failures; and
- To identify appropriate strategies and an agenda for action with respect to economic development and sustainable use and management of natural resources in the fragile ecosystems of mountain areas.

The conference participants, about 70 in all, included senior government officials engaged in policy-making and implementation; academic experts and representatives of civil society from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, and Pakistan; resource persons from Germany and China; representatives of international development organizations; and bilateral donors and experts from DSE and ICIMOD. Nineteen papers were specially commissioned for the conference and were presented in its plenary sessions. One reviewed the status, trends, and policies relating to development of mountain areas in the Hindu Kush Himalayan region,

while 6 others dealt with the situation in each of the South Asian countries represented at the conference and in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau Region in China. Another set of 5 papers highlighted the emerging economic opportunities and options in mountain areas, and 7 others covered different aspects of accessibility, equity, and institutions. Papers and proceedings of the Conference will be published under the joint auspices of ICIMOD and DSE by the end of the year.

Presentations and discussions were made in the plenary sessions, and intensive discussions took place in 8 working groups. The working groups were devoted to the following subjects: diversified agriculture; enterprise development; forest products; tourism; land system, land tenure, and natural resource management; accessibility; gender and social equity; and highland–lowland linkages and the impact of globalization. On the basis of these discussions, the conference arrived at a number of conclusions and made detailed recommendations on various aspects of sustainable development of mountainous areas in South Asia.

At its concluding session, the conference adopted the following statement.

Main conclusions and recommendations

I. The context

- The conference noted that mountainous areas, including those in South Asia, have emerged as a significant item on the agenda of discussion at the national and international levels, particularly since the United Nations Conference on Environ-

ment and Development (UNCED) and adoption of Agenda 21, including Chapter 13 on sustainable mountain development. Concern and awareness of environmental conservation have increased over the past decade.

- The problems and concerns of mountain people, however, have remained by and large neglected. Developmental and conservation efforts have usually taken place in isolation.
- As a result, two major goals—poverty alleviation and environmental conservation—have not been achieved. Poverty has persisted and environmental degradation has continued unabated. Both these phenomena have been further accentuated by increasing population pressure. Food security for mountain people has been severely threatened. Extension of cultivation to marginal lands and fragile slopes has led to resource degradation.
- On the other hand, accessibility in mountain areas has improved, leading to rising aspirations. A crisis that has been “silent” so far is leading to “violent” action in several areas.

II. Some hopeful signs

- The conference also recognized that there have been several instances of successful fusion of environmental and developmental goals, while mountain specificities and the concerns of mountain people have been increasingly reflected in national policies.
- Some mountain areas have undergone economic transformation based on comparative advantage, at the same time ensuring conservation and

regeneration of natural resources, with strong national and local policy support.

- Accessibility has improved as a result of the expansion of transport and communication networks.
- There has also been greater recognition of mountain people as custodians, users, and preservers of resources. Several successful experiments in devolution of power and effective use of participatory approaches for conservation and poverty alleviation have been carried out.

III. Concerns and constraints

The conference expressed concern over the widespread evidence of threats to the livelihoods of mountain people and mountain environments and over the lack of adequate recognition of these threats and appropriate policies to meet them.

- It was observed that mountain production systems are becoming increasingly unsustainable, economically and ecologically. Yet national level policymakers have not been sufficiently sensitive to the specific mountain conditions and constraints of mountain people in trying to escape the “poverty trap.”
- There has been a general lack of recognition of the niche that mountains offer in certain productive activities that can enhance incomes without any serious damage to the environment. As a result, there is a lack of appropriate policies to promote their sustainable and profitable development and use.
- Indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources has often taken place with very little or no economic advantage for local communities, particularly the poor. On the other hand, local communities have been denied access to the resources necessary for a basic livelihood in the name of environmental concerns, without any offer of alternative opportunities.
- Traditional local institutions of governance, management, and benefit sharing, which have long functioned successfully in sustaining livelihoods and the environment, have frequently been disregarded and replaced by “modern” institutions that are often more inequitable and patronage-oriented.
- There has not been enough recognition of the plight and the potential of women. Consequently, they have been further marginalized in already marginalized mountain economies, communities, and households. Disregard of indigenous knowledge and practices of which mountain people, particularly women, have been the repositories, and which could have been more efficiently adapted, has resulted in further erosion in livelihood bases and in nonuse of potential, particularly in the case of women.
- There is little recognition of the fact that mountain people, given their disadvantageous location, are subject to “unequal exchange” and unfavorable “terms of trade” in the flow of commodities and natural and human resources between highlands and lowlands, owing to market imperfections and market failures. As a result, any suggestion for compensatory mechanisms is treated with indifference.
- Programs are usually formulated and implemented in a fragmented manner and are partial in character. They may succeed in the plains because of easier access to infrastructure, inputs, and services but fail completely in mountain areas.
- Development of infrastructure is often induced by considerations other than the development and welfare of mountain people and is of a type and form that results in little benefit to isolated communities.

- There is apprehension that globalization and further penetration of markets may result in increased resource drain and other adverse effects on the livelihoods and environment of mountain areas. However, there is a general lack of preparedness and a lack of policies that would enable mountain people to prevent further erosion in their livelihood base and their environment. Mountain people need to be equipped to benefit from the opportunities globalization can offer in terms of comparative advantage.

IV. Recommendations

The conference, therefore, made the following recommendations:

- National and subnational governments should evolve specific strategies, policies, and programs to foster more rapid growth by facilitating diversification of mountain economies from production patterns centered on subsistence food crops to patterns of comparative advantage based on production for the market.
- Food security should be ensured through improvements in infrastructure, public distribution systems, and/or a fair trade regime to facilitate diversification.
- Higher investments are needed in the provision of infrastructure—both physical and social—to improve the accessibility of mountain communities in a manner compatible with fragile mountain environments (eg, nonroad modes of transport and use of information technology to improve access to knowledge about markets).
- Where mountain resources are used in a manner that primarily benefits lowland areas and populations, appropriate revenue-sharing/compensatory mechanisms should be evolved to promote development in mountain areas and benefit mountain people.

- Changes need to be made in legal frameworks that deny or restrict access to and use of local resources necessary for the livelihood of mountain people, particularly mountain women.
- The dimension of gender needs to be incorporated into development strategies and programs in such a manner that ensures participation by women. Given their proven potential in mountain areas, women must also be allowed scope to act as agents of change and fully share in benefits. Women must be empowered in the economic, social, and political spheres.
- All policies and programs need to be “engendered.” This should be done in lieu of creating separate programs for women which may, nevertheless, be required to supplement general programs in some areas and economic sectors.
- Mechanisms must be developed for effective decentralization of power and promotion of greater participatory and collective approaches to resource management and social and economic development.
- Existing and potential niches in mountain areas should be identified through focused efforts to document and classify mountain resources.
- Transfer of knowledge, technologies, and successful institutional mechanisms and practices should be promoted throughout mountain areas in different countries and locations in the region.
- Greater R&D efforts are urgently required to develop products and technologies that give mountains unique or comparative advantages.
- There should be an appropriate combination of use and regeneration of natural resources rather than the imposition of bans or the granting of free license for the use of natural resources in mountains.

- High priority should be given to efforts to develop human resources appropriate for utilizing the opportunities offered by improved access and greater penetration of markets in mountain areas as a result of globalization.

V. The roles of different actors

The conference emphasized that

- Governments will have to play a continuously proactive, regulatory, and promotional role in mountain areas, even in an age where market forces are supreme, and probably because of this supremacy, not only to develop infrastructure but also to
 - Put an appropriate legal and regulatory framework in place,
 - promote dissemination of knowledge and R&D,
 - come to the rescue of local institutions and enterprises in times of crisis,
 - enable local institutions to function effectively.
- NGOs and INGOs have a significant role to play as catalytic, facilitating, and supportive organizations. But they, as well as government agencies, should emphasize local capacity-building by providing support for the development of community-based organizations, especially producers’ organizations, to give them access to markets, inputs, and technology.
- Research and training institutions working in or for the development of mountain areas should reorient and strengthen their training and research programs to relate their outputs more specifically to needs, problems, and opportunities in mountain areas.
- Multilateral and bilateral organizations should refocus their efforts, resources, and investments on filling in the gaps in the basic requirements of development and environment in

mountain areas. This should include efforts to provide infrastructure and environmental conservation, as investments needed in such areas may very well be beyond the capacities of mountain areas, mountain states, and mountain countries.

VI. Follow-up

The conference decided to remit its recommendations for consideration and use in policy and program formulation to

- National and relevant provincial governments in the countries in South Asia,
- Relevant institutions involved in education and training and institutions that have an influence on policy, as well as NGOs and INGOs working in the HKH region,
- Bilateral agencies and donors,
- Multilateral organizations, particularly FAO, the agency responsible for implementation of Chapter 13 of Agenda 21, for their possible use in preparation for the International Year of Mountains in 2002.

Participants also suggested that ICIMOD, in addition to remitting recommendations, could take more proactive initiatives such as organizing and/or facilitating interactions on the problem of poverty alleviation and sustainable development at national level in the HKH region.

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