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Book Review: Policy in High Places: Environment and Development in the Himalayan Region

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Books

Policy in High Places: Environment and Development in the Himalayan Region.

By Piers M. Blaikie and Syed Zahir Sadeque, International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, Kathmandu, Nepal, 2000. 209 pp. US $15 (developed countries, agencies), US $10 (developing countries). ISBN 92-9115-233-1.

Policy in High Places is the product of a most interesting and ambitious exercise. The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) in Kathmandu initiated a comparative study in 1998 that involved fieldwork by country teams in 6 of its "member" countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Nepal, and Pakistan. This study, entitled "Land Policies, Land Management and Land Degradation in the Himalayas," sought to determine the actual impacts of policy on land management and environment. There was an underlying objective: to provide suggestions on

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how to improve policy to ensure more positive effects on the socioeconomic and environmental situation and to reduce the negative impacts of policy. A second focus was to evaluate the way in which land policy was formulated in the different countries. Thus, the study focuses on issues of environmental justice, democracy, participation, and equity, that is, on socioeconomic and political issues rather than the narrower technical ones.

Nine sites were selected for study, ranging from Pakistan's Northern Areas to the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh and western Yunnan, China. Individual country teams undertook the local site fieldwork, while ICIMOD staff provided coordination and the senior author served as consultant. The authors were able to visit all the field sites except that in Bhutan. A final workshop was held in Kathmandu following 5 months of investigation and was used as the basis for this book.

This is a most intriguing approach, and the book should be read by everyone interested in the Himalayan–Hindu-Kush region, whether academic or decision maker, and by those interested in problems of mountain development in general. The coverage is far ranging and the authors identify the primary difficulty that any such study will face—how to isolate the effects of a particular policy, or policies, upon the environment when it is virtually impossible to separate out policy impacts from on-going change induced by the many other factors. They specify that "the complex and ill-understood nature of anthropogenic environmental change" in the region creates 2 sets of problems. The first is the difficulty of determining any unambiguous identification of the policy effect. The second is that the scientific justification of environmental policy, usually based on assumed cause–effect relations between land use and degradation, is often highly unreliable. This raises the issue of how to evaluate so-called scientific knowledge that itself often rests on questionable foundations.

The authors identify forestry, agriculture, national parks, and biodiversity as the major topical areas. Each has a chapter devoted to it, and each chapter is subdivided into country sections. The international and national frameworks for land policies are examined, as are land titling and property rights. The final chapter (8) provides "strategic conclusions."

At several points in the text, the authors take up the question of the uncertainty that surrounds, if not actually engulfs, their objectives—what to do about the "Theory of Himalayan Environmental Crisis" (slightly renamed, with "crisis" substituted for "degradation"). They take the view that the theory as characterized by Eckholm (1976) is far too extreme. They also adopt a "much more optimistic [stance] about the contribution of natural science to knowledge in the region" than that of Thompson et al (1986). Furthermore, they "reject the more extreme views of writers such as Guthman (1997) who reduce the production of knowledge … to what the powerful (the policy elites, international agencies, and leading experts) want to say and deny that it is possible to say anything 'real' about nature at all." One of their 5 summary points is worth quoting in full:

> There are environmental problems in some areas for some people some of the time, and some of these are probably serious—there are no grounds for universal complacency, just as there are none for a universal crisis mentality. (p 195)

This is comforting to this reviewer, especially since Ives and Messerli (1989: xix), more than a decade ago, wrote "… the most serious anxiety that faces us in our attempt to demonstrate that the Theory is an over-dramatization and distortion is that our position should not be interpreted that there is no problem and that, therefore, there is no need for re-thinking, action, or alarm." I hasten to add that Blaikie and Sadeque state that they do not intend to add any new material to this on-going debate. They correctly throw the balance of their contribution solidly into the policy and political arena and bring welcome new insights into the discussion. Their final sentence is worthy of careful contemplation:

> It is tempting to make the connection between land policies that increase central control [of access to resources] and deny livelihood rights and the large number of separatist political movements and conflicts.

The alarming trends in the region toward conflict and political destabilization, as well as corruption at all levels of political authority, could have been emphasized more strongly. The constraints that the authors faced, however, are fully appreciated and have been partially overcome in that a valuable contribution has been published. However, expression of some disagreement is in order. Bhutan is treated with surprising equanimity, possibly a reflection of the authors' inability to make a field visit. Regardless, there is the insinuation that the policy of GNH (gross national happiness) is a sincere national policy and not the gross systematic propaganda that it surely is. There is no mention of the 100,000 Bhutanese refugees who have been languishing for over a decade on the Terai of eastern Nepal. The statement "The support and services provided by government in the renewable natural resources' sector will be available and accessible to all without discrimination …. " (p 103) is alarming in view of His Majesty's Government of Bhutan's policy toward its citizens of Nepalese

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descent who have been forced into exile and to abandon their homes.

At the level of picky detail, the book would have fared better under more stringent editing and many references cited in the text are not found in the bibliography. Several major and more recent contributions to the Theory of Himalayan Environmental Degradation have been overlooked (Griffin 1989; Wu and Thornes 1995; Schreier and Wymann von Dach 1996; Hofer 1997; Jackson et al 1998). Finally, this book is yet another example (albeit a good one) of ICIMOD in-house publications that, presumably, are not peer reviewed. It is to be hoped that the new executive director of ICIMOD will modify this unfortunate policy.

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