

Mountain Development in South Asia

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South Asia is a diverse region, both geographically and culturally. The Himalayan mountain range stretches along its northern border, including parts of all countries of South Asia except Sri Lanka and the Maldives. More than one-fourth of the area of the region is hilly and mountainous. Mountains are important sources of water, energy, minerals, forest and agricultural products, and medicine.

They are enormous water reserves for the region, storehouses of biological diversity, home to endangered species, and an important component of the global ecosystem. The mountains are also home to millions of indigenous people with varied cultures, values, languages, and indigenous knowledge systems. But in recent times, the mountain ecosystems have been faced with various challenges, many of them due to anthropogenic or human-created factors.

The development of the South Asian region, particularly its hill and mountain areas, faces the twin challenges of poverty alleviation and environmental conservation. Despite attractive economic growth in some countries of the region, South Asia has a huge poverty burden. Human poverty indicators point towards formidable challenges.

Poverty reduction has remained at the core of the development agenda of the South Asian Association

for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) since its inception. At the 13th SAARC Summit, the leaders of the region endorsed the SAARC Development Goals (SDGs) as a comprehensive blueprint in the areas of livelihoods, education, health, and the environment for the next five years. The SDGs inter alia cover connectivity of remote areas, poorer regions, and social groups; an acceptable level of forest cover; water and soil quality; and conservation of biodiversity. At the 14th Summit, SAARC leaders agreed that the national plans for poverty alleviation should appropriately mirror the regional consensus reached in the form of the SDGs and the Plan of Action on Poverty Alleviation.

Combating poverty in South Asia becomes more difficult because the region is prone to natural hazards and disasters. The Himalayan ranges are one of the seismically active mountain systems prone to disastrous earthquakes. Growing evidence suggests that temperature is rising in the Himalayas due to global

warming, presenting serious risks to the people of South Asia. Himalayan glaciers are melting and retreating over the years due to the impact of climate change. Glacier lake outburst floods (GLOFs) are becoming real concerns for our countries. The hilly and mountainous areas of the region are vulnerable to flash floods and seasonal floods, soil erosion, heavy landslides, and debris flow. The region regularly experiences floods, cyclones, earthquakes, and other natural disasters, causing huge losses of life and property. In the most recent past, it also experienced the devastation of a huge tsunami.

Given the imperative to collaborate regionally to face natural disasters, the 14th SAARC Summit approved the SAARC Comprehensive Framework on Disaster Management. The objectives of the Framework include sharing best practices and lessons learned from disaster risk reduction efforts at national levels, and establishing a regional system to develop and implement regional programmes and projects for early warning.

In line with the Framework objectives, the SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC) was established in 2006 with the mission to serve the member-states by providing policy advice and facilitating capacity development services. SDMC, with the SAARC Coastal Zone Management Centre, Malé, and the SAARC Meteorological Research Centre, Dhaka, are to implement the Framework in the context of regional cooperation within their respective mandates.

Given the magnitude of poverty and the severity of environmental degradation, there is no doubt that we need to cooperate more closely among our countries, and also with development and research organisations working in the region, to bring in synergies for action for lasting impacts. In this context, the prospective role of ICIMOD can be noted as networks are developed and strengthened with the relevant national, regional and international organisations.

The strengths of ICIMOD as an independent, non-political, technical knowledge centre working in the region are well known. The Centre is reputed for focus on generating and disseminating knowledge, information, technology for poverty reduction in mountain areas, and better management of mountain ecosystems including the reduction of risks of natural hazards. ICIMOD's strategic focus in some key areas also features prominently in the SAARC agenda.

Poverty reduction. It is increasingly realised that poverty alleviation programmes need to be better targeted and adjusted to local biophysical and

socioeconomic conditions. Our countries can certainly benefit from tried and tested practices and proven technologies – the wealth of experience generated by ICIMOD in trying out solutions appropriate to local HKH conditions to attain the SDGs and the MDGs.

Sustainable use and management of natural resources. The judicious use of natural resources in promoting economic activities is particularly important for South Asia, where the majority of the poor live in rural areas and depend heavily on the use of natural resources such as water, arable land, and forest resources for their livelihoods. Some of the South Asian countries have developed pioneering models and good practices in community-participated management of forests, water, and pasture resources that ICIMOD may refine and disseminate.

Management of ecosystems and natural resources. Sound ecosystems management and biodiversity conservation require cooperation among neighbouring countries because ecosystems cross territorial boundaries. Better irrigation practices and river basin management are central in managing ecosystems and natural resources.

Disaster risk reduction and developing adaptive mechanisms. Reducing risks of natural disasters is critical for poverty alleviation and development efforts. This is especially true for mountain communities as well as for communities in the flood plains downstream. Mountain communities are more vulnerable to risks and lack information and the infrastructures to cope against disaster.

Environmental management. Global warming is potentially the most serious environmental threat the Himalayan region faces today. To deal with this complex issue, governments and policy makers of the region need reliable and comparative regional data and information and data from the individual member countries. We note with appreciation how ICIMOD seeks to develop capacity in these important areas to be able to function as a regional think-tank and to serve as a platform for sharing regional information, knowledge, experiences, and good practices.

As ICIMOD redefines its mission, priorities, and roles based on changing realities and requirements to continue to make itself relevant, it becomes apparent that building closer strategic partnerships within and beyond the region will gain greater emphasis. In this context, it may be useful to assess carefully how SAARC and ICIMOD may benefit from each other's experiences, and how a symbiotic relationship may contribute to facilitating transfer of know-how and good practices to deal better with the issues of poverty confronting the mountain areas of South Asia.