

Mountains: Vital to World Water Supply, and a Climate Change 'Hotspot'

Impressions gathered at and Key ICIMOD Messages AT the 5th World Water Forum in Istanbul, Turkey

Mountains are important for the world's water supply. But mountain systems are both disaster and water hotspots which climate change will exacerbate, and the HKH region – being the largest, highest mountain systems in the world providing essential ecosystems services for humankind – deserves global attention and concern.

ICIMOD'S participation in the World Water Forum highlighted the mountain perspective on water and climate change and brought attention to ICIMOD's work, and there are now efforts to bring mountain systems into the category of 'Hotspots of Climate Change'. (This category used to include only small island-states and coastal areas, as identified during the Bali conference in 2008). Seven of the 10 major global disasters in the last five years, including the big earthquake in Pakistan in 2005, have occurred in the region. Climate change will aggravate water hazards in the mountain regions, and mountain people are the first to pay the price with loss of their lives and livelihoods.

Water storage surfaced prominently in the Forum as an issue, which ICIMOD could make as a strategic theme for one of its programmes on water and hazards management. In the context of the mountain region, water has a high seasonality for a short period, and a key challenge is how to store this water for most parts of the year which are dry and arid. Storage brings up the important roles of the mountain region's water basins, watershed management, high altitude wetlands, and glacial lakes as nature's water storage, and the ways of managing these resources and community-based participation.

Other key issues underscored during the Forum, of great concern and relevance to ICIMOD include:

- Hydroclimatic data as a 'public good' which must be shared at all levels – local, national, regional, and global
- The need to address scientific uncertainty for early warning; we have observations in the region but cannot argue on a scientific level if we have no data to support our observations
 - The Forum highlighted the need to invest in data gathering, especially for research on a local scale.
 - ICIMOD underscored its work in providing regional databases and documenting local adaptation strategies.
- Transboundary waters as shared waters and shared opportunities, which call for national and regional action and for strengthening institutions and human capacities
- The need for a combined focus on preventing loss of life and livelihoods, and the provision of clean drinking water and sanitation
- The need to create a permanent forum of parliamentarians for water; parliamentarians come and go.

ICIMOD was active throughout the week-long Forum, giving presentations on: a) The Himalayan water storage centres, b) Why the HKH region is a Major Hotspot and Why Adaptation Strategies Addressing the Region are Necessary, c) Disaster Management on GLOFs and Mitigation. We participated along with FAO and ICHARM in a panel discussion on the importance of water in the context of climate change, while our former Board member, Bruno Messerli presented the global view of mountain ecosystems. Our key messages include the need to:

- reduce scientific uncertainty in the region
- reduce risk from floods and flash floods
- support community-led adaptation

- regional cooperation for sustainable water use and water management

As a sidelight to the Forum, the NGO community brought up the issue of water as a human right.

The World Water Forum is held every year and in Mexico in 2007 was a 'listening opportunity' for ICIMOD, we listened to water issues; during 2008 in Stockholm, ICIMOD participated in a side event and exhibition and contributed to articles that came out of the Forum 's publication. In Istanbul, "we are already in the world water map, and both mountains and ICIMOD have been very much prominent in this forum."

These impressions of our participation in the recently concluded World Water Forum were shared by the Director General and key participating staff, Basanta Shrestha, Mats Eriksson, Ramesh Vaidya, during the ICIMOD 'Blue Bag Session' held Friday, 10 April 2009. The theme colour-coded 'Bag Sessions' (Blue, for water issues; brown for energy; green for forest and natural resources) have been initiated by the Integrated Knowledge Management division to encourage knowledge sharing within ICIMOD.

JMM 10 April 2009