

One overview

Poverty refers to a state of absolute or relative lack of fulfillment of basic human needs in the contemporary context. Attempts to portray and measure it and identify its sources among population groups have been continuously pursued, especially over the last four decades, with the realisation that economic growth and development, even at a rapid pace, often leaves certain groups of the population in relatively poor living conditions. Based on analysis of the nature and sources of poverty, measures to make growth more equitable or focused on the poor, and/or special programmes for poorer groups have been devised by national governments, non-government development organisations, and international organisations and donors. These have met with varying degrees of success. Evaluations and analyses of successes and failures have also been continuously undertaken and changes in approaches, programmes, and interventions have taken place. One of the important lessons from these experiences, often not fully recognised while introducing interventions, is that although in most cases the extent of poverty and its sources and, therefore, the nature and magnitude of required interventions may vary over space and time quantitatively, there are situations in which the manifestations and sources of poverty are qualitatively different, warranting special kinds of approaches and interventions.

In mountain areas conventional methods of portrayal, measurement, and diagnosis are not able to capture the distinctive nature and causes of poverty; hence, realistic assessment of poverty has not taken place. Approaches to poverty alleviation based on assessment using these methods, therefore, are found ineffective. The basic reasons for this are found in the geo-physical features and the social and economic formations conditioned by them in these areas. Specific characteristics of mountain areas conditioning the lives and development of the people are schematically described in what has come to be known as the 'mountain perspective' and consist of inaccessibility, fragility and marginality as constraints on development; and diversity, niche' and adaptation mechanisms as windows for development opportunities (see Jodha 1997 and 2000). These specific characteristics, combined with the 'isolated enclave' nature of mountain economies and societies lead to different manifestations of poverty from those obtaining in non-mountain areas. Lack of recognition and understanding of the implications of mountain specificities often leads to myths and misconceptions about the status of the socioeconomic conditions of the people and also misdirects the diagnosis of the sources of poverty. As a result the strategies and interventions for development and poverty alleviation tend to be either unsuitable or partial, resulting in ineffectiveness and distortion. An attempt is made in the present paper to examine and illustrate the different manifestations of poverty,

how its sources differ and why common strategies and interventions are inadequate; and, on that basis, to identify the basic elements of a framework for approaching poverty alleviation in the context of the mountain areas of the Hindu Kush-Himalayan Region.

It should be clarified at the outset that the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region, extending over 3,500 km from east to west, covering an area of about 35,66,000 sq.km and with an estimated population of 140 million contains not only a wide variety of eco-systems, but also falls into eight countries - Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, China, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar – with varying levels of socioeconomic development among and within them. And there are significant differences in accessibility, economic development and institutional structures not only among the areas falling in different countries, but quite often in different parts of the mountain regions within a country. As a result generalisations on the forms, extent and causes of poverty are always risky. Yet, since characteristics such as inaccessibility, fragility, marginality, diversity and niche¹ are common to all areas to a greater or lesser degree, the observations made in this paper, based on the framework of these mountain specificities as they are, would be, by and large, valid for the majority of areas in the HKH region. At the same time, differences in the levels of development and poverty as they occur currently in different mountain areas of the HKH region are recognised and used for drawing inferences about the poverty generating and poverty alleviating forces in mountain areas.