

five common strategies and interventions

Approaches, strategies and interventions for poverty alleviation in mountain areas have mostly been in the form of replications and extensions of those developed for and adopted in the mainstream flat land areas. Most of the time the strategies have been sectoral, relying on a lead-sector approach. Identification of the sectors has often not been based on the area-specific approach required for mountain areas, and intersectoral linkages that need to be developed even in sectoral development in the mountain areas, have not been given sufficient recognition. Thus value-addition and marketing emerge only as after-thoughts in agricultural development and diversification programmes. Livelihoods and income generation are seen only as an appendix to forestry sector programmes. Promotion of tourism has not always been linked to local economies and enterprise development is seen basically as a function of small credit. In recent years governments and donors have tried to recognise linkages, though mostly on the basis of experiences in the plains, and develop more comprehensive and integrated programmes. Larger investments in infrastructure and access improvement have become a critical element of development strategies for mountain areas, for example, in China; and sectoral specialisation based on comparative advantage is being tried in some areas in the Himalayan region of India. Donors like the Department for International Development (DFID) have developed a 'holistic' sustainable livelihood approach, emphasising simultaneous development of human, natural, financial, social, and physical capital. The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) has launched a series of projects especially focusing on 'uplands', relying on a multi-pronged strategy for 'securing livelihoods'. These are recent experiments and their outcomes are yet to be seen.

In most cases, however, the strategies of different programmes have seldom taken cognisance of the specificities of the forms and sources of poverty in mountain areas, as described above. The following paragraphs illustrate how some of the dominant approaches and interventions tried by government planners, non-government development agencies, and donors have proved ineffective in mountain areas.

Infrastructure-led Strategy

Provision of physical infrastructure as a catalyst has been one of the oldest strategies of development. Given that inaccessibility is a major cause of underdevelopment and poverty in mountain areas, access improving infrastructure can obviously be a major facilitating factor in development and poverty alleviation. There are, however, two main problems in solely relying on an infrastructure-led approach in these areas. One, the topography, terrain, and fragility of

mountain areas make development of physical infrastructure like road networks economically expensive and environmentally hazardous. Second, the assumption that infrastructure is not only a necessary but also a sufficient condition of development is not valid in most mountain areas because of a limited, dispersed, and environmentally sensitive resource base and difficulties in the realisation of linkages of infrastructure with the processes of building the production base. As a result, the development of transport networks, unaccompanied by simultaneous efforts to develop the productive potential of connected areas, has often resulted more in a drain of resources, including of human resources, than the benefits to local areas and communities. Access improvement, unless accompanied by the development of human capital, systematic harnessing of niche, and appropriate institutional arrangements for improving the bargaining power of local people may result in greater marginalisation rather than integration of mountain areas in the wider economic space (Bandopadhyaya 1993).

Targeting Poor Households

Identification of the poor and assisting them directly with the provision of productive assets through subsidy and/or credit-based programmes has been a common approach to poverty alleviation. This approach is based on the assumption that poverty is primarily a phenomenon at the household level, and it is mainly caused by the absence of a productive asset base in the case of some households. Once they are enabled to acquire such assets, they will be able to cross the poverty threshold and progressively improve their livelihoods on a sustained basis, as the other conditions for productive use and income realisation, such as access to other inputs, technology, and markets, are in place. In mountain areas, these conditions are generally lacking and, as a result, effective use of the productive assets provided under various government and non-government credit programmes is severely constrained. In any case, provision of credit through targeted programmes is no substitute for investment in social and physical infrastructure (Bennett 1993).

Technology Driven Approaches

Quite often the availability of new technologies has prompted governments, non-government agencies, and manufacturers to introduce programmes based on them to alleviate poverty through more efficient and productive use of resources. Such initiatives assume availability of the extensive resource base as well as access to markets. Input-intensive agriculture and energy-intensive industry are among the successful technology - initiated strategies in the plains. Their suitability for mountain areas is obviously very limited. But even small-scale technologies for improving agricultural productivity, agro-processing, and improved practices for meeting household needs for cooking, heating, and drying are not found suitable because insufficient attention is paid to such specificities as the local resource base, socioeconomic organisation of production, and the capacity and skills to use and maintain technologies and access to markets.

Human Capital Development

Human capital, no doubt, has been found to be a major contributor to development and poverty alleviation. No other approach, either based on physical infrastructure development, capital investment or technology has been found to have sustained success unless accompanied by development of human capital, particularly education, technical skills, enterprise, organisational capabilities, and health. Most mountain areas have a weak human capital base due both to limited access to social infrastructure and lack of exposure to knowledge and experience of

activities that enhance human capital endowment. Efforts to improve the human capital base of mountain people are essential for improvement in their general well being, but by itself it may not lead to alleviation of poverty because of the limited opportunities for its effective use in economically and socially productive activities. In fact, education, a major means of human capital formation, results in outflow of human resources, for that reason, resulting in a decline in the productive capabilities of the population in mountain areas. It is well known that most educated persons migrate out of mountain areas.

Social Mobilisation Approach

Mobilisation of intended participants and beneficiaries of programmes, through formation of groups, participatory rural appraisal (PRA), and so on has been an important part of rural development and poverty alleviation programmes and projects in recent years. These processes have been found to help not only in improving programme delivery and outputs, but in making a significant contribution to building social capital. They have also helped, particularly in relatively better endowed and accessible areas, in accessing resources, services, and markets for productive activities. In mountain areas, however, these groups have often found it difficult, beyond a point, to use the awareness and organisation they have built for themselves to improve their livelihoods because of limited access to productive resources and exposure to markets. Some success has been achieved in this respect by those organised around a common interest like production of similar commodities and use of common property resources like forests. In other cases, even where the groups are able to pool their resources, they have not been able to put them to productive use. Notable examples are those of the several women's savings and credit groups through which large sums of money have been collected in small contributions, but have remained idle due to the lack of investible opportunities and/or of initiative on the part of programmes to identify and plan such opportunities.

Conservation Motivated Approach

It is widely feared that development of mountain areas, including development of poverty reducing activities, damages ecology and the environment. Therefore, any proposal for development activities, whether related to infrastructure construction or use of natural resources for productive purposes to sustain livelihoods in the mountains, is often perceived as a danger signal. Policy and regulatory mechanisms and practices that result from this perception are extremely restrictive. Thus, even a small rural road project remains blocked for years and is finally rejected; and banning the use of bio-resources by local people is considered to be the only way to conserve biodiversity. Alternative technological, economic, and institutional options and mechanisms are rarely considered to arrive at environmentally compatible solutions for development activities. Mountain communities, therefore, often feel that they are compelled to remain poor for the sake of environmental conservation which benefits others more than them. And no mechanisms to compensate them for this deprivation by way of alternative measures for alleviating their poverty are evolved.