conclusions

The e–conference, on the whole, could be said to have been a success. Fifty–two discussions were posted during the four weeks. Due to certain occurrences the last two weeks of the e–conference received fewer contributions than the first two weeks. However, important issues were brought forward for discussion and many interesting facts were brought to light.

A study of the e–conference proceedings indicated that contributions were generally very critical. Issues were viewed critically and, more often than not, it appeared that the e–conference was a forum for criticism rather than a forum for healthy debate. However, in summary, here is our analysis of the discussions.

Perhaps, the one burning issue that tied the discussions of all four themes together was the issue of developer culture influencing decision–making about local mountain communities. We have seen that, for various reasons, developer culture invariably seeps into local cultures. The impacts of such seepage, while beneficial at times, often occur at the cost of NRM in these local communities. The participation of the local communities in question is needed when development policies are framed. Even when definitions are drawn up, the participation of local communities should be sought.

Donors could be more concerned about targets being met, and as such proposals and, hence, programmes for development of mountain communities are designed to meet the targets. While it is good to have objectives and deadlines to meet the objectives, donors should realise whether such targets are pragmatic or not and whether such programmes are indeed beneficial to the mountain communities at all. The very purpose of enormous amounts of money being spent on the welfare of NRM and local communities is defeated when targets are set fraudulently.

While the onus of development is thrust upon developers, care should be taken that the developer culture and donor needs are not prioritised to the detriment of the actual needs of local communities and their NRM.

Continuing the above discussion, we need to extend the duration of project cycles to allow for documentation methodologies that are attentive to culture and to enable the building of rapport and trust between external agents and local people[9]. This is important, especially after we have examined, through our discussions, the impact of developer influence and targeted funds, given the short project cycles.

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[9]   Kenneth D. Croes, 'Integrating Culture into Natural Resource Management: A Thematic Essay'. Read full paper at http://www.icimod.org.sg/iym2002/culture/web/reference/integrating_culture/ full.htm

Needless to say, we need an agreeable language to correspond with local communities—a language that is understood by locals and the professionals alike. Though it is difficult to structure such a language, a universal language that is free of professional and political jargon and in which each statement is valued in the same light is needed. The same can be said about definitions. Culture, being dynamic, is difficult to interpret through definition. But since the definition of cultures varies according to time and location, each local community may have its own definition, of course with interaction from the locals; and when development policies and programmes are designed, definitions that are area–specific should be used and not universal definitions.

Essentially, we should be looking at alternative mechanisms of development. But can we do it at the cost of traditional culture? While looking for new alternatives for development, various measures should be taken to ensure that the traditional culture does not become extinct. Also, various side effects should be gauged to ensure that there are no biological adversities. In other words, we should make research genuinely collaborative with local people and use ethno–scientific methods and find ways to examine local knowledge by combining traditional and external experimental methods.

One challenge is to fight gender discrimination. This is one of the biggest challenges remaining for developers. It appears that even developers are not free from discriminatory practices. As the e–conference discussions revealed, even development organisations where professionals are well educated are not free from such discrimination, especially in the Hindu Kush–Himalayan region. We should make special arrangements to elicit the knowledge and viewpoints of women, whether in development organisations or communities.

The issue of ethics is one of debate always, as each individual may have a variable opinion on the rights and wrongs of issues. However, it is not impossible to frame policies on culture that can be integrated into NRM–based on combined notions. This may call for a lot of hard work and many other e–conferences and other mechanisms for soliciting opinions. Nevertheless, such an effort would be one in the right direction.

Employing the APPA is a good way of ensuring planned development that incorporates past successes by identifying the actual needs of the local people and translating them into new frameworks within which new developments can be planned.