

2 The Opening Session

Mr. Egbert Pelinck, Director General, ICIMOD, opened the meeting with a note of welcome to all participants. Explaining the genesis and mandate of ICIMOD, he stated that the deteriorating environment and persistent poverty in the HKH Region had been matters of increasing concern, and the Centre had been striving to develop environmentally and economically sound and sustainable approaches to development in the region for the past 12 years. It had been observed that past efforts by national and international agencies had been far from appropriate and effective, insofar as they had treated environment and development as if they were inherently antagonistic entities. Development programmes had been mostly of a sectoral nature with very little recognition of intersectoral linkages. Mr. Pelinck emphasised the need for an integrated approach to sustainable development to reconcile the economic needs and aspirations of the people with the requirements for maintaining the ecological balance in mountain areas.

To develop such an approach, Mr. Pelinck argued, it was necessary to keep the 'mountain perspective' in mind. The basic elements of this perspective consisted of certain specificities of mountain areas: i.e., inaccessibility, fragility, and marginality – as constraints – and diversity, human adaptability, and 'niche' – as opportunities for mountain development. Only proper recognition and use of these specificities can result in sustainability, in both contexts of the environment and the livelihood of the people. Since poverty and environmental degradation were causally related, a minimum level of development was essential for environmental conservation, but development based on indiscriminate exploitation of environment-sensitive resources could not be sustainable.

Mr. Pelinck further pleaded for an approach to human resource development linked with the pattern of economic and environmental development. In particular, he stressed the need to improve access and opportunities for women to participate in development processes as they, as a workforce, had always been the backbone of mountain economies.

Mr. Pelinck concluded by expressing the hope that the current meeting, attended as it was by high level planning officials and experts from different ICIMOD regional member countries, would

pave the way for operationalising the approach to sustainable development of different HKH areas in national and local development plans and programmes.

Dr. Mahesh Banskota, Director of Programmes, ICIMOD, explained the background, objective, and theme of the meeting in the context of the ICIMOD mandate, functions, and past work on the subject. He explained that ICIMOD's aim was to promote development of an economically and environmentally sound ecosystem and improve the living standards of mountain people in the HKH area. ICIMOD was a multidisciplinary documentation centre, a focal point for training and applied research, and a consultative centre for scientific and technical matters relating to mountain development. It endeavoured to influence decisions and actions by providing appropriate concepts, strategies, and methodologies for policies and programmes, rather than suggesting further project activities to add to the abundant numbers in existence. Dr. Banskota said that the meeting constituted part of the Centre's effort in this direction.

Referring to the previous work of ICIMOD on the subject of area planning, Dr. Banskota mentioned micro-level studies focussing on environmental problems in areas such as Neimoy County in Tibet, Swat in Pakistan, and Doon Valley in India. Concerning integrated planning at regional level, he provided details of the study of the Bagmati Zone in Nepal, which had aimed to produce an integrated environment and development profile and develop practical approaches to integrating environmental and economic concerns into planning for each district in the zone.

Dr. Banskota highlighted some of the important issues that had emerged from the Bagmati Zone study. First, due to the neglect of environmental and equity considerations, growth resulting from development strategies adopted in the past had been accompanied by increasing poverty and disparities, on the one hand, and deterioration in the state of natural resources, on the other. Secondly, the limitations of both the 'project' and 'plan' approach, as practised in the past, had become quite evident. Plans had become a source of increasing disenchantment for the people as there had been substantial discrepancies between promises and performance, mainly due to the lack of realism about resources and capabilities in relation to declared goals. Most development activities had been carried out on the basis of projects, as all the plans become operational on the ground only in the form of projects. It was, therefore, often argued that plans were not needed and development could be carried out on the basis of projects. Projects, however, had their own limitations in terms of both the coverage

and time horizon as well as limitations caused by departmental rigidities and failure to develop intersectoral linkages with project funds. More importantly, the concerns underlying sustainable development emphasised the need for going beyond the project approach.

The third important lesson Dr. Banskota had drawn from the Bagmati Zone exercise was that area-based approaches provided a useful mechanism for integrating economic and environmental concerns. For this purpose, however, basic information on various physical and socioeconomic aspects on a spatial basis was essential, and the most important among these were land-related data.

Dr. Banskota argued that there was a need to develop the right kind of combination between projects and comprehensive development plans in order to ensure that the development pattern envisaged addressed (i) the underlying forces affecting development and not just the symptoms; (ii) the territorial realities of resource endowments, environmental constraints, and economic development potential; and (iii) the need to promote institutional capacities at various levels to cope with the management of sustainable development. Such plans should be realistic and avoid the temptation of being more ambitious than resources permitted and of attempting to incorporate every conceivable problem and activity.

These issues, Dr. Banskota observed, were among the many that the current meeting would consider. He hoped that the exchange of views among participants from different countries represented at the meeting would help to improve understanding of the approaches and methods of integrated planning in mountain areas and to shape the nature and contents of the ICIMOD programme.