

# INTRODUCTION

## Background

In June 1992 the United Nations' Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) adopted Agenda 21, of which Chapter 13 provides a special focus on mountain areas: "Managing Fragile Ecosystems: Sustainable Mountain Development." In this chapter mountain areas are seen as fragile ecosystems urgently in need of major efforts to promote sustainable development. Two programme areas were identified under Chapter 13. The first one was to generate and strengthen knowledge about the ecology and sustainable development of mountain ecosystems and the second one was to promote integrated watershed development and alternative livelihood opportunities to mountain people throughout the world.

In order to facilitate the translation of the concerns and issues expressed in Chapter 13 (of Agenda 21) into a realistic programme for action, it is essential that a number of activities be initiated on a priority basis. These include (a) overcoming the lack of knowledge of mountain ecosystems through various measures, (b) establishing and operationalising an effective communication network for information exchange, and (c) implementing collaborative activities that address both the problems of and the opportunities for sustainable mountain development.

ICIMOD was established in 1983 with a major mandate in information exchange, research, and training in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas. It played a pioneering role, along with others, in the preparation of Chapter 13 and will continue to facilitate the implementation of the concerns of Chapter 13 in Agenda 21.

It has generally been agreed that a special effort is needed to move the 'Mountain Agenda' higher on the international and national development agendas. Having an exclusive mandate for integrated mountain development, ICIMOD decided to take the momentum generated by the Earth Summit in 1992 a step further by organising this first "Regional Conference on Sustainable Development of the Fragile Mountain Areas of Asia".

## Objectives

The main objectives of this conference were to draw the attention of development planners, natural resource managers, and the international donor community to the increasing problems of mountain areas in Asia; to facilitate reviews and assessment of the knowledge already available throughout the region; to identify gaps in our knowledge and identify emerging issues in mountain development that require priority attention for scientific and analytical work; and to provide an opportunity for the donor community to communicate directly with key institutions and individuals on priority needs for external assistance specifically designed for sustainable mountain development.

It was hoped that the conference would achieve:

- ▶ a better understanding of major issues affecting sustainable mountain development in Asia -
-

both with regard to their problems and the opportunities that mountains provide for development;

- ▶ a set of recommendations for accelerated action in poverty alleviation and environmental management in mountain areas; and
- ▶ a plan of action for Regional and Subregional Collaboration in Sustainable Mountain Development.

## **Programme and Participation**

The three-day Conference was held in the Convention Hall in Kathmandu from December 13 to 15. The welcome remarks were given by the Director General of ICIMOD and Ms Savitri Kunadi, Vice-Chairperson of the UN Commission for Sustainable Development, delivered the opening address. Mr. A.Z.M. Obaidullah Khan, Assistant Director General of FAO, gave the keynote address after which the Rt. Honourable Prime Minister of Nepal inaugurated the Conference and delivered the Inaugural Address. The highlights of these addresses are given in Chapter 2 and a detailed programme schedule in Annex 1.

The Conference brought together over 60 policy-makers and practitioners committed to mountain development. Seventeen governments of Asia sent two delegates each, one from the planning sector and one from the national resources' sector. The participation of representatives from over 10 international organisations, bilateral and multilateral donor organisations, and non-governmental organisations reflects the interest and potential for greater attention to mountain development among these organisations also. The list of participants is provided in Annex 2. During the two days of discussions, theme papers were presented on a number of issues critical to the improvement of the economic and environmental conditions in the mountain areas of Asia, focussing on:

- ▶ restoring the environment and combating poverty,
- ▶ sustainable mountain farming systems,
- ▶ management of rangelands and grasslands and control of desertification,
- ▶ management of mountain watersheds and forest resources,
- ▶ sustainable use and conservation of biodiversity,
- ▶ natural hazards and disaster management,
- ▶ women and mountain development, and
- ▶ review of selected mountain development processes and opportunities.

Highlights of these papers and the discussions that followed are presented in Chapter 3.

On the final day, delegates, representing mountain regions from New Zealand to Iran, presented summary country statements under a session headed 'The Asian Mountain Agenda: Looking Ahead with Chapter 13'. Their major highlights are discussed in Chapter 4.

The final session on 15th December concluded with the participants formulating the SUDEMAA (Sustainable Development of the Mountain Areas of Asia) Call to Action based on the crucial concerns generated by the Conference. This is presented in its entirety in Chapter 5. The day after the Conference, on 16th December, many participants visited an ICIMOD site for rehabilitation of degraded lands in Kavre District, east of Kathmandu, where discussions took place with villagers and local officials.