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Social Science and Sustainable Development – Perspectives from the Hindu Kush- Himalayas

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Social Science and Sustainable Development — Perspectives from the Hindu Kush-Himalayas

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Preface

Despite economic growth, poverty and a low level of human development continue to persist in many developing countries. Mountain areas in general have a disproportionate share of poverty-stricken people. Decades of development initiatives, often associated with huge investments, have done little to change the situation. Academicians, politicians, and others have pondered over this anomalous outcome of planned change. A common consensus identifies the failure to take into consideration social dimensions in development planning as the major cause of such malaise. Development activities, to succeed, must be sustainable on all accounts. Along with economic and ecological sustainability, social sustainability must also be incorporated into project design and implementation. For mountain areas, this has a special significance as, biophysically and socioeconomically, mountain areas are different and unique in comparison to other backward areas. This is the central theme of this paper.

In addition to the centrality of the social issues, this paper also argues for the inclusion of critical issues like poverty, gender equality, stakeholder participation, vulnerability of minorities and other disadvantaged people, and human and social development in development planning for mountain areas. The paper goes on to show how these critical issues can be incorporated with appropriate tools and methods now available to social scientists.

ICIMOD endeavours to develop and disseminate new knowledge on sustainable development approaches for mountain areas. This paper adds a new dimension to this long-standing effort of ICIMOD by including a hitherto uncharted area. It is hoped that it will generate interest, awareness, and concern among policy-makers, administrators, community and aid workers, and politicians concerned with the development of mountain areas.

Abstract

This study argues that sustainable development can only be ensured if social issues are given due consideration in the conceptualisation and design of development planning. The paper convincingly shows how social, economic, and biophysical variables are interrelated and how they influence the outcomes of programme and project sustainability. A list of important social and cultural issues characteristic of backward areas, in general, and the Hindu Kush-Himalayan mountain areas, in particular, are discussed as the agenda for social analysis. Several available methods and tools are also discussed to provide a flavour of social analysis useful for social as well as non-social scientists involved and concerned with sustainable development of mountain areas.

The paper goes on to argue that the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region, home to over 120 million of the world's poorest people, but having the potential to affect the lives of a far greater number of people in the entire South Asian region, requires urgent attention from development planners and other activists in charting a course of development initiative that is mountain specific and takes into consideration the historical and cultural heritage and practices of the region. The paper concludes with an agenda of action for looking beyond the current *status quo* and indicating a new framework for studying mountain areas.

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The human capacity to imagine social change is notably limited.... Attempts to imagine a better future have remained simplistic and schematic.... We may simply be unable to conceive of the strictly limited advances, replete with compromises and concessions to opposing forces, that are frequent outcome(s) of actions undertaken under the impulse of some magnificent vision.

Albert Hirschman (as quoted in John Toye 1987: VIII)

Social Scientists' capacity to answer the complex riddles of development practice is growing. Beaten paths do not exist and the need to innovate and experiment is paramount. The variety of roles performed and honed by social scientists in development from field researchers to project designers, to policy formulators, to impact evaluators, or even to managers of development programs - is illustrated and demonstrated

Michael Cernea (1994:4)