

# TOUGH TERRAIN

## Media reports on mountain issues

There is no dearth of scientific knowledge and technical information about mountain issues. However, most of this information is only accessed and understood by experts and specialists.

**L**ife in the mountains has always been tough. And despite development efforts over the past decades, it is getting tougher.

Hill dwellers may have access to better health care, electricity, improved transportation and schools. But these benefits appear to have come at a cost.



Carefully carved terraces, Nepal.

ICIMOD

Governments, technical institutions, social organisations and market forces are competing to bring the fruits of development to remote areas left behind by progress. But in many cases, these very efforts have pushed once self-sufficient mountain communities towards recession and even decay. It is this paradox, and the mismatch between good intentions and unexpected consequences, that make mountain issues so complex.

Before roads snaked up the mountains, upland-lowland interaction was based primarily on the convenience and needs of the upland community. Hill farmers decided what they needed and came down the mountain when they needed to buy or barter. They decided what they would carry to sell or exchange. The transactions involved the barest essentials. The construction of roads, dictated as much by strategic and economic interests of the government as by concern for the welfare of mountain communities, altered this equation.

### **Drastic impact**

Roads were to have a drastic impact, most of them unintended, in the hills and mountains. Once thriving market towns withered and died when the new roads bypassed them. Villages with small hotels and lodges that depended on travellers on foot and horses halting for the night went bust as buses and cars took them further ahead, or to their final destinations.

With roads, came traders and processed goods from the plains. Overnight, hill farmers became poorer peo-

ple. Earlier, farmers didn't have money for goods that they didn't need. Today, they still don't have money. But goods they didn't need started flooding roadside markets. As hill farmers were forced to enter the market economy, many became even more impoverished.

Roads exposed subsistence farmers to new consumer goods. Easy availability of goods introduced new eating habits. There was a new dependence on manufactured and processed products. In some instances, dietary changes led to dependence on exotic food grain. Local grain, vegetable and livestock production began to be dictated by external markets. New high-yield varieties replaced hardy local breeds. Mountain agriculture lost its diversity and became vulnerable to disease, and vulnerable to markets and the price of inputs such as fertilisers and seeds.

This dependence on external goods monetised the economy, and increased cash requirements which in turn contributed to an exodus of able-bodied males to the cities and plains to supplement income. The responsibility of the hill woman increased sharply: in addition to taking care of children and carrying out other domestic chores, the entire farm burden fell on her shoulders.

While natural resources and men moved down, diseases and social ills climbed uphill with goods and services. Medical facilities also came, but were often not able to keep pace or were too expensive for the sick to afford.



*Transplanting rice, Bhutan.*

ICIMOD/Ajay Rastogi

In the long run, extension of health care and awareness campaigns on hygiene undoubtedly had an impact. Although life expectancy is low and infant mortality rates remain high in the hills, they have improved dramatically in the past four decades. But such successes were often accompanied by an ironic twist of fate: the resulting increase in population put pressure on limited land and resources. Population pressure put pressure on forests and on steep slopes previously considered uncultivable, leading to further degradation of the fragile mountain ecology.

Lack of jobs and increasing population increased the drift to towns and plains. Education, too, played its part in this rural-to-urban migration. Youth with a minimum of education no

longer considered it appropriate or worth their while to toil on the terraces. Congestion increased in hill towns across the Himalaya and Hindu Kush. Many scenic British-era 'hill stations' were bursting at the seams and lost their charm. Visitors went elsewhere.

When a new mountain highway is planned, the economic justification that precedes approval always places the hill community first: the roads will improve the community's access to the market, hill farmers will be able to bring their produce down faster and at lower cost. But when the highway is complete, most of benefits flow down to the plains. Markets for goods do open up, but it is a market that steadily moves up. In the few cases

when mountains have something of value, they are extracted at unsustainable rates mostly by businesses in the plains. Thanks to insatiable demands, rare animals have joined the endangered list and many medicinal plants are ripped off the forests faster than they can regenerate.

To be sure, it isn't all negative. Expansion of transportation and communication networks has radically transformed many regions. The ability of once isolated communities to bring perishable goods to the markets in time, to be able to bring ailing relatives to hospitals, to trade and communicate with the outside world, has improved the lot of people in mountainous areas in many parts of the world. There are hundreds of places in the hills where the economies have exploded following their connection to the plains.

But if there are mountain communities that manage a healthy economic relationship with the plains or towns through better transportation links, there are many others that are marginalised even further. This dichotomy stands out as a challenge to planners and technical specialists, governments and social organisations involved in mountain issues.

As it is, the geology and geography of mountain regions already pose a formidable challenge to major infrastructure development. Mountains have tremendous potential - agricultural and horticulture products, medicinal herbs and plants, forest produce, hydropower, tourism. But developing these resources means dealing with severe climatic conditions and difficult access. The fragility of the Himalayan and Hindu Kush environ-



*Shearing sheep, Tibet.*

ICIMOD/Daniel Miller

ment, and the need to protect mountain biodiversity generate opposition and debate. Fault lines and seismicity add to the risk.

Connecting mountain communities to the 'mainstream' and bringing the fruits of progress to these regions require understanding of complex issues. The topography has acted as a barrier and a technical challenge in some instances, but even more significant is the difficulty of not being able to replicate successes, or to formulate a common, appropriate development pattern.

A great amount of research and study has been done on mountains. The Khumbu region below Mt Everest has been called the "most analysed, most researched and most blood-taken area of the world." Social scientists, economists, engineers, hydrologists have traversed the Himalayan arc from Afghanistan to Burma studying its resources and problems. They have written about it all - the fragility of the environment, the rich biodiversity, the tremendous energy potential. Anthropologists have dissected the ethnic and religious diversity, researchers and travel writers have written about lifestyles, food habits, languages and social customs. Indeed, it seems there is not much else to learn about mountain issues.

But the breadth of research is deceptive. The average person is unaware of the issues and the enormous amount of work that has been undertaken. The non-specialist is seldom

able to explore this vast treasure trove of knowledge. Because of its technical nature, little of the research filters out to the general public. The information fills the shelves of technical libraries and research institutions where they are the source of more research and more study. For the common citizen of the Himalaya and Hindu Kush, or the non-technical decision-maker, all this has little practical value.

We hope this book will help to make mountain issues more accessible to the general public. The editors at Panos Institute South Asia have tried to make the content as jargon-free as possible without sacrificing precision and nuance. The chapters have been adapted from articles commissioned to journalists and experts from the region during 1998-99. Some of these have already appeared in the regional press.

In the run-up to the International Year of Mountains 2002, we hope that this book will help rekindle interest on mountain issues among policy-makers and the public. It can serve as a reference tool for journalists, for schools and for the English-reading public. The specific problems of development in the mountains must get the priority they deserve.

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