

# Some Thoughts on Alleviating Poverty in the Himalayan Mountains

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Kalash woman and children of Chitral, NWFP, Pakistan with an ICIMOD staff member

**A major development challenge for countries of the Himalayan region is alleviating widespread poverty, especially in rural areas. Studies analysing the incidence of poverty in various sub-regions of the HKH countries show that, on the whole, poverty is higher in the mountain regions. The peculiar biophysical characteristics, and relative remoteness and inaccessibility of the mountain regions are among the main reasons for widespread poverty and the poor quality of mountain life.**

Unless the quality of life of mountain people is improved substantially by reducing their abject poverty, efforts to improve the biophysical environment of the Hindu Kush-Himalayan mountains will face difficulties. The consequences of a deteriorating biophysical environment in the mountain regions will be disastrous not only for these areas but also for large populations living in the vast plains of India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh. The highest priority in ICIMOD's plans

should therefore be the alleviation of poverty in the mountainous areas of the region. While the main responsibility for development efforts to reduce poverty lies with the governments of these countries, ICIMOD can play a key role through a well-planned research programme in collaboration with experts from the region to analyse the causes and extent of poverty in its sub-regions and to identify interventions that can reduce poverty in a sustainable way.

The issue of widespread poverty and poor quality of life in developing countries has attracted the attention not only of governments and policy makers in these countries but also of international development organisations. Most governments of the HKH countries now have poverty alleviation programmes with sizable funds from national resources as well as through international development assistance. However, research efforts to analyse poverty in various sub-regions and the effectiveness of poverty alleviation approaches are modest at best. ICIMOD was established as a research centre and has the capability to provide a leading role in undertaking research on this important issue in collaboration with relevant national agencies. It is essential that a high priority is accorded to this kind of research, both by ICIMOD as well as by the participating countries.

**Defining poverty.** A first step in this direction will be the availability of reliable statistics on the extent of poverty in various sub-regions. It is essential to have an agreed upon definition and indicators of poverty so that data from countries of the region can be compared. In addition to the criterion of average per capita income, it would be useful to incorporate quality-of-life parameters in the definition of poverty. This should include access to food, education, health and sanitation facilities, and opportunities for gainful employment. The goal of the research and analysis should be to enable people to live a healthy and happy life and play a useful role in community development.

**Agriculture remains the dominant sector.** The majority of the population in the HKH region depend on agriculture for sustenance. Because of higher population growth rates in these areas compared to national averages, and the deteriorating state of land and water resources from a myriad of factors including soil erosion, land degradation, deforestation, among others, the already marginal net income of mountain families from agriculture has been decreasing further, aggravating poverty. The main sources of income for the average mountain household are land and livestock. Mountain families in the region mainly grow cereal crops like maize, wheat, or rice for family consumption; they rear cattle to produce milk and meat to meet the family consumption needs, and some surplus to generate income to meet other family needs. Income from these resources is meagre and dwindling further with the continuous deterioration of the natural resource base and adverse climate changes.

**Seeing poverty with my own eyes.** The depressing state of poverty of the local population made a deep impression on me when I spent two days in an official guesthouse located in the scenic high mountain region of Azad Kashmir. A large part of the mountain road that led to the guesthouse had been washed away by a massive landslide which, I found out, is a common feature in these high mountain areas. Next morning when I went for a walk, I saw many children from surrounding villages sweeping the floor under the pine trees for pine needles and dried leaves to be used as



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Balochistan, Pakistan: aside from agriculture, rearing cattle helps mountain families meet their consumption needs and earn income from surplus.

fuel to cook meals. This contributed to the deteriorated overall condition of mountain forests and resulted in massive erosion leading to landslides. Next, I saw herds of cattle the size of goats in the plains, walking up the soggy slopes in search of grass which existed only in small patches. All this presented a very sorry state of affairs.

#### **Resource characteristics of mountain areas.**

While there can be different prescriptions for poverty alleviation in various sub-regions, keeping in view the location and opportunities for development in mountain areas including for eco-tourism, mountain cottage industries, other employment opportunities and income from agriculture will remain the main sources of livelihood for most of the HKH region. The following need to be kept in mind while planning interventions for the mountain areas of the HKH region.

- Landholdings of mountain families are generally small.
- Location in the mountains has several advantages for agriculture compared to agriculture in the plains, notably better availability of water for irrigation, higher content of organic matter in the soil due to mild temperatures, better availability of family labour due to small landholdings, and environments relatively free from insects and diseases because of freezing conditions during winter.
- The local population needs cereals, milk, and meat to meet their nutritional requirements, and fuel to cook their meals and provide warmth in winter. They will meet these requirements to stay alive even if this means destroying the resource base for future generations.

**Approaches to poverty alleviation.** Realistic approaches need to be adopted so that the needs of mountain communities for food and fuel are met while simultaneously increasing family income to reduce abject poverty. The following are some ideas for projects that need to be seriously considered.

1. Mountain farmers use most of their scarce landholdings to grow staple crops: maize, rice, and wheat. Having enough food to sustain life takes the highest priority over all other human needs. However, this is a poor and inefficient use of scarce land in mountain regions. Cereal crops can be produced more efficiently in the plains where good agricultural land is more abundant and machinery can be used for increased crop production. It will therefore be more efficient to import food grains from the plains to the mountain region to free up land in the mountains to produce selected high-value crops for which the local environment is more suitable.

For this to be successful, packages of production technology suited to local mountain conditions need to be developed and field-tested before large-scale introduction in the mountain region.

Adequate marketing arrangements for mountain commodities is another important requirement. Markets are crucial since many innovative projects aimed at increasing the net family income of local populations fail mainly because of poor marketing arrangements.

2. Environmental conditions in the HKH region are similar to those in the Alps and other mountainous areas around the world. Technologies are available in developed countries for fast-growing trees for fuelwood and fodder, as well as fodder crops which can be produced efficiently to facilitate stall-feeding of cattle. Similarly, breeds of cattle are available for alpine conditions which produce 10-20 times more milk than typical cattle in mountainous regions. Therefore, more efficient cattle, fodder varieties, and tree species introduced in the mountainous areas of the HKH region can meet the needs of mountain communities for milk and fuelwood using only a fraction of the land currently being used under inefficient production. This will reduce the pressure on forest areas and land resources and will enhance the mountain environment while meeting the vital needs of mountain communities for milk, food, and fuelwood. The government can organise fuelwood lots and dairy production on a community cooperative basis. The principle can also be extended to poultry production along modern, more efficient and hygienic lines than the present system of domestic poultry production. Efficient agricultural and livestock production in these regions can be organised on a cooperative basis, and these enterprises, cottage industries, and other more remunerative ventures can provide employment to the local population not engaged in agriculture.

The state of poverty and human deprivation in the mountain regions is desperate and needs measures that can produce tangible results in a relatively short time. The proposal outlined in this article needs to be discussed at length by experts in consultation with target communities. If feasible, pilot projects along these lines can be initiated in sub-regions of the Himalayas. This will enable the study of the overall impact on poverty alleviation in the communities and on the state of the bio-physical environment in the target areas. ICIMOD being an inter-governmental, mountain-focused institution can facilitate such discussions.