

A FOCUS ON Mountains for Regional Cooperation

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THE HINDU KUSH HIMALAYA

(HKH) region that extends 3,500 km from Afghanistan to Myanmar is home to 210 million and is incredibly rich in cultural diversity with 1,000 different languages spoken in the area. Ten major river basins originate in the HKH, serving 1.3 billion people and indirectly 3 to 4 billion people are benefiting from the food and energy produced in the region. The HKH is an important energy source, carbon stock and biosphere reserve, all of which are important for our future. The

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Eight countries share this mountain resource base: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Pakistan. And we are certain that shared management of

resources at the local, national and regional levels will be more beneficial for the countries. Yet, we also know that at this point in time, in depth cooperation amongst HKH countries is difficult. In spite of this political reality, I want to argue that a focus on mountains can lead to better development outcomes, faster and more equitable growth, and more regional cooperation and peace.

The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) was founded more than 30 years ago. Visionaries had the idea to focus on mountains and bring countries together to share knowledge. Nepal has proved to be an ideal place to host ICIMOD's headquarters, as it is a meeting place for mountain people and mountain nations.

The early days were not easy. Most countries viewed ICIMOD as serving national interests. But that has changed in recent years, with countries looking at ICIMOD as a regional

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platform that bridges knowledge with policy and practice across borders. We recognize that there are many common issues across countries such as climate change, migration, agriculture, and community management of resources. In addition, ICIMOD deals with issues that cross national boundaries such as biodiversity and ecosystems, water, disasters, and air pollution. We have found that countries have a great interest to share knowledge and learn from each other.

The 4th IPCC Assessment Report in 2007 marked a turning point for HKH climate science. In this report, we not only found how fast glaciers were melting, but, more importantly, realized that there was too little data about the HKH as a whole. And suddenly, much national and global interest shifted to climate change and melting glaciers, and the possible impact on water resources.


Now let me briefly turn to climate change. We know that temperatures are warming more rapidly at higher elevations, there is increased glacier and snow melt across the HKH and this leads to changing hydrologic patterns. However, less is known about changes in rainfall and the monsoon, but it is likely that we will see more extreme events like heavy rainfall and longer periods of less rain. An increasing volume of science is aimed at refining this knowledge and obtaining a better indication of the magnitude of change taking place in our environment as to help us better predict the future events.

The consequences of climate change are shifting ecosystems and agricultural systems, changes in hydrology and the possibility of increase in incidences of floods and droughts. The impacts of glacier and snow melt will be felt the most in high mountain areas where people depend directly on snow and ice, but downstream there may not be a huge impact

on the annual volume of flow in big rivers such as the Ganga or Brahmaputra because models also predict increase in annual precipitation in the future. Ultimately, if we do not adapt, this will have negative consequences on human well-being.

There is also a realization that in the HKH we are experiencing change in many different dimensions, along different sectors that intersect and diverge – something we refer to as climate + change. There is climate change, but it is mixed with globalization, migration, urbanization, an increasing demand and use of water and energy coupled with a growing infrastructure development. It is the interaction of all these factors that adds complexity to our understanding of the socio-ecology of the HKH.

However, we need to acknowledge that while change brings challenge, change also offers opportunity. For example, high mountain niche products when linked with markets can bring money to mountain people. Ecotourism is one example of mountain value chains, but there



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are others in agriculture like medicinal herbs, nuts and fruits. The mountains can take the lead in innovations for clean energy to provide energy for all. There is an increased role of empowered women in mountains which will open doors for more sustainable management and use of mountain resources. And we can take advantages of linkages between upstream and downstream people to share the benefits of development equitably. To take advantage of change, there is a central role for business to assume in sustainable mountain development.

There is a special initiative at ICIMOD that has relevance to our current discussion: the Himalayan Monitoring and Assessment Programme (HIMAP). This program is compiling an IPCC-like report for the HKH and will cover

climate change, livelihoods, ecosystems and sustainable development from different vantage points. The report brings together the most current knowledge and science about the HKH and addresses key policy issues around all of these topics.

Importantly, the HIMAP report is aimed at encouraging cooperation between countries. To compile the report, we have more than 300 people from across the HKH sharing knowledge, science, and experiences. I would like to suggest that the next Himalayan Consensus meeting could have one focused session on creating a science-society-policy dialogue based on the HIMAP assessment, and focus on key actions that need to be taken now for a sustainable future.

We can look to the Arctic to find inspiration for this kind of cooperation. Also heavily influenced by climate change, nations in this region have created the Arctic Council, an organization of eight countries that historically did not always see eye-to-eye. But for the cause of climate and environmental change they have set aside their differences and became a united force and shared resources to improve scientific data for the purpose of informed policy making that will impact future generations. A first step was a scientific assessment done by researchers from across the Arctic countries to inform policy discussions. Can we think of a "Himalayan Council" wherein mountain people and countries work together to solve HKH mountain problems? It's too early to tell, but there are possibilities and the time is now.