

# Mountains and people: A peoples' perspective from the Indian Himalayas

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1995

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Keywords: sustainable mountain development, mountain people, mountain economy, indigenous knowledge, biodiversity, forests, ecology, ecosystems, natural resources, energy, water, watershed development, social movements, environmental activism, gender issues, alcoholism, domestic violence, women, communities, nomadic communities, non-government organisations, Himalayas, India.

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## Preface

The world's mountains comprising a fragile ecozone, are under threat of falling victim to a preying socio-economic world order.

Mountain inhabitants all over the world, often guileless and trusting people, are gradually waking up to their vulnerabilities and there is growing concern among them over the loss of their immediate habitat and the usurption of their resources and livelihood patterns by vested interests. These concerns have found articulation in Chapter 13 of the Agenda 21 document under the heading: Managing Fragile Ecosystems: Sustainable Mountain Development. As mountain development comes up for review later this year, there has been an attempt to aggregate global NGO concerns vis-a-vis mountain development and the many challenges to that process. The consultation of NGOs from all around the world at Lima, Peru in the last week of February '95 is an attempt to articulate these concerns.

The Sri Bhuvaneshwari Mahila Ashram (SBMA) has endeavoured to dovetail the concerns of grass roots NGOs in the Himalayas and project them onto a global

platform. This is done as a two step process. The first is to articulate the survival strategies of mountain-dwellers, given their rapidly degrading environment. To this end, a platform of mountain NGOs is being created to listen to the concerns at the micro level and to take up advocacy on their behalf. The broader canvas afforded by the global process has allowed people at the grassroot level to project forward in a bid to defend their point of view in the face of the challenges posed by modernisation.

The second of these steps is to appeal to a global forum to promote equity among marginalized mountain people in the process of promoting coherent and sustainable strategy vis-a-vis mountain development. This can be done if we bring the common issues of the Himalayas on a platform with advocates and representatives of other mountain dwellers all over the world.

SBMA sees itself as playing the role of a catalyst in energising the process of elevating local concerns for consideration at a global level. This is an effort to enjoin upon the people that the need for affirmative action has never been greater if the world's mountains are to retain their unique biotic and abiotic profiles.

Cyril Raphael

SBMA

February 1995

## Introduction

A meeting of NGOs and social activists from many parts of the Indian Himalayas took place at Dehradun, Uttar Pradesh, India, from Sept 29-30, 1994. An NGO, Bhuwaneshwuri Mahila Ashram from Garhwal, Uttar Pradesh, organized the meeting. The main objective was to share experiences and ideas about NGO approaches to sustainable mountain development in the Indian Himalayas. About 65 individuals participated, primarily from the NGO sector, who work in the hill regions. Of these, there were some representatives of academic institutions and government bodies concerned with Himalayan development issues as well. Following the workshop, a series of follow-up meetings were held with local people in three districts of Uttar Pradesh. This document is a compilation of both the Dehradun and grassroots meetings, and is designed to act as an input to the Global NGO consultations on Sustainable Mountain Development to be held in Lima, Peru, during 22-25 February, 1995.

The Chapter 13 of Agenda 21 on Mountains is to be reviewed in May of 1995 by the UN CSD (Commission on Sustainable Development). Therefore a global NGO meeting is being organized to ensure that information on various hill programmes be they from the Andes, Caucasus, Himalayas and so forth are to

be identified in the CSD review process. Although it is appreciated that the decisions at Lima or New York will have a limited effect on the rural poor in our mountain areas. It is better- in an increasingly integrated world economy - that there is an awareness of the reach of global policy-making and its impact on remote areas of the world.

Social activists and NGOs working in Himalayan villages are keen to understand key elements of the global decision making process and, when needed, want to have the capacity to take necessary steps to influence global decisions in the interest of mountain people. However, those who work directly with mountain people are often handicapped by the lack of access to information on these global decisions. This participatory process, however limited, represented a step towards involving NGOs, social activists and people from the Indian Himalayas in global deliberations about sustainable mountain development.

### *A South Perspective from the Mountains*

Inputs from local people and grassroots groups on the priorities of mountain development were collected with reference to the two programmatic thrusts of Chapter 13 of the Agenda 21 document. The two programme areas are

- Generating and strengthening knowledge about the ecology and sustainable development of mountain ecosystems; and
- Promoting integrated watershed development and alternative livelihood opportunities.

#### Generating and Strengthening Knowledge about Ecology and Sustainable Development

The strength of the NGO sector is in its ability to articulate the needs and capabilities of villagers and to work collectively with people at the grassroots level. It is increasingly apparent that NGOs cannot work in isolation. Together they need to advocate on larger policy decisions, on environment and assist in sustainable development programmes.

To achieve an advocacy role it is necessary that NGOs establish collaborative relationships around common issue areas and learn from each other's experiences. Also, as a forum, they need to forge partnerships with government bodies, academics, and other relevant agencies.

With this in view, NGOs can use the micro approaches to broad base their work in their search for large scale solutions. For this to occur development of better communication networks is essential and this is seen by NGOs as a priority. Increasingly therefore, regional resource centres which are in their

formative stages in several places, need to be upgraded. This is one way of strengthening cooperation among NGOs in future.

### Promoting Integrated Watershed Development and Alternative Livelihoods

The need for integrated watershed development is due to the requirements of regenerating water, forests and soil with a view to ameliorating environmental destruction, and at the same time having local people access a constant supply of nature's products for their subsistence.

With a regenerating resource base there is greater scope for identifying alternative and sustainable livelihoods. It is evident that agriculture based livelihoods need to be upgraded and complemented by other off-farm livelihoods.

For this to occur, a micro level planning process needs to be designed keeping in view local people's active involvement in decision making. Currently, a decentralized political process is under way throughout India with the revival of the Panchayat system and the authority and powers vested in them by the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment to the Constitution, and this provides one channel of keeping people in the decision making process.

In addition, the Van Panchayat (People's Forest Management Councils) system needs to be studied, refined and strengthened as a means of increasing forest cover. Increasingly, Van Panchayats need to be managed by villagers in a watershed and this requires mechanisms for conflict resolution.

The local people drew mention to the Uttarakhand movement as an example of the priority of redistributing power to the local hill people, giving them rights over crucial decision making over hill development that has hitherto been in the purview of the plains people.

### Building a Common Platform among Mountain based NGOs

For NGOs to promote integrated watershed development and alternate livelihood opportunities, means that they need to upgrade their activities and share experience and expertise which addresses common issues to the mountain people's development. NGOs can advocate with the government in order to promote innovative approaches to the problems in the hills. Hitherto the NGO input has been very valuable in ensuring a people centred approach to development.

NGOs and social activists are increasingly aware as to their role in promoting equity in the planning and management of natural resources. This means that local needs are to be satisfied in terms of the basic requirements of water, forests, agriculture, before resources are exported out of the region in the

form of water, energy, tourism, and so forth. Equity also means that women, indigenous people and scheduled castes not only have a voice in the political process but are able to achieve greater power. Equity also means that the accountability of government is monitored by people and that this accountability also extends to the local institutions enhancing their capacity to develop appropriate programmes and interventions for sustainable development in the Himalayas. If we were to synthesize the main issues that emerged from a participatory process we would find that the concerns were related to:

**Natural Resources:** forests, energy, water, bio diversity.

**Micro-macro Linkages:** The global political process, research priorities, NGO-government relationships, legislation affecting NGOs and local people.

**Women, Work and Health:** gender issues, women's work, health.

**Economy and Governance:** economic diversification, tourism, appropriate agriculture, migration, political autonomy.

**Culture and People:** indigenous knowledge, cultural and spiritual heritage, indigenous lifestyles, people's participation, NGO partnerships.

These are elaborated in the sections below.

### ***Notable Features of the Indian Himalayas***

The Himalayan range is home to about 120 million people, the most populous mountain range in the world. The cultural and ethnic diversity in the region is remarkable, with each group of people adapting to the demands of the region in their own unique way. Yet people who live in the Himalayas face special difficulties. The rugged terrain makes road construction difficult, and roads once built are often damaged by landslides, particularly during the monsoon season. Access to essential goods and services is poor. Economic activities in the mountains are hampered by lack of access to the well-organized market economy of the plains. Educational opportunities in the hill regions are limited, and unemployment is extremely high.

In the hill regions of Uttar Pradesh, lack of local employment opportunities has led to an extremely high rate of male migration. In the northeastern states, literacy rates are high, yet employment for educated youth is scarce. In the health sector, the region lacks health care facilities, trained personnel and adequate outreach of health services. Low immunization rates and inadequate access to maternal health care cause much avoidable morbidity. In the northeastern region, population growth rates are extremely high, probably reflecting the lack of access to appropriate family planning services. Another

serious problem in the northeastern states is HIV/AIDS transmitted by IV drug use.

The Himalaya is the youngest, highest and most unstable mountain region in the world. The Himalayan region, which is taken to include the Hindu Kush, the Hengduan and the Karakoram, is about 2500 km long, and is spread over eight Asian countries: Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, China, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Myanmar. In India the Himalayan ranges are divided into two geographically separated flanks, the Western Himalayan range, extending from Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal, Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh up to the western border of Nepal. The eastern Himalayan range extends from the North Bengal hills to Sikkim, Bhutan and the North Eastern states. Great differences in altitude, latitude and longitude create vast variation in micro-habitats throughout this range. The Western Himalaya is relatively dry and cold, while the Eastern Himalayan region is extremely wet. The eastern regions are exceptionally rich in biodiversity. Three main river systems arise in the Himalayas the Indus, the Ganges: and the Brahmaputra systems. These great rivers form the most important water sources for South Asia, supporting almost half a billion people. The Himalayan Mountains are weather makers for the subcontinent, regulating the monsoon cycle and protecting the Indian plains from cold Central Asian air during the winter.

Central characteristics of the mountains shape its ecosystems. These mountain characteristics have been presented systematically by Jodha (1989) and Bandyopadhyay (1992). Thrust upwards by massive tectonic forces, the mountain environment is inherently structurally unstable, subject to seismic activity, landslides and floods. More than a dozen earthquakes with a magnitude of 7.5 or greater have been recorded over the last hundred years in the Himalayas. The verticality of the mountain landscape makes transport and communication very difficult. While this isolation prevents access to many facilities, it has also acted as a barrier, preserving the diverse cultural and ethnic identities of the mountain people. The great differences in altitude in mountain environments results in a vast number of micro-habitats, a reason for the extraordinary biodiversity of the region. As a reservoir of genetic resources, the Himalayas are one of the most important areas of the world.

In many mountain areas, the centre of political and administrative power is located far from the mountain. Government policies are seldom created to reflect the realities and needs of mountain people. Rather, mountain resources are systemically exploited for the benefit of those who live on the plains. This combination of factors creates a situation in which mountain people become progressively marginalized.

The hill region of Uttar Pradesh, for example, has little political autonomy, and is centrally administered from Lucknow. Many policies result in exploitation of resources which the people of the U.P. hills depend upon. Forest policy in U.P.

has resulted in reservation of huge tracts of forests, where villagers have no usufruct rights. This has resulted in the alienation of village people who are forced to put increasing pressure on small areas of legally accessible forest. Such policies lead to increasing discontent. Recently, a mass people's movement for a separate state (Uttarakhand) has acquired tremendous momentum in the U.P. Hills, reflecting people's desire for more control over their resources.

Himalayan ecosystems are currently facing serious threats. Deforestation in the Himalayan region has received worldwide attention. Having begun during British colonial rule, systematic harvesting of commercial timber has caused tremendous damage to the Himalayan forests. Although in many parts of the Himalayan region, legislation prohibits commercial exploitation of the forest, requirements from the local population for wood and fodder cause continued pressure upon forests. Steep slopes denuded of trees are prone to soil erosion. Terracing of fields has prevented soil erosion to some extent, but in parts of the Himalayan region villagers have begun to plough even steep slopes without constructing terraces. Land holdings are small and fragmented. Subsistence agriculture is more common in the hill regions than is cash cropping. In the North Eastern states, agriculture is dominated by the controversy surrounding shifting cultivation (jhum). Jhum cultivation is thought to be environmentally damaging particularly when the jhum cycle becomes short. In some areas of the North East, the jhum cycle is as little as 3 years (traditionally 20 years). Government programs aimed at changing these practices have had little success. Regional water shortages are a serious problem in many parts of the region often associated with drying of water springs after cutting of forest cover.

The solution for these interconnected environmental problems which has been proposed by government agencies has been "watershed development". However, officially sponsored watershed development activities, mostly internationally funded, seem to be strengthening the bureaucracy rather than reaching the targeted community. This entire process needs to be critically re examined by NGOs. In addition, the NGOs are further alarmed by the proposed legislation related to forests called the Forest and Ecosystem Conservation Bill, which negates the spirit of Chapter 13 of Agenda 21, to which the Government of India is a signatory. This will also dilute the potential gain of the Panchayati Raj Act to truly empower local people to manage their own natural resources and affairs.

### ***Social Movements in the Hills - Cases of Environmental Activism***

Activists and NGOs have an admirable track record in raising awareness on the Indian Himalayas both in terms of environmental concerns and with respect to women's empowerment and development. In the Garhwal region of the Indian Himalayas, the most notable is the Chipko movement. The empowerment of

women through Chipko in spite of low literacy levels and high degree of poverty has been a result of extreme marginalization and victimization. Women have also played a most important role in anti-alcohol movements in UP and Himachal Pradesh, two hill-states that have encouraged licensing of alcohol producers, especially because of the tremendous violence and physical abuse which they have had to endure.

Other noteworthy social movements that are caused by environmental activism are peoples' protest against limestone quarrying in the Doon valley, the movement against the construction of the Tehri dam, and the advocacy and campaign of the Van Gujjars against their displacement as nomads. We provide some case studies on:

- The Chipko Movement
- Anti-alcohol Movement of Himachal Pradesh
- The Silkot Tea Estate Movement
- The Anti-Tehri Dam Movement
- The Movement for the Gujjars

### **One Village's Struggle: A Case of Chipko Activism**

At an altitude of 6,000 ft., Kangad, a hamlet of 200 families, is an excellent example of successful local people's forestry. In 1977, the already degraded forest of Kangad was marked for felling by the Forest Department. The women, who had to walk long distances for fuel, fodder and water, were determined to save the last patch of trees. The men of Kangad were offered work by the Forest Department to fell trees. The conflict of interest between the village men and women made the launch of Chipko difficult.

After four months of resistance, the women succeeded in saving their forest. The women's organization, the Mahila Mangal Dal, then decided to regenerate the degraded forests. On the basis of the number of cattle owned by each family, contributions were raised to support a village forest guard who was paid Rs 300 per month. For three years the arrangement worked well but problems arose thereafter. The individual forest guards became negligent and protection was lax. Once the women discovered this, they decided unanimously to abolish the post of the village forest guard, and decided to guard it themselves by rotation.

Now the Mahila Mangal Dal has allocated the duty of looking after the forest to a group of village women. The responsibility is shared among 15 women in such a manner that the work is evenly distributed among all the families. Thus the duty for one family comes about every 15 days. As one woman said, 'On these days we leave our own work and protect the forest because our oak trees are like our children.' Mixed natural oak forests are now regenerating excellently in Kangad.

Once when a *gujjar*, a migrant shepherd, allowed his goats to graze in the protected regenerating area, the women confiscated the goats and fined the *gujjar* Rs 200. Villagers are fined up to Rs 50 per person for clandestine branch lopping in the protected oak forest and Rs 100 for cutting trees for firewood. The strength of nature, and the strength of women is the basis of the recovery of the forest in all parts of Garhwal. In 1986, the Mahila Mangal Dal decided to help the Forest Department in tree planting. They dug 15,000 pits, but found that the Forest Department was only interested in planting poplars. The women refused to allow the planting of poplar, an exotic commercial tree, and forced the Forest Department to plant different kinds of indigenous fodder trees that would benefit them directly. Similar instances are also seen in other parts of the mountain areas like Rawatgaon, Lambgaon and elsewhere.

Extract from Bandopadhyay, J and Shiva, V. 1988. People's Control over Forest sources in the Himalayas. Appropriate Technology. Vol. 15, No. 1.

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## Alcoholism and Domestic Violence in Himachal Pradesh

It appears that after decimating large areas of the state's forest during the 1970's, from the beginning of the 1980's, the state government is relying more and more on excise revenue from liquor sales as a means of increasing its income. Every year, new liquor vends are auctioned and even remote areas, till now left unaffected by the evils of alcoholism, are being opened up to the disease.

The result is that despite increasing numbers of villagers sitting in dharnas and sending petitions to the government protesting against the opening of liquor vends in their areas and demanding their closure, excepting for the recent case of Chhyachi Panchayat in Nalagarh block, no vends have been closed. In Hamirpur, as many as 20 panchayats had passed a resolution demanding closure of a *theka* (liquor vend) in their area but the government refused to budge. This is despite the fact that in many cases, the formality of obtaining the panchayat's consent for

opening a *theka* often consists of a formal or informal letter signed by only one office bearer of the Panchayat.

It is the impact alcohol is having within the home, the supposed haven of love, peace and security, that is the least visible but the most alarming. Wherever a group of women meet, be it a *mahila mandal* meeting, a meeting of mahila mandal pradhans and secretaries of a women's mela meant to discuss women's issues, the one thing to come up for discussion is the impact organised and commercial distribution of alcohol is having on women and their lives. Happy homes have now been converted into hell holes of torture, physical abuse, insecurity and want. Women get beaten, thrown out, sometimes raped or killed by men of their own household within the four walls of what used to be a 'home.' But affairs of the family belong to the 'private' domain and her '*izzat*' or honour depends on maintaining a good image of her husband after all, that is a major culturally defined duty of the wife. She might still try and protest but that could potentially threaten her very place in the home with the man telling her to get out. So, an unknown number of women silently suffer daily violence and abuse from the growing number of alcoholic husbands within the four walls of their so called 'homes'. Not only does cash inflow decrease, but whatever assets the family owns, sometimes including the kitchen utensils, can slowly end up at the altar of alcohol. Many women are being forced to work in addition to their substantial other work burden because their men now bring in little. But even this is often snatched away by the addicted husband or father to satisfy his craving for alcohol.

Then, with the easy availability of alcohol, school boys start drinking while still in school. The health of the men is badly affected. All kinds of alcohol induced diseases have become common. The women, deprived of the little cash available earlier, cannot afford the treatment required by the men. Before the end of the licence period on March 31 each year, the *theka* owners sell liquor at throw-away prices to finish their stocks. During these few days, drinking crosses all limits as the men overdrink to take advantage of the low prices.

Extract from Sarin, M. 1990. Women and Environment. Health for the Million. Vol. XVI, No. 4.

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### *The Silkot Tea-Estate Movement*

Silkot, in Chamoli, Garhwal was a favourite of the British in India who saw in the area, immense potential for growing tea, especially since cheap labour was easily available. At independence (1947), the British left the Estate to one Major Khan. In 1950, the government auctioned the Silkot estate and it came to be in the possession of one Nanda family. This family systematically disenfranchised the local people and restricted their access to the forests.

These people, mostly from, Pajiyan, Matkol, Mahargaon, Ramara and Silkot had traditional and customary rights over at the 700 acres of forests and their produce as well as recorded rights over the same. The owners were rapidly cutting the forests as litigation pertaining to holdings in excess of the ceiling was pending in the Karnaprayag courts.

Swami Manmathan - the well-known social activist of the hills, took up the case of these people. In 1974, at the annual Baisakhi mela, Swamiji made the call for a movement to stop the ongoing disenfranchisement of the people. By organising large demonstrations, the movement gradually captured the attention of the local people.

At the second stage, the movement began a poster-campaign to generate awareness and Swamiji was also joined by prominent social workers of the region. In a massive rally at Garisian on 15th April 1975, the people presented the government with three recommendations:

1. That the Silkot estate be nationalised.
2. That the government take notice of the lakhs of rupees of which it was being defrauded by fudging land ceiling issues.
3. Restoration of tea-growing, the prime livelihood generating activity of the region.

Swamiji also filed a case in the Allahabad High Court arguing in his petition (this was happening in 1974-75, long before the worldwide environmental movement got underway) that felling of trees in the Dudhatoti mid-Himalayan Range would seriously impair the environment and bring about significant ecological change. The Ramganga and Nayar rivers would be irreparably disturbed and massive topsoil washouts would take place.

As the movement gathered popular support, so did the resentment of vested interests against the Swami. As the government of India damped a national emergency in 1975, the detractors of the movement saw their chance to sabotage it.

A police First Information Report was lodged against Swami Manmathan. The Sub-divisional Magistrate invited him for talks at Karnaprayag and arrested him under the National Security Act.

He was thrown into solitary confinement in Chamoli. Although the case against him was sought to be deferred by those arraigned against him, growing public pressure forced the case to come up for hearing. In November 1975, the court honourably acquitted the Swami of all charges. In 1978, the owners finally

surrendered proprietorship to the people making it a major victory for the people's movement. The lush forests today bear testimony to this.

### *The Anti-Tehri-Dam Movement*

The philosophy of the Chipko movement has recently expressed itself more concretely in a different context through the emergence of the movement against the Tehri Dam Project (TDP), near Tehri-town, the cultural and political nerve centre of Tehri Garhwal. The long drawn arguments between the officials planning to construct the 260 m high dam and its opponents have emphasized fundamental global issues related to sustainable mountain development and in particular, the choice of technology for the use of Himalayan water resources.

The supporters of dam construction are both locals and non-locals. In spite of the predominantly non-Garhwali labor recruitment in the dam construction so far, Garhwali middle-class hope for large-scale employment at the dam at some stage, with no true conception of the exact number of jobs available. Even if all the jobs in the post-construction stage go to local people, it will not decrease unemployment rates among the Garhwali youth. There is a euphoria among businessmen, traders, and large land owners in urban settlements of Garhwal, except at Tehri, that dam construction will mean accelerated growth of these towns or cities coupled with escalating land prices. The non-local interests are first the construction companies and then the major consumers of electricity ~ the industrial sector in North India. Politically, this is the strongest lobby. Water for Delhi is an attractive wrapping paper to sell the TDP. One also often hears of a strong pro-dam group in the submersion area. This group is made up of those who seem to have obtained disproportionately high compensations and have no further interest in their homeland. Among the strongest opponents of the Tehri Dam are the residents of Tehri town and thousands of people in the villages in the submersion area who depend on their homeland and do not have the least inkling of where and how they will be rehabilitated. The most articulate opponents are the informed and committed anti-dam campaigners and the large number of environmentalists. This group collected signatures in an appeal to the Prime Minister of India to stop this project, together with the large scale uprooting of about 100,000 people. Another small but important group opposing the dam has raised religious reasons and the holy character of the river Bhagirathi to oppose obstruction of its natural flow.

In 1978, a massive dam burst occurred on Kanodiagad in the upper catchment areas of the Bhagirathi. The Anti-Tehri Dam Committee immediately took up this instance of landslide-dam burst as an illustration of the threat to sustainability of the Tehri Dam area and identified reforestation in the upper

catchment of Bhagirathi as the root cause. However, discussions at the Forest Department did not identify the disaster as the natural process of mass washing, characteristic of a growing and unconsolidated mountain. The Forest Department blamed overgrazing, thus, making the local people responsible. It is not surprising that the disastrous landslide in the Alaknanda catchment generated ecological rethinking in Garhwal's forest movement, while the disastrous landslide in the upper Bhagirathi catchment gave an ecological turn to tile protest against the Tehri Dam. The positive outcome of this relatively ill-informed debate was that the Department of Science and Technology of the Government of India established a working group on the Environmental Impact Assessment of the Tehri Dam in December 1979, of which a courageous environmental crusader, Sunil Roy, was made the Chairman in February 1980.

A very significant aspect of the Tehri Dam was that the construction was going on during the years when studies on environmental impact were being carried out. The burden of proof was clearly on the opponents of the dam and not on the planners. Even when doubts about the sustainability of such dams were gaining recognition with the scientific committee on large dams in the Department of Environment and Forests, construction went ahead, creating political pressure against the critics on the grounds that a poor country like India cannot abandon investments already made. In the meantime, the argument that a poor country like India should not invest in economically and ecologically unprofitable projects was ignored. It was ultimately the strength of the non-violent Gandhian strategy of *Satyagraha* which forced a temporary halt to construction.

On December 25, 1989, Bahuguna, a philosopher activist of the Chipko movement went to the site of the dam and staged a protest sit-in in front of a bulldozer, forcing all construction activities at the site to a standstill. However, the government has not stopped further construction of the dam. Construction continues while environmentalists continue their protest and most people in the submersion area prepare themselves, psychologically, to leave the area. Substantiating the environmental opposition, a massive earthquake did hit the area in the early hours of October 20, 1991, killing thousands of people.

The message to all those interested in sustainability is clear; when it comes to actual implementation at the micro-level, global plot-forms on environmental issues are hardly useful. It is in the education of environmentalists that the real test of success lies and in changes at the local levels, not resolutions at the global level. In this respect, the Anti-Dam Movement has made a very significant contribution in raising the question "what development to sustain and for whom?"

Extract from Bandopadhyay, J. 1992. Sustainability and Survival in the Mountain Context. *Ambio*. Vol. 21, No. 4.

### *Displacing Pastoral Gujjars*

The pastoral Gujjars of northern India practice transhumance and migrate with their households and livestock between summer and winter pastures. The basis of their economic activities is keeping buffalo herds and they are specialized producers of dairy products that are sold in local towns. The Gujjars do not themselves own any land and do not practice agriculture, and are therefore dependent upon access to state forests where they live for most of the year. Their lifestyle has come into collision with the state through the regulation of the traditional use of Indian forests. This has meant a remarkable impoverishment for the Gujjars who are rapidly losing their traditional pastureland and are falling into debt. Their position as outsiders in Indian society is putting a lot of pressure on their traditional society and internal solidarity. Misfortune has become a part of their life to be accepted with a stem degree of stoicism.

The principal problem of nomadic people is environmental degradation and eroding of their ecological resource base. Historically, the problem of environmental degradation was less profound because of low population pressure and mobility that allowed the land to be rested periodically. In addition, many pastoral communities have expanded their home grazing range, so that they have sufficient pasturage and water resources to fall back upon during periods of drought.

Degraded environment has a low productive capability and therefore can not support an increasing human and livestock population. When this happens, even a normal dry year becomes "a regional" drought. During an actual drought, high livestock mortality repeats the spiral of hunger and destitution.

Plans for providing education for the nomadic population of the country have been prominent on the development agenda in recent years. Education is regarded as an appropriate media for changing the nomads' perception and value systems, while integrating them into a broader socioeconomic and political context. A major deficiency in establishing education has been attributed to their dispersal and constant mobility. Logically, resettlement has been upheld as a strategy for providing formal and non-formal education.

RLEK (Rural Litigation ~ Entitlement Kendra) is working on such a module for the Total Literacy Programme and Post Literacy Programme with the nomadic community of the Gujjars. This has shown very tangible and fruitful results. In a period of one year 14,000 Van-Gujjars have become proficient in literacy and numeracy skills. They are in a position now to apply these skills to systems of

learning which would empower them in their quest for survival through sustainability. It is these skills that are now enabling them to respond to environmental initiatives that they could combine with their traditional wisdom.

Extract from Kaushal, A and Dangwal, P.n.d. A Case for the Survival of Pastoralist in the Himalayan Region. Paper presented at the Himalayan NGO Consultation on Sustainable Mountain Development. Dehradun, India. 29- 30 September 1994.

### ***Key issues for Sustainable Mountain Development***

These issues were identified in a participatory process with NGOs and grassroots groups in September and December 1994. In September, a meeting was held in Dehradun in which sixty-five representatives of NGOs, academic institutions and government bodies met to discuss and analyze the pertinent issues. Following the meeting, two further participatory processes were held at Srinagar and Anjanisain in December. The key issues emerging from these processes have been synthesized under the following headings:

**Natural Resources:** Forests, energy, water, bio diversity.

**Micro macro Linkages:** The global political process, research priorities, NGO government relationships, legislation affecting NGOs and local people.

**Women, Work and Health:** Gender issues, women's work, health.

**Economy and Governance:** Economic diversification, tourism, appropriate agriculture, migration, political autonomy.

**Culture and People:** Indigenous knowledge, cultural and spiritual heritage, indigenous lifestyles, people's participation, NGO partnerships.

## **NATURAL RESOURCES**

### **Forests**

The forest of the Himalayan region has been badly damaged by indiscriminate cutting for commercial timber production. While bans on cutting have been imposed in many regions, the subsistence based biomass needs of people are not being met either for basic needs or for purposes of regenerating the environment. The regeneration of the forests is seen by many environmental activists as one of the keys to improving the quality of the life of the hill people. Forest regeneration is imperative for water regeneration and for soil protection. At the same time, forest utilization is directly related to

agriculture and animal husbandry and is therefore, an integral part of daily life.

Valuable minor forest produce such as honey, nuts and raisins, etc. need to be projected as alternative livelihoods to agriculture and which can be carried out without damaging the environment.

Horticulture has been seen as a very important element of the watershed management programmes. It must be kept in mind however, that in Himachal Pradesh, the apple industry and the wood needed for packing apples has resulted in severe damage to the forests. It is imperative therefore, to pay attention to traditional forms of forest management and to build on this traditional knowledge base in our efforts of regenerating forests.

In terms of NGO involvement in forest development, there have been a large number of efforts to take top tree planting and to conserve existing forests through traditional and non-traditional regenerative practices.

## Energy

A critical issue and a point of conflict between local people and state agencies and private interests are around energy. The main source of energy in the mountains is hydra-energy which is increasingly being captured, for purposes of generation of hydroelectric power. Although the Himalayan region has vast potential, this potential is limited by the fact that the region is seismically active and unsuitable for large dam construction. Smaller run-of-the-river schemes are more environmentally appropriate and can generate energy for both local use and for export. These schemes need to be built into watershed management programmes and done so keeping the energy requirements of local communities in mind. It is increasingly clear that the local community should also benefit from energy export out of their communities as well.

A second energy source is in the form of fuelwood and biomass. This is the primary source of energy for the local populations. Women endure great stress in the collection of fuelwood for cooking and it is compounded by the need for collection of fodder and water.

Increasingly, NGOs have been responding to women's energy crisis by reducing fuelwood requirements and supplying cooking gas and solar energy based electrification. Development of alternative biomass based energy sources and the extension of non-conventional energy sources are NGO priorities.

## Water

The water resources in the Himalayan region are tremendous. Unfortunately, given deforestation and extensive soil erosion, water run-off has increased and

there has been reduced percolation into the soil which is directly contributing to loss of agricultural productivity. Besides, environmental degradation, there has also been growing pressure for utilization of Himalayan waters by outside vested interests which are interested in profiteering through the construction of dams, tourism and through bottling of water.

In addition, there is little interest on the part of state agencies to regenerate water sources and to ensure soil retention of water in the existing watershed development programmes.

Moreover village people do not have the potential to invest in appropriate water technologies which would allow water to be stored and diverted for local use in their villages.

Many Himalayan NGOs see the basic need of water for local people as being a first priority in the development of Himalayan resources. All water that goes out of the Himalayas either in the form of run off, or in the form of water based products, should provide a benefit back to the local people so that they have the means to regenerate their water sources.

### **Biodiversity**

The Himalayas are a tremendously rich source of biodiversity, particularly in the North Eastern states. Genetic resources of the Himalayan region arise from both nature sources and from centuries of indigenous crop breeding. This genetic wealth is directly linked to both the physical and cultural survival of mountain peoples, and must be preserved. Revenues accruing from economic activities based on the genetic resources of the Himalayan region must remain within the hands of the local people. Increasingly NGOs are aware of the vast genetic potential that can be protected and also useful to the development of hill people. Preservation of gene stock and investment in the production of traditional medicine, are examples of NGO interventions to date.

### **Macro micro Linkages**

#### **Global Political Process**

With liberalization and the changing relations at the village level owing to the globalization processes, villagers are increasingly aware of the profound effects in terms of expanding communication technology, tourism, and large infra-structural development. Mountain regions are no longer remote. In the face of these changes, mountain people are developing a unified political voice to effectively impact all national and international policies related to mountain development.

NGOs as spokespersons for local people increasingly are concerned about taking lessons at the micro level and deducing various policy changes that can be advocated at the macro national and international levels. This consultative process in itself is an effort to bring the realities of the Himalayan people to the larger international consultations at Lima and to the CSD meet in New York later this year.

## **Research**

High quality research is lacking on many aspects of the mountain system. Researchers' heavy reliance on poor secondary sources of information that do not allow in-depth understanding of the changing realities at the micro-level, is common. Basic research on bio diversity, hydrology, soil study, forestry practices, health and welfare, are all needed. Applied research in terms of promoting appropriate technology, alternative energy, food processing technology, are of urgent importance. Changing patterns of morbidity and mortality need to be understood in relation to the degrading environment. Action oriented research on traditional and non-traditional coping mechanisms is a high priority. Research needs to be geared towards development action for directly providing greater control to people over their own development.

Action research has been carried out by numerous NGOs in the Himalayas. Increasingly NGOs are pressuring academic institutions, and other bodies to redefine their research priorities so that research is done in partnership with village people and so that real need and the micro level realities can be reflected and used as a basis for action.

## **Government/NGO Relationships**

Government policies for Himalayan development have not reflected adequately, the environmental imperatives and the socio ecological requirements. Increasingly, government strategies have to be region specific so as to deal with the particular environmental and social requirements but at the same time must involve local people in the planning process through panchayat-based development schemes or through NGO groups. New emphasis needs to be given on traditional and non-traditional coping that hill people have developed in response to locally specific conditions.

NGOs need to assist to develop a lobby group of mountain people in order to advocate on issues which critically affect them. NGOs need to press for capacity building of indigenous institutions and at the same time, play the role of catalysts for change. Joint initiatives to promote trainings to NGOs and staff is important.

## **Legislation Affecting**

## **NGOs and Local People**

Attempts to preserve the forest merely by passing "Save the Forest" legislation may result in the elimination of traditional means of forest conservation developed over the years by village people. Careful attention must be paid to the area of conflict between laws to protect forests and essential development activities such as road construction. Better training of forest administrators is a need, so that these people will enact laws in the truest spirit of forest conservation. Forest laws and the new Panchayati Raj legislation must be studied and potential areas of conflict in legislation worked out.

NGOs need to become more aware about key pieces of legislation which affect the work that they do at the grassroots level. For example, few NGOs involved in the consultation process were aware about the recent Forest and Ecosystem Conservation Bill, or its implications for NGO work in the Himalayan region. Local people need to be more involved in the debate about new legislation. A pressure lobby can be formed involving forest specialists, NGOs, environmentalists and people's representatives to put forward suggestions about laws and regulations regarding forests.

## **Women, Work and Health**

### **Gender Issues**

The status of women is known across the Himalayan region, although there are some significant variations from one region to another. Gender oppression does occur in the form of violence and physical abuse, extreme work and health stresses, and the culture of giving women all the responsibility of house hold and farm labour without giving any rights to land, or to the household economy. Literacy among women is uniformly low.

Government agricultural extension workers, state foresters, health officials, small industry workers are invariably male yet all farm, forest and subsidiary activities are the responsibility of women.

NGOs and the government need to focus on all policies with an emphasis on women's status and autonomy. NGOs have particularly taken up the issue of alcoholism as a male habit that generally leads to violence and social disintegration. As seen in the social movements section above, an example of women against the social abuse of alcohol in Himachal Pradesh is given.

### **Women's Work**

Time studies have shown that women's workload has been increasing along with environmental degradation. In other words, head loading of water, fodder or wood is more and more becoming a burden. The drudgery of working from

five in the morning to midnight affects the women's health and well being which impacts on her productivity and therefore results negatively on the family. NGOs have found that women's work burden is so great that it is difficult to have her participate in development meetings and activities such as literacy, health and other programmes which are geared towards fostering a better life for her and her family. Increasingly NGOs are seeing that reducing women's ecostresses is essential to her maintaining a productive level and this means that successful environmental programmes need to introduce and reinforce traditional and nontraditional coping mechanisms.

## **Health**

Health issues in the Himalayan region are related to the changing environment and the breakdown of traditional, cultural and social interactions. Since environmental degradation in the region appears to be changing the morbidity and mortality patterns increasingly, we are introducing the notion of maintaining women's ecohealth.

Ecohealth programmes that are increasingly being carried out by NGOs are aimed at reducing the long distances that women have to walk to obtain fuel and fodder and minimizing the risk of physical injury to her. NGOs are conscious of increasing the access to safe drinking water, and sanitation so that water borne and water washed diseases are minimized. Iodine deficiency disorders are endemic. Respiratory track infections are a significant cause of morbidity and mortality in Himalayan environment.

Without access to proper health care services the role of health education in preventive health has been an important concern among NGOs. Many NGOs have been introducing a micro level planning process to ensure that health services are being offered that, reflect local needs and perceptions. Preservation and strengthening of indigenous systems of medicine as the wealth of knowledge on traditional medicine still exists in the Himalayan region.

## **Economy and Governance**

### **Economic Diversification**

Greater attention needs to be paid to off-farm employment. This is necessary because of the serious unemployment problem across the region which is contributing to high out migration as well as to social disintegration in the form of alcoholism, drug addiction and crime.

Economic diversification needs to be considered within the context of sustainable environment and sustainable livelihoods. For instance, in Garhwal and Kumaon, the Government is introducing eco-tourism. Within watershed

development programmes, there is more attention being given to horticulture, vegetable plantations, and animal husbandry.

NGOs and community groups have been particularly focused on developing alternative livelihoods so as to increase the value added on cash crops and other farm and off-farm products. This includes weaving and handicrafts, food processing, and production of medicinal plants. Horticulture, such as dry fruits, apricots, etc. because of their particularly low volume but high value, are also important new cash crop innovations, as is Oak-Tussar for silk production.

## **Tourism**

Although tourism is seen by the government to be an important source of revenue generation for the Himalayan region, careful development of the industry will be required to ensure that local people are benefited and that environmental measures are built in so that minimal damage occurs. Adventure tourism and nature tourism could both be promoted as eco-tourism.

In places of great religious significance such as Garhwal, a code of conduct is needed so that visitors to the area do not offend local values and ethos. Along pilgrimage routes, basic facilities for tourists need to be improved. Legislation should be passed to ensure that outsiders cannot indiscriminately buy land for speculation in the area. Part of the training for those in the tourism industry should be education about preservation of the environment.

## **Appropriate Agriculture**

There is scope for improving agricultural practice in the Himalayan region. Improving agriculture is largely determined by the availability of water and improving the water retention capacity of the soil.

In terms of increasing soil structure, improving cropping systems, such as inter cropping with nitrogen fixing crops such as trench beans and various grasses could improve the environment as well as the economic potential of hill agriculture.

Animal husbandry practices and the use of forest biomass are intimately linked to improving agriculture. Techniques for stall feeding animals and the introduction of appropriate fodder grasses to ease pressure on trees are examples of these.

Tree crops such as walnuts, apricots, almonds, citrus fruits hold potential for the hills. These tree crops need to be planted with a view to maintaining the soil structure and to cultivating of traditional varieties. Biodiversity is one of the greatest natural heritages of the Himalayan region and this must be preserved.

## **Out Migration**

Out migration from the region has been going on for more than 150 years, with many young men joining the armed forces. The income coming from ex-army personnel is a major source of revenue for families living in the hills. However, the loss of the male population has led to new pressures on women. In addition, land abandonment due to migration causes deterioration of terrace agriculture and this diminishes the productivity of the soil. Terrace agriculture requires a large number of productive members and with high levels of migration this kind of agriculture cannot be sustained.

NGOs have been addressing the issue of out-migration by trying to generate new off-farm employment and by promoting the autonomy of hill communities as marginalized and dispossessed populations.

## **Political Autonomy**

There is a need to recognize mountain people's own desires and aspirations, particularly for increased political autonomy. Failure to address these needs may lead to, situations of political unrest, as mountain people's frustration reaches intolerable levels. The mass people's movement for Uttarakhand, a separate state in the U.P. hills, is an important example of this struggle for increased political autonomy.

## **Culture and People**

### **Indigenous Knowledge**

In reviving traditional and non- traditional coping mechanisms for the hill people to achieve higher levels of self-reliance and gaining control over their own lives and environment, there is a need to study indigenous technology. Herding of animals in upland and mountain areas, a traditional pastoralism, is one example of the hill people generating employment. A traditional water harvesting structure to regenerate water resources is another. Traditional forms of architecture designed to resist earthquakes, are significant coping strategies as well.

It is important not to over-rate traditional methods, but it is important to build on local and indigenous know-how.

### **Indigenous Livelihoods**

In Himachal, Jammu and Kashmir and Uttar Pradesh, indigenous nomadic populations are facing threats to their pastoral lifestyle. (See section under Social movements in the Van Gujjars).

A shrinking resource base, misunderstanding between farmers and pastoralists, and lack of political power are some of the key issues at stake. Pastoralists have contributed to cattle breed improvement and have occupied a unique ecological niche, producing milk by grazing their buffalo in remote areas where not much use was made of resources.

In Uttar Pradesh, a population of about 10,000 van Gujjars were threatened with eviction from their traditional wintering grounds, to make way for the Rajaji National Park. A local NGO intervened on their behalf, winning a Supreme Court ruling which permits them to remain in their traditional wintering grounds. The difficulties faced by the van Gujjars illustrate the plight of pastoral people in many mountain areas of the world.

### **Jhum Cultivation in the North-East**

It is generally argued in official circles that *Jhum* cultivation (slash and-burn) as practised in the states of North-East India is essentially an irrational and destructive practice, with high input and relatively low production. Moreover, it leads to large-scale deforestation, soil erosion and an all round degradation of the ecosystem in the region.

However, recent studies show that jhum is based on a highly rational calculation of field rotation and is best suited to the ecological context of the hill terrain here. Besides its suitability to the terrain, it also provides for high productivity through year round mixed cropping. This allows for a multilayered canopy, in which the more hardy varieties having longer stalks protect the more vulnerable crops from sun and wind and prevent soil erosion.

Jhum, moreover, is not necessarily a subsistence mode of cultivation. Where the land is fertile and the population pressure low, it is known to generate substantial surplus to facilitate growth of chiefdoms and states as witnessed by the numerous tribal councils in the north-east region. Traditionally, the surplus is kept on a community basis and controlled by the village council as a security against unexpected calamities and lean seasons. This only goes to demonstrate that sustainable exploitation of natural resources in the mountains is best organised by traditional and indigenous knowledge, rather than importing intensive agriculture on the name of modernization.

The present problem of deforestation and soil erosion blamed on jhum, needs to be analyzed within this context. Large-scale alienation of forest land in the region has led to high population pressure on the land, reducing the rotational cycle of the fields a number of times. This, hence, is not a problem of the inappropriateness of jhum cultivation itself, but that of sustainable development through indigenous resource rights and its violation by the state.

### **Cultural and Spiritual Heritage**

The Himalayan Region has rich cultural traditions. In the preservation of this priceless heritage, artists and poets of the hill regions have an important responsibility to pass on their knowledge to the next generation. The Himalayan Mountains also have a unique place in the spiritual traditions of Indians. Regarded as "dev bhoomi", the land of the gods, the Himalayan region is sacred for both Hindus and Buddhists.

### **People's Participation**

Unless policies and programmes are truly pro-people, people are unlikely to participate. Several large-scale watershed management projects have been taken up in Garhwal by the Government of India. Although these projects claim to be committed to people's participation on paper, such participation is unlikely to occur. This is due to fundamental inconsistencies in policies. The practice of funding advanced training and building sophisticated research projects out of the budget of watershed projects must be stopped. In Uttar Pradesh, forest authorities claim to promote people's participation on one hand, yet are actively abolishing "van panchayats" (people's forest management councils), on the other hand.

### **Management by the People**

Political mechanisms are needed which promote people's management of resources. The "van panchayats", which put local forest management into the hands of the villagers, have had some success in parts of the hills. Similarly, some remarkable NGO initiatives based on promoting people's forest management have provided some excellent models. Such approaches should be studied, refined and promoted.

The national "Panchayati Raj" initiative aims at significant decentralization of political power and increased decision-making power to village panchayats. This process hits the potential to empower village people to manage essential resources. NGOs should study Panchayati Raj legislation and consider their own role in this emerging political process. On the issue of national park management, local people living in wildlife sanctuaries should be participants in the management of the park and should get some of the profits from park revenues.

### **Partnerships**

There is a need for better regional cooperation and the sharing of ideas and initiatives. Linkages between NGOs, as well as between NGOs and academic institutions working on similar issues need to be strengthened. Such partnerships can result in work which is better coordinated, as well as in development of new initiatives in sustainable mountain development.

## **An Alternative Development Paradigm**

NGOs must contribute to the important debate on alternate development paradigms. A narrow view of development in terms of increasing economic growth is unsustainable in a world of limited resources. A more holistic view of development needs to include concepts of ecosystem health, social justice, and spiritual and ethical values.

### ***Recommendations for Action***

Given the expressed concerns of the signatories to this document, we submit that some of the common action strategies for all people advocating for a just, equitable and sustainable mountain development are as follows:

Advocate for "Save HimaLaya", a campaign that has been going on in the Indian Himalayas since 1992 and endorse the Mohawk Mountain Conference Declaration which declared the special role of Himalaya as a unique fact of the world's cultural heritage and to the cultural importance of its spiritual contribution to mankind.

Advocate for development that:

- generates local wealth
- provide local investment opportunities
- benefits producers over consumers
- promotes small scale and sustainable schemes
- promotes micro as opposed to mega-watershed development schemes
- opposes displacement that does not have a sound rehabilitation policy
- promotes equal tourism

Press for planning that:

- includes local and regional priorities
- ensures peoples participation
- brings together NGO / activists / government representatives in joint collaboration
- protects local land rights

- resuscitates Van Panchayats or forests as common property
- upgrade skills development and livelihood opportunities of local inhabitants
- creates a special cadre of bureaucrats trained in hill development
- ensure that forest regulation i.e. forest bill does not counter local village development i.e.

### Panchayati Raj

Alter formal education to include:

- local needs / requirements
- local history / culture indigenous knowledge promotion of indigenous livelihoods
- enhancement of local skills development

### *Conclusion*

The importance of international meetings - like the forthcoming one of NGOs on global mountains - has less to do with negotiations and more to do with how one exploits these opportunities to convey common concerns in domestic settings. The global NGO meet is important in that it will legitimize the concerns of local people which is important in our work with the grassroots, namely to gain a greater margin of control over the exploitation of natural resources so that local people can benefit but not to the exclusion of sustaining the mountain environment.

This challenge has been addressed, in part, by examples of environmental activism under social movements in the hills. But it continues to be a challenge in future. With greater collaboration among NGOs and the state structures and private concerns, we can begin to work with equal enthusiasm on equitable distribution in a sustainable environment.

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### Sri Bhuvaneshari Mahila Ashram (SBMA)

The Sri Bhuvaneshwari Mahila Ashram, (SBMA) is a non-governmental organization working in the Garhwal Himalayas of northern UP, India. The SBMA runs an integrated development programme in the hills comprising of activities relating to health, education and village development, coordinated through six subcentres located in four districts of Garhwal. The Ashram functions on the philosophy of 'service through labour and education by example.' Its community development strategy through the involvement of women has been derived from an integrated understanding of mass social movements of other nations. Besides its many successes in the field of social reform, the Ashram has also undertaken awareness-building, skills impartation and entrepreneurship as well

as disaster-relief work in the hills. It trains resource person in the field of community development in order to disseminate its initiatives widely.

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### **South-South Solidarity**

South-South Solidarity is working with NGOs among the countries of the South on various issues falling within the broader context of sustainable development. As a developing movement, South-South Solidarity recognizes the need to strengthen cooperation and to respond to the structural crisis between the North and the South. The thrust of all the programmes is to sensitize people across the borders to share similar problems and promote inter-regional exchanges and understanding. In the course of South-South Solidarity's development, many channels for cooperation between NGOs in several African and South Asian states on a policy and programme level are being forged to evolve a more innovative approach to development.

As a part of its continuing efforts in studying and documenting watershed areas with a view to devise strategies for sustainable community - centred development initiatives, South-South has, in conjunction with the SBMA and Prof Jayanta Bandyopadhyay, launched an initiative to study the selected regions in the Himalayas. It is the belief of South-South that the near future will see the emergence of a concrete mountain agenda that respects the interests of people living in the world's mountains.

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Acknowledgements from the authors:

The editors of this publication acknowledge the contribution of over one hundred people from the regions of Kumaon and Garhwal in the UP Himalaya.

The basic text was prepared by Dr Karen Kumar of Dehradun with input from Cyril Raphael, Jayanta Bandyopadhyay, Rahul Sen and Jill Carr-Harris.

The following people from South-South Solidarity were involved in the production:

Executive Editor: Jill Carr-Harris

Assistant Editor: Niloy Banerjee

Layout and Design: Lakshmi Venkatarayan and Ravi Sharma

Cover Transparency: Vinay Aditya

Production: South-South Solidarity, New Delhi

Typing: Harish Bhatia

Printing: Wordtronic

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We wish to acknowledge the participation and contribution of hundreds of people and institutions (both government and non-government) who have helped make this document a reality. The interest and concern to feed into the global consultation of UNCSD has been inspiring and endorses that 'more important than the issue of growth is a rise in the desire to be in control of one's own collective future.'

Special thanks are due to the following people:

1. Keshav Desiraju (MEF)
2. Jan Poullisse (FAO)
3. Prof. A.N. Purohit
4. Dr Shekhar Pathak
5. Mr Ghanshyam Sailani
6. Dr Jayanta Bandyopadhyay
7. Prof. Tewari
8. Ms Jill Carr-Harris
9. Mr Rahul Sen
10. Dr Abate T.W. Kirkos
11. Mr Singhvi
12. Ms Singhvi
13. Mr Ravi Chopra
14. Dr Tripathi, Ranichauri
15. Dr Singh, Ranichauri
16. Dr Ranichauri
17. Ad. Awadh Bihari Pant

18. Ad. Krishna Methani
19. Ad. Virendra Painuly
20. Mr Hem Goirala
21. Sardar Prem Singh
22. Ms Sonali Bist
23. Ms Mobini Rai
24. Mr Kainthora
25. Mr Vikram Singh Bist
26. Mr JagUish Balodhi
27. Mr Suresh Khandurie
28. Mr Jaiprakash Panwar
29. Mr Evan Goldsmith
30. Dr Pradeep Kumar
31. Dr Karen Kumar
32. Dr Satyendra Srivastava
33. Mr Natwar Thakkar
34. Representative, Doon Valley Watershed
35. Representative F.R.I.
36. Dr Shamsheer Singh Bist
37. Dr R. Nautiyal, NABARD
38. Mr Martin Pinto, FCA
39. Mr Girdha Ji
40. Mr Rajiv Lochan Shah
41. Prof. RP. Gaurd
42. Dr P.C. Joshi
43. Mr Anand Singh Bist
44. Mr Jagat Singh Chaudhury
45. Mr Bharat Patwal
46. Mr Kalyan Singh Rawat
47. Mr Brahmanand Shastri
48. Ms Padma Bhen
49. Ms Jagdambah Ratouri
50. Mr Ramesh Pahali
51. Mr P.C. Tewari
52. Mr Harpal Singh Negi
53. Ms Chankhi Devi
54. Ms Sona Devi
55. Ms Kadambari Devi
56. Ms Kamla Dev

NGOs, University faculty, students, womens groups, workers groups, pradhans and all interested in the hills.

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Notes to readers

This is a draft paper presented at the NGO Consultation on Sustainable Mountain Development, Lima, Peru. 22-25 February 1995.