

# Strategic Conclusions

Chapter Eight

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Eight



- Top            Preparing sloping land for cultivation in Godawari Demonstration Centre  
*File Photo*
- Middle       Water reservoir for irrigation at Godawari Demonstration Centre  
*File Photo*
- Bottom      Sloping Agricultural Land Technology (SALT) at Godawari Demonstration Centre  
*File Photo*

## Chapter Eight

# Strategic Conclusions

### Sources of Social and Environmental Change

This chapter summarises the strategic conclusions of this report. The more country-specific and sector-related conclusions are to be found at the end of Chapters 3–7. The context of land policy and its environmental impact in the Hindu Kush–Himalayan region is one of profound social and environmental change. Any strategic policy analysis must understand this context and be able not only to cope with but also to manage change. There are three interrelated aspects of change in the region that have important strategic policy implications. They are the prospects for economic growth in the region, the changing role of the state in environmental management, and the changing global environmental agendas.

- The region as a whole has, with a few notable exceptions, not registered a consistent and discernable improvement in the quality of life of the approximately 140 million inhabitants. Thus, poverty-related causes of environmental degradation seem set to dominate the agenda for the foreseeable future in most areas. The exceptions are, perhaps, some parts of the Chinese Himalayan provinces and autonomous regions and some pockets in the states of northwest India (e.g., Himachal Pradesh). There is a general consensus of continuing, and even increasing, levels of poverty in rural areas where reliable long-term studies have been undertaken. Other indicators of economic growth, in both agriculture and other sectors, usually make gloomy reading (except in some cases in China). The prospects of an increase of receipts for development budgets from national sources or from foreign aid also are not encouraging. In addition, considerable areas, mostly in the eastern Himalayas, are embroiled in insurgencies that are always a severe constraint for investment and growth. At the present time, major sources of revenue for the region are hydroelectric power, hydro-carbons, tourism, and forest resources. However, there are formidable technical

and political problems, as well as environmental ones, that have inhibited progress in the energy sector. In any case, there is no guarantee in the reality of politics that revenues from the sale of electricity and other energy resources would find their way back to the Hindu Kush–Himalayan region. Even tourism revenues are mostly appropriated by the state and private sectors based in urban areas. Thus, the region is poor and will conceivably remain so. In some ways, the lack of dynamic economic growth has put less pressure upon natural resource use, and the main problem area for environmental conservation is poverty with population growth that leads to non-sustainable adaptations of existing agricultural practices and wasteful technologies. However, where economic growth is taking place (e.g., Yunnan Province, China), a combination of unrestrained entrepreneurial expansion without clear property rights and the removal of state-ensured entitlements for the poor have led to severe land degradation in the recent past. It is not a matter of either sustainable livelihoods or development, as a number of publications about the region imply. So-called ‘development’ merely brings new opportunities and new threats to both people and environment. It redistributes these between people differentiated by gender, wealth, ethnic group and skills, and between areas. The case of commercial apple production in Himachal Pradesh is a case in point; a series of linked environmental challenges were thrown up and dealt with partly . The more extreme case of Yunnan Province illustrates the falseness of this dilemma. The town and village enterprises and the responsibility system have provided enormous opportunities for enrichment for those with the necessary social and financial capital, but for others it has increased their vulnerability and deprivation. Both the new rich and the new poor use the environment in non-sustainable ways. Thus, Yunnan Province, as many other provinces of China, has achieved high rates of economic growth and activity but with undoubted environmental costs. However, stagnant economic growth and poverty have also brought about environmental degradation (Blaikie 1985; World Bank 1992), in which the poor are forced to commit ‘desperate ecocide’. The conclusion that may be drawn is that the maintenance of natural capital (including the narrower notion of environmental conservation) can be maintained or degraded at all levels of development. As more development occurs, the environmental challenges change, but do not necessarily diminish.

- In general, at the global level, there has been a decline in the role of the state, specifically regarding environmental management. This is in part due to economic liberalisation and the policies of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, and in part due to a number of other factors that must lie outside the scope of this report. The Hindu Kush–

Himalayan region is also affected by this trend. The authority of central government (and with it the ability to impose its political will and implement its policies) has tended to wane, and expenditure on the public-sector wage bill has suffered severe reduction in most countries. Also, special interest groups have, through various means, been able to press their claims above others, and the state is less able to adjudicate between them in a rational manner. In many policy areas with important environmental implications, the ability of the state to implement laws and regulations has receded in almost every country of the region with some notable exceptions. Policing of forests, reserves, and parks, and clarifying the ambiguities in land ownership and use, have also become problematic. In the case of forestry and national parks particularly, colonial styles and sets of assumptions live on in new guises, but without the authority to police and coerce. Conditions of service in many government jobs connected to land policy have deteriorated, morale has suffered, and, in some sectors, corruption has increased substantially. Of course, these changes vary greatly across countries and sectors, but the generalisation holds for the region as a whole. This is not to advocate this trend, but to come to terms with it. It provides a powerful explanation for the failure to implement policies that rely on centralised public sector bureaucracies, charts out the limits of what can be expected of policy, and points to some alternative strategies in which the state takes a less commanding role in policy-making and implementation. Therefore, any recommendations about decentralised, participatory, and local management of natural resources not only arise from political and ethical arguments alone but from the economic realities that make the costs of control, policing, and implementation increasingly difficult to meet from public-sector funds.

- The third change is not so much about changes in civil society, the state and policy-making themselves, but the way in which these changes are viewed by global opinion. In Chapter 3, this report discussed three paradigms of environmental policy, each of which inform the policy process. New concerns about the environment, equity issues, gender, and governance have been finding their way on to international development agendas, often backed by informal leverage or formal conditions in loan agreements. Of course, conditions of inequality and social exclusion have always been there, but it is only now that they are international issues that national policy is being forced to address them. Many of them run counter to the professional and cultural norms of the policy elites and administrative cadres of the region. Gender issues, for example, are seldom addressed in most of the almost exclusively male professions, and few see the point in taking this and other issues seriously. This is again one of the major reasons why

particular aspects of these new priorities are honoured on paper but not in practice. Examples, discussed in this study, include handing the management of forests back to communities, initiating effective participatory agricultural research, ensuring women have an effective day-to-day say in the management of forests, and ensuring that the registration of the land in titling exercises effectively incorporates the claims of the poor and of women. Thus, different bureaucratic cultures and national politics, already under pressure from cutbacks and loss of legitimacy, face new and challenging social and environmental agendas from the international community

## **The Theory of Himalayan Environmental Crisis**

Any report that deals with environmental policy in the Hindu Kush–Himalayan region cannot avoid taking a view in the theory of Himalayan crisis. Nor is this study in a position to add anything substantive to an area of research that has attracted a prodigious amount of attention. It is an issue that arouses deep-seated passions in conservationists, mountaineers, forest intellectuals, professional foresters, natural scientists, and academics. It is certainly difficult to judge whether there is, indeed, a general trend of environmental degradation in the Hindu Kush–Himalayan region. The scientific evidence grows in volume but fails to provide clear and simple answers. One of the problems seems to be that many have asked too simple a question and expected an answer that there is, or is not, an environmental crisis. Some authors such as Thompson and Warburton (1986) have taken the view that scientific study can never give unequivocal answers because 'the institutions are the facts', and that an inappropriate type of science is being applied — a one-way, rational and objective process that can uncover 'the truth'. There are, particularly in the Hindu Kush–Himalayan region, so many practical and institutional challenges to the cumulative uncovering of the truth about environmental change that some claims about reality are patently ridiculous (e.g., the much-quoted case of the lowest and highest estimates of fuelwood consumption in the region differs by a factor of 57). Our own view is much more optimistic about the contribution of natural science to knowledge in the region (though, as we say below, we are not convinced that natural science has a major role in environmental policy-making). There has been an increasing number of authoritative studies of changes in forest cover, soil fertility, erosion, landslides, geomorphology, and orogenics, to mention a few, that do not make unsubstantiated claims, and which have added to our appreciation of the complexity and diversity of natural processes in the region. Social science studies in great numbers have also shown the diversity of resource-management practices, adaptations, and strategies of farmers and

pastoralists. Many too, frame problems, choose participatory methodologies, and interpret results in ways that are socially relevant to stakeholders in the environments being studied. We, therefore, reject the more extreme views of writers such as Guthman (1997) who reduce the production of knowledge of the Himalayan region to what the powerful (the policy elites, international agencies, and leading experts) want to say and deny that it is possible to say anything 'real' about nature at all.

However, a summary view has to be taken on this issue since it directly affects our view on the importance of land degradation in policy-making. It may be summarised in five brief points as follow.

- Substantial agreement among stakeholders about the meaning of environmental degradation and whether it is occurring in a particular locality is possible in many cases — however, it needs a favourable political environment for that agreement to be negotiated.
- There are environmental problems in some areas for some people some of the time, and some of these are probably serious — there are no grounds for universal complacency, just as there are none for a universal 'crisis' mentality.
- The description of the environmental situation in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region as a 'crisis', at least in its early forms (e.g., Eckholm 1975), is probably overstated.
- It is difficult to take sides on the relative contribution of anthropogenic versus natural causes of degradation for lack of reliable, concrete time series' data and major disagreements about extent and quantities of parameters.
- One must be aware that the reproduction of the 'crisis' in policy and international circles benefits almost everyone in terms of professional affirmation of one's role, for attracting funding, justifying intervention, and so on, and this is why the crisis narrative survives.

## **Impact of Land Policy and Land Degradation**

What difference has land policy made? The problems of providing an analysis based on evidence has been discussed in Chapter 2, but it is still possible to identify the environmental impact of some land policies. It would be premature to condemn land policy as ineffective in the region, as its complete absence might have led to an even worse environmental outcome. The Indian forest service is a case in point, although many of the detrimental environmental consequences of the official management of forests were diverted elsewhere. Nonetheless, the history of conservation on the part of the service is full of examples of both periods of wasteful and

destructive use of the forest under imperial rule and of responsible conservation (Grove et al. 1998). It is undoubtedly true that the service today protects forests against the people who would use it — and eventually cut it down. In spite of the curtailment of local environmental entitlements, much of the forest still standing today in the western hills of India is due to 100 years of forest policy. The see-saw changes of policy and political change in China have also had profound environmental impacts. Owing to the high degree of mobilisation on the part of the local people and the real productivity gains that current reforms have made possible, economic growth has been favoured at the expense of environmental protection. Extensive legislation is largely ignored. The point is that, in China, economic policy has made a difference in achieving increased growth rates. As the current direction towards individual production contracts on medium-term leases (but not titling) and social differentiation takes place, it is possible that future potential mobilisation and enthusiasm for public works will decrease. China will then face even worse environmental degradation for reasons similar to those in the other countries in the region. The unprecedented floods of last year stimulated much internal debate, and the admission by usually complacent Chinese authorities indicates that the process has already begun.

There are also cases in which there was unintentional land degradation as a result of land policy. These include the nationalisation of forests in Nepal, a coercive conservation areas' policy in Khunjerab, and pest problems resulting from the monoculture of potatoes in the Northern Areas of Pakistan. Some of these, such as the potato monoculture, are coincidental and unintentional, as, in the absence of other options, farmers in the resource-poor Northern Areas look to cultivating a niche product for markets in the plains.

Another issue that we have observed throughout the region concerns the linkage and synergy between the public and private domain within the arena of land resources. Land-based activities, irrespective of ownership and title of the parcel of land in question, are largely influenced by public decisions, policies at work, and even wider private domain responses from communities, local government units, and so on. Degradation, either as a natural process or because of anthropogenic causes, is happening throughout the region, notwithstanding the merit or otherwise of the 'Himalayan environmental crisis' thesis discussed earlier. However, for an individual farmer or for a settled farming community as a whole, the response to this degradation process — e.g., a minor landslip or consistent erosion and debris flow from upper reaches, siltation of irrigation channels and the like — is costly and causes hardship to most people. The divide

between private and public responsibility and management of surrounding natural resources in the Himalayan region echoes too often the tragedy of the commons' syndrome. In the areas where the country studies chose to conduct field research, we observed too many such instances. In Yunnan Province, we noticed silted irrigation channels and precarious hills along highways scarred by past strip-mining and clear-felling. Instead of reclaiming the channel, people have resorted to constructing newer and smaller channels and reservoirs. Obviously, the commune, with large human resources at its disposal, is no longer there to mobilise and command people to undertake earthworks. In Syangja District in Nepal, we noticed a perennial landslip threatening cropland (homesteads have already been moved because of the continuous instability). However, no collective action to remedy the situation has been forthcoming. The root cause is the replacement of traditional social organisations by formal local institutions that have not performed their tasks. The push for decentralisation and politicisation of local institutions are perhaps second generation problems of local governance that simply do not live up to expectations. Such policy directives and administrative changes have already destroyed the existing traditional organisations with their inherent social capital and mobilisation potentials. In the eastern Himalayas, traditional local governance structures that have existed for centuries are also facing decay and maybe eventual extinction. In northeast India and the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, this is clearly visible where traditional authorities, such as the headman and karbari, are fading in the face of formal institutions such as the district council and union 'parishad' endorsed by the government.

There are also many examples of initiatives that are socially sustainable and have reduced or even reversed degradation. The neo-liberal model of pricing of 'free goods' from open-access resources has taken root as our country study in Kaski District in Nepal shows. The village itself is well endowed with natural resources, and alternative livelihood sources could be found by most. Also, the institution that oversees the operation of the market is dominated by the already wealthy — this is more or less inevitable. Other local institutions, which were formed under the community forestry programme, have proved viable, and have undoubtedly improved the forest condition. However, there too, in some cases, livelihood entitlements have been abrogated, especially for the already landless and poor (Graner 1997). The forerunner of this policy (the Nepal-Australia Forestry Project) was eventually adopted as national policy, and is an example of where local initiatives, their successes, and (some) failures found their way on to international and national policy agendas.

## New Directions, Old Problems

Most policy documents that have international authorship and financial backing are coherent, well thought out, and theorised, and are the product of skilled and experienced planners. Yet they often remain ineffective policies — paper exercises that are difficult to implement. Why?

- Some policies have a long history of ground experience in the field. They have stood the test of time but are overtaken by new pressures and changes from civil society and the state. The majority of forest services in the subcontinent are feeling these contradictions at this time. Some policies, driven by new styles of development and new social agendas, require such fundamental changes to established bureaucratic and cultural practices for their implementation that they create various strategies of resistance within the civil service and other stakeholders. National environmental strategies and community forestry are two examples. Other policies may be new and have a fresh scientific justification, but their implementation, on paper at least, can be grafted on to existing policies and supported by existing professional attitudes. These new policies then face new and inherited problems from their 'host' institutions. Wildlife projects, national parks, sanctuaries and bioserves are such examples. In a few cases, environmental policies break new ground altogether in the administrative experience of a country. Here, new relationships within chains of command in the bureaucracy and with the people must be developed. The Kingdom of Bhutan, which is developing new government structures, is such a case, where there is evidence of learning from the mistakes of others and of being able to avoid creating a centralised and coercive style of land policy.
- These pervasive problems facing land policy are shared across the policy spectrum. They are currently termed in policy debates as issues of governance. A policy analysis of even the most technical and applied nature implies the more general and structural problem of governance. Social justice, transparency, accountability, and professional standards are the main characteristics of good governance. Some aspects of existing organisational cultures, values, and processes of civil services in the region may also be obstacles to good governance. Also, the socioeconomic changes described above have tended to undermine good governance further. Those land policies that rely most upon state departments are clearly most affected. Rent-seeking behaviour, foot-dragging and a basic lack of technical and management skills on the part of politicians and forestry officials are symptoms. There are a number of case studies in this report that illustrate the environmental

impacts of the absence of good governance and failures of implementation. However, a downward spiral is not inevitable, as shown by the case of the management of community forestry in Nepal. In spite of resistance from many professionals at all levels, corruption and other policy perverse behaviours have probably decreased through time.

- There is a 'more paper, less practice' tendency. All policies have to become made into a routine before they can be implemented. New demands, which may be implicit in a policy (e.g., personal initiative and benign discretion), remain unacknowledged and are either not done or are subsumed under old labels and categories. For example, a policy of greater participation in agricultural research and extension, biodiversity conservation, and forestry can be subverted to a number of targets. These targets do not represent the intention of the new policy at all, which is much more of a process than a meeting of quantitative targets. For example, monthly reports of many departments list the number of women's groups, number of women in community forestry, number of participatory rural appraisal meetings, number of nurseries established, number of saplings planted — all these hide the radical intention of new land and environmental policies and remain merely number/target oriented and devoid of process. Indeed, such strategies, of reduction of intention to previous bureaucratic routine, are types of resistance. There is good evidence that this is the case in the forestry service of many countries, and of male-dominated professions faced with implementing policies in a gender-sensitive way.
- A challenge for any organisation is to manage change. This change is impacting upon the environment, the people who manage it and live through it, and the policy-makers who seek to change or conserve it. Policies can provide no more than an enabling environment and be an expression of intent to meet broad goals. To proceed, organisations have to become learning organisations in which new behaviours and practices become necessary. New knowledge is becoming available all the time, e.g., understanding about the environmental outcome of certain actions and about the politics of local institutions that favour or disfavour effective social and environmental outcomes. However, there is too little evidence that they reach the public domain and are picked up for critical discussion by policy elites. Many and diverse initiatives are being taken all the time, often by NGOs and community-based organisations. They may be successful or disastrous, but they are not effectively evaluated, collated, and entered into leading policy discourses. As Chambers (1993) says failures can have valuable lessons but they are all too often swept under the carpet. A critical policy discourse, which the major official stakeholders (national administrations) approach with open minds, is often lacking. Initiatives

as undertaken by multilateral institutions — ICIMOD and others — frequently receive short shrift. Junior delegates are sent to training courses or to internationally hosted policy debates, or they are unrepresented altogether. Transfer of postings and responsibilities of those professionals in whom investment has been made is another problem.

## **Specific Policy Recommendations**

Given the current poor economic growth in much of the region, and due to limited resource availability and economic opportunities, emphasis should be put on diversifying livelihoods for mountain people. Projects that assist this diversification, which is already well under way in the region, and, at the same time, do not deplete the natural resources, should be accorded highest priority.

Natural resource research networks linking research station and farmers need to be strengthened and efforts should be made to test and adapt, where necessary, conservation packages introduced from outside (i.e., SALT).

High-value crops, such as off-season vegetables, temperate and exotic vegetables and fruits, seed potato, and seeds for other vegetables have greater prospects in the mountains because of their value and low volume. Increasing income, gained from such products, can enhance the food security of mountain people and raise the value of land, making it more worthwhile for farmers to invest in its sustainability.

Location-specific issues such as micro-watershed management, soil fertility maintenance, and soil management at a micro-level should be addressed by governments, big international NGOs, NGOs, and local organisations, but, unlike the conventional research approach, more attention should be accorded to adapting to local conditions.

The forestry sector in the region still carries its classic orientation of command and control. Changes need to come in curricula and training methods to incorporate more on human natural resource interactions. Without this happening, efforts to increase social/community forestry programmes will suffer from lack of substance and direction. Trainees in social and community forestry are still discriminated against in postings and promotions in many countries.

Tourism has brought some real opportunities for mountain people to increase and diversify their income and employment opportunities. However, attention needs to be focused on the distribution and retention of

benefits in the areas that tourists visit. There are efforts in the region (ICIMOD-sponsored research and training is a good example) to increase awareness and find ways of sharing benefits with local communities from tourism income. Regional governments may work according to these guidelines to increase benefits from tourism receipts to local communities.

Bioreserves and wildlife sanctuaries in the region are still dominated by academic and scientific interests. Benefits from such places still seem esoteric and remote to local people. Promotion of eco-tourism in the highly attractive and resourceful wildlife sanctuaries of the region can go a long way towards realising benefits for the local people. This is critical for the success of the reserves as, often, people living within or in their vicinity have to forego income and resource extraction due to their establishment. However the actual realisation of the values of biodiversity may remain difficult in practice.

Due to the unique history and settlement pattern of mountain areas, land is often untitled creating legal and administrative problems for their users. Recognition of customary rights to land is a basic right for the original inhabitants of these areas. Failure to recognise such rights may lead to intensified short-rotation, shifting cultivation and other short-sighted uses of sloping land. This will certainly not be in the best interests of the environmental policies of the countries in the region.

Governments may consider examining multiple-resource tenure concepts instead of the prevalent single property rights and ownership focus. Mountain people have traditionally used surface water, pasture, and forest in addition to land for their livelihoods. Recognition and clear policy pronouncements of use rights for various resources will benefit mountain people.

Local institutions in the region are facing new challenges from the imposition of new formal structures (which are often failing). A thorough review of such substitution of local institutions is needed before a conclusive judgement can be made. However, it is sufficiently clear at this point that devolution of power and decision-making at the local level can remain a far cry if local institutions and traditional governance structures are completely pushed aside. The renewed interest of the global development community in institutions and rediscovery of the old social network concept (somewhat substituted now by the newer term social capital) for valid reasons suggests that policy planners concerned with poverty and good governance at least seek not to do harm to local institutions.

## New Strategic Inputs

- It is becoming a practical necessity that state institutions devolve much of the management of natural resources to local institutions. There is a populist rhetoric in development styles at the present time (discussed in Chapter 3). It has attracted considerable criticism (naïve, ideologically driven, consensus-seeking, conflict-avoiding, and ignorant of local politics). Also, aspects of populist environmental management are promoted by a more market-oriented approach. The previous classic approach of managing natural resources, well tested and historically long lived, is slowly breaking down. Increasing pressures on resources for both subsistence and commercial use, the waning of the legitimacy of the state, dwindling resources for policing, and a degree of demoralisation of many forestry and agricultural support services are the main reasons for this. Decentralisation and local participation, of course, are no panaceas, but to continue with centralised state-driven policies is not appropriate for the hills and is slowly becoming less and less practicable.
- The skills necessary for this transformation require continuous policy debate, new syllabuses, retraining, and new terms of reference for all government personnel. The role of environmental referee and monitor for the ministries involved with agriculture and environment will become increasingly important.
- The notion of an environmental contract with local organisations should be further explored. Already, the best community projects, with state or donor funds and expertise, involve different types of contract between a local institution and an outside agency. Current agreements between forestry services and local communities are also a form of contract but are negotiated under conditions of extreme inequality, and the latter are virtually presented with a 'take it or leave it' fait accompli. It may be possible to extend this notion of a more diverse and locally appropriate form of contract to include an economic, social, and environmental plan with rolling targets and intermediate goals. This would be discussed and negotiated with the new emerging local institutions, and simple indicators of contract fulfillment agreed upon between all parties.

The principle of environmental entitlements or rights to natural capital, as an essential part of a livelihood, should be recognised officially. Perhaps, in the same way as an environmental impact statement should precede any policy decision regarding an infrastructural project, a social audit that forces policy-makers to confront the implications of their actions for livelihoods should likewise be introduced. At present, the rights are struggled for

unofficially and ex post, in terms of poaching, lawlessness or more organised and violent action. Entitlements are wider and more fundamental than, for example, forest-user rights. The word entitlement refers to a fundamental right. When it is deemed necessary to abrogate these in the higher national interest, compensation must be paid. This principle is sometimes conceded but seldom honoured. There are many cases in which governments have reneged on promises of compensations — to the same unfortunate set of displaced people at different times. This process continues; nullifying the intent and spirit of all policies and governance goals, and bewildering local people with a policy that makes promises but does not fulfill them. It is tempting to make connections between land policies that increase central control and deny livelihood rights and the large number of separatist political movements and conflicts.