

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background

This is a study about government policies that bear on how the country's most valuable natural resource, land, is utilised and managed, how those policies have influenced the various land utilisation and management practices, and how such practices have contributed one way or the other to land degradation and the quality and sustainability of this resource.

It is a part of the series of country studies commissioned by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas. This study was coordinated by Dr. Zahir Sadeque and technically guided by Prof. Piers Blaikie.

The report is organized as follows. A brief review of the overall national framework for guiding development efforts with due regard for sustainability and maintenance of the environment is carried out in this section. Before embarking on the analysis of the five key areas of concern selected

for this study (agriculture, property and entitlement, forestry, national parks and wildlife, and decentralization [wild card]), the various perspectives on the very concept of land policy, land management, and land degradation are presented in the next section. Agriculture is discussed in Section 3, followed by property and tenure. Forests and national parks and wildlife are treated in Sections 5 and 6, respectively. Section 7 deals with decentralization, while the main conclusions of the study from all major areas covered are presented in the last section.

1.2 National Environmental Policy

The Nepal Environmental Policy and Action Plan (NEPAP) was prepared by the government in 1993 by engaging a team of specialists and with support from the World Bank. This document analyses the country's environmental issues in a multi-sectoral framework and sets forth a strategy for maintaining the country's natural environment and the health and safety of its population and its cultural heritage as

economic development occurs (EPC 1993, v). Below is a summary of HMGN's environmental policy, and sectoral policies related to agricultural land, forest, and rangelands and biodiversity conservation.

There are five main aims of HMGN's environmental policy (EPC 1993):

- to manage efficiently and sustainably natural and physical resources;
- to balance development efforts and environmental conservation for sustainable fulfillment of the basic needs of the people;
- to safeguard the national heritage;
- to mitigate the adverse environmental impacts of development projects and human action; and
- to integrate environment and development through appropriate institutions,

adequate legislation and economic incentives, and sufficient public resources.

It appears that Nepal's environmental policy incorporates the objective of reversing the land degradation problem, while being aware of the social and economic imperatives to meet the people's basic needs. Land degradation however is a difficult issue to conceptualise and much more so to prove its causes, magnitude, and consequences for various actors. Factors that play a key role in affecting land degradation are more difficult to understand than had conventionally been believed in the past. Before going into the details of Nepal's land policies and their impacts on land degradation, the next section provides an intellectual framework for understanding the issue of land degradation from various perspectives.