

1. Background

The Hindu Kush-Himalayan (HKH) mountains stretching around 2,500 kilometres from east to west and covering a vast expanse of 3.5 million square kilometres is home to more than 120 million people in eight South Asian countries. Never before in the region has the challenge of sustaining the livelihoods of an increasing and impoverished population on a degrading resource base been as monumental as it is today. The pace of change sweeping across the region and through the global economy has never been faster. The economic changes and improvements in human welfare that are taking place across the region and elsewhere would be meaningless if the large mountain population of the HKH, which represents the most marginalised populations of these countries, remains mired in endemic poverty with low levels of human and social development; and, at the same time, the rich but fragile natural resources of the region, a global heritage, continues to be degraded and lost forever. The economic and social development of mountain people and sustainable use of mountain natural resources must go hand in hand, and that is the challenge facing the HKH region today.

ICIMOD was established to promote sustainable development of the Hindu Kush-Himalayan (HKH) mountain areas. More than 120 million people from eight countries live in the HKH and most of them are poorer and more socially deprived than even their own fellow citizens, who constitute a significant portion of the so-called poorest of the poor in the world. The HKH inhabitants, are highly dependent upon the limited, readily extractable natural resources within their reach for their subsistence; and due to their lack of access to social, financial, and infrastructural capital, they are victims of endemic poverty and social deprivation. Therefore, sustainable management and development of the fragile ecosystem of the HKH areas will remain elusive unless the social and economic development of the already marginalised people inhabiting these areas are pursued vigorously through an eco-friendly and socially sound approach.

It is by now widely acknowledged that holistic development of a people not only depends upon an appropriate mix of policy and interventions, but is also largely dependent upon an understanding of their society, culture, and aspirations. Otherwise, policies and investments, however well intended and technically correct, will not bring about the desired changes. This is where a Social Science Perspective comes into play. By a Social Science Perspective, we simply state that, in addition to the dominant paradigms of development, i.e., Technological and Economic, it is very pertinent to realise that numerous other issues emanating from the broad 'Social and Cultural' domain, including the politico-institutional and historical processes, also shape the nature of things in society. This is particularly essential for development policies and interventions that have experienced failure, which is often due to the lack of attention to social and cultural (including institutional and organisational) issues. Nowhere is this more relevant than in the inaccessible and marginalised communities of the HKH

region which are ethnically diverse and often dispersed and fragmented within the boundaries of various nation states. Many mountain communities are minorities within their nation states, and, due to a variety of factors, are often not beneficiaries of mainstream development efforts. Tradition, heritage, and ethnic identity play far more important roles in the lives of mountain people than in the lives of more homogeneous communities in the plains. Also, due to the unique habitat, policies and interventions for mountain communities require a truly multi- and trans-disciplinary mountain-specific perspective that incorporates the multidisciplinary mountain specificities.

ICIMOD's activities, based on a thematic and programme-based approach, address the issues of sustainable mountain development through the multidisciplinary and problem-solving expertise at the Centre's disposal. The Social Science Perspective, hitherto generically subsumed by programmes and activities, will now be a cross-cutting theme with a designated focal person. Social Science Perspective here refers to both social anthropology and sociology, as they have essential overlapping commonalities. These are distinct from other branches of the social sciences, i.e., Economics, Political Science, and so on. However, it should be made clear at the outset that the social science perspective is essentially a broad one, incorporating the so-called social and cultural factors as well as issues and concepts such as 'institutions' and 'organisations' normally thought to be the preserve of Political Scientists. This perspective also takes into consideration the 'historical' view, for, without historical appreciation of changing societies and their values and structure, it may not be possible to realise why people behave the way they do. Thus, the Social Science Perspective can bring about not only a multidisciplinary view but also a trans-disciplinary one through which social scientists can contribute to other disciplinary inquiries. When this perspective is added to the existing economic and technological (natural science) perspectives, the combined effort can be a powerful tool for analysing society and the questions of development and environment in a more holistic manner than can be arrived at from the perspective of a single discipline. Examples of such assertions abound, some of which may be worth citing here. It is widely accepted that deforestation is a major cause of environmental degradation in ecologically fragile mountain areas. The reasons behind deforestation are mostly socioeconomic and so are the mitigation measures. Unless local communities are mobilised and given viable incentives and some form of control over local resources, reforestation of denuded hills will never be possible and, even if technological interventions take place, e.g., aerial seeding, reforestation efforts will still not be sustainable unless the participation of local people is ensured. This whole process requires inputs from social science, including economics.

The Social Scientist at ICIMOD has been urged to define the role and functions of the position by preparing a concept paper. The foremost role of a social scientist is to ensure that activities support 'social goals', just as an economist's main task is to ensure adoption of sound techniques of economic analysis and

adherence to attain economic goals. Within the broad area of development, social objectives; such as equality and non-discriminatory policies; access to basic social services; special measures for protection of the vulnerable; and, finally, taking into consideration the so-called social, cultural, and institutional-organisational aspects of human life that allow participation of the targeted population; comprise social goals. In support of this, a designated Social Scientist can perform both 'staff' and 'line' functions and provide a disciplinary perspective in support of activities.

In the context of 'staff' functions, these may include regulatory and analytical support, i.e., developing a framework for incorporating social considerations into project and programme development or reviews of and reports on social issues. In an organisation such as ICIMOD, engaged more in networking, research, and training, the staff function seems to be more important. It also dovetails with ICIMOD's involvement in experimental and pilot projects; as the Centre is not directly involved in investment-oriented project implementation activities. The social scientist's staff function here might include providing inputs on social issues and towards a socially- and culturally-sensitive methodological and substantive approach, as well as inputs into various areas such as mountain farming, natural resources' management, and enterprise and infrastructural development activities. For instance, in 'Tourism and Local Community Development', it is important to ensure that increased tourism does not trample upon the locally held social and cultural values, while it should explore, through the local community's social structure and institutions, how best to integrate increased income from tourism in order to translate it into local community development activities. Total dependence on conventional economic planning techniques may not provide enough insight to attain the objectives of community development through tourism in unique hill communities. The point here is to highlight the underlying social organisational factors that support economic activities, particularly for community development activities that have resulted from increased revenues generated through tourism. The centrality of a social and cultural approach is referred to here, while not undermining the economic approach, for, without considering the economic imperatives or adopting the economic planning techniques, projects will not be sustainable or comprehensive enough to attract the people's interest.

The 'line' function, broadly meaning project management duties, may incorporate project monitoring (particularly for the adaptive changes deemed necessary through monitoring the findings) and 'Impact Assessment'. These functions may also be quite critical in view of the importance of an integrated, team approach to project management. This is particularly relevant for ongoing projects of a biological/physical nature which have potential for social and cultural concerns. The other critical contribution of the line function could be to undertake quick but well-rounded impact assessments of completed activities, rather than carrying out conventional evaluation studies that consume more time and resources but which often do not reveal significant findings.

Further, 'in between' activities could include development of appropriate training modules, or participating in various training activities as a specialised resource person, and advisory services whenever the social science input is deemed necessary and important.