

3. The Social and Cultural Agenda

The social and cultural agenda, in analysing the state of development and sustainability, is recently gaining increasing acceptance from all quarters. The UNDP-sponsored annual publication the 'Human Development Report' is a powerful and strong advocate of this approach. The considered opinion now is that human progress cannot be measured by economic growth alone. To attain continued and sustainable human development, attention must be given to opportunities for social development. Critical social and cultural issues that either

strengthen or thwart human progress, with or without economic growth, need to be considered. This is also true for ecological sustainability. Without being attentive to economic compulsions and social and cultural issues, maintaining the integrity of the ecosystem will remain as elusive as ever. The quest for economic growth through the increased efficiency of production systems and the desire for continued conservation of bioresources will remain unfulfilled, if the ideas forming the interventions are socially and culturally ill-informed or ill-conceived; in which case the affected people and expected beneficiaries will not participate in the implementation of the activity, as they will not have a feeling of ownership; and projects will likely fail if they do not meet the stated objectives. Development projects that have failed to attain their purported goals are not difficult to find, and their failures can be largely attributed to such a lack of understanding. The premise that 'economies exist for people — not people for economies' (Speth 1996), or for that matter ecosystems, must be embraced in order to attain sustainable development of people, economies, and ecosystems. Having advocated the importance of social and cultural issues in the approach to sustainable development, let us now lay out, *inter alia*, an agenda for incorporating social and cultural knowledge.

Social science can be put to use in the analysis of a given situation and beyond, by being predictive and prescriptive. This is a new realisation on the part of social scientists, as well as a new appreciation of the role of social science on the part of project planners and others. That power of social analysis can be transformed into positive social action for change (Cernea 1995) is a growing realisation on the part of the social science community in their quest for being heard by the world at large. Understanding and acceptance of such a premise indicate that sociological knowledge should be incorporated before designing a project or activity and not simply in an ex-post evaluation or critique of what went wrong (Cernea 1985). This realisation also lays out an agenda for social scientists for pursuing the goal of sustainable development. However, it is important to reiterate that the social science perspective should be viewed from the perspective of the social science specificity, which is sufficiently broad but not necessarily all-encompassing enough to render it too superficial and without introspection and focus. Too often, social science has been viewed through other disciplinary perspectives and parameters. To illustrate this point, it is helpful to point out that, to other disciplines, social science is often a 'residual' science that focusses on issues (not taken care of by these disciplines. At the same time, it is also worthwhile to mention that social science is also often viewed opportunistically by other disciplines. For instance, economists would like the social scientist to look at poverty and inequality issues, which to them are more social than technical economics; while physical and biological scientists expect the social scientist to explain why people are averse to some technologies or improved practices that are found to be highly responsive in the laboratory situation. Such flawed tendencies not only render the social science perspective a mere appendage to other sciences, but also diminish the utility of the complete

and holistic framework social science can offer. This attitude also writes off the integrated approach in which all disciplines are supposed to be co-partners.

To emphasise the importance of the social science approach, it is essential to define the terms, social and cultural, so that they are properly understood, contextualised, and do not convey differential and conflicting meanings to different people. Although the terms are a part of our very basic vocabulary, a clear definition is needed to delineate the boundaries of the terms; this is much more than an exercise in semantics. By 'social', we mean those activities that are external to individuals (separating sociology and anthropology from psychology) and not primarily resulting from non-social motivations, e.g., economic, political, or religious. Here, it is important to dispel certain popular misconceptions about sociology, which studies society (interactions) and social forms (organisations) and not individuals and their motivations or actions, which are the prerogative of psychology. Therefore, the term encompasses the social relationships of groups and institutional structures that govern people's lives in society. However, it would be erroneous to assume that anything social is independent of the economic and political and vice versa. In the human world, everything is so interrelated and intertwined to such an extent that strict separation is not feasible.

By 'cultural', to give a more comprehensive definition — culture is a way of life which covers tangible, intangible, material, and non-material aspects. Perhaps this defines the term best. Therefore, culture is not merely rites and rituals, but it also covers people's world view, relationships with technology, political structure, indigenous knowledge about resources and their use, and even preference for economic and subsistence activities. This comprehensive view of culture, is, therefore, essential for many development activities. This particularly applies to activities for the success of which the participation and support of local inhabitants are needed. To achieve that support and participation one must take into account the culture and way of life of the intended beneficiaries. ICIMOD projects such as those on Ethnobotany, Rangeland Management, People and Resource Dynamics, and Sloping Agricultural Land Technology (SALT), to mention a few, all require an understanding of the project areas' inhabitants' culture and could benefit immensely from such an approach. Specifically, the agenda for social scientists engaged in sustainable mountain development (recognising the unique specificities of a mountain region with its people and ecosystem) could include the following issues (Box 1).

The issues identified above take cognizance of the mountain specificities and are indicative of the major areas of concern for social science in sustainable mountain development, but this list is in no way exhaustive and is not in order of priority. These issues broadly cover stratification; rites and rituals; gender roles; economic activities; organisational forms, political rights, and structure; policy and regulatory structure; knowledge systems; and development aspirations of their communities vis-à-vis the nation states that these mountain communities

Box 1

- Social Organisation of Communities
- Ethnic and Cultural Identities and Aspirations
- Gender Roles in Society
- Institutional and Policy Issues
- Participation, Decision-making, and Customary Rights
- Social Mobility and Fulfillment of Felt Needs
- Social Cohesion and Integration
- Traditional Production Systems and Indigenous Knowledge
- Social Processes Related to Impoverishment/Vulnerability
- Access to, Alienation and Exclusion from Resources

inhabit. These concepts/issues are sufficiently important and comprehensive enough for all societies. However, they are part of a generic framework that needs to be developed into workable and field-tested indicators and operationalised for the benefit of non-social science researchers and project managers, if they are to apply these perspectives to their work. It is beyond the scope of this paper to develop along this line, but a short compendium paper will be developed later which will identify and develop the process of incorporation of social and cultural variables into the HKH mountain-specific applied research, training, and development programmes and into project planning.

The above issues, as part of the Social and Cultural Agenda for ICIMOD, are a comprehensive list of issues that can be incorporated into the mandatory functions, e.g., Documentation Networking, Applied Problem Solving Research, and Training and Advisory Services. The challenge here is to integrate these issues into all ICIMOD activities, which are not necessarily project-oriented, whereas the approach incorporating social issues has so far largely derived from the project perspective. Social scientists have developed these concepts with the aim of incorporating them into (investment) project activities. But here, for the purpose of ICIMOD, we have to use them creatively to get the most out of these issues which are generic to societies and interventions.