5. Social and Cultural Sensitivity in Sustainable Mountain Development

Mountain Specificities and Mountain Perspectives

Mountain areas, particularly the HKH areas, are characterised by the uniqueness of diverse ethnic and religious communities, usually cut off from one another due to natural divides. The HKH areas also spread across at least eight countries, with differential composition within the national population. With the exception of Bhutan, and to some extent Nepal, mountain communities are a minority within the remaining six countries. Therefore, mountain specificities and perspectives have to take into account their position and relationship within their nation states.

ICIMOD has been at the forefront in studying the HKH mountain communities and the mountain issues as they affect the communities with a specialised mountain perspective (Banskota 1993). Over the years, the mountain perspective has produced mountain specificities (Jodha 1990). The so-called mountain specificities, 'Inaccesability', 'Fragility', 'Marginality', 'Diversity', and their specific 'Niche', describe the characteristics of HKH mountain areas.

Mountain areas, due to their characteristics and opportunities, present this set of specificities. They have their attendant imperatives and should follow situation-specific development strategies. Thus, inaccessability is a product of slope, altitude, and seasonal hazard; fragility is due to slope, altitude, and the corresponding geologic, edaphic and biotic characteristics; marginality is conditioned by the preceding specificities, especially in relation to mainstream non-mountain areas; and diversity is due to all the other specificities and complemented by human adaptations and settlement patterns. All these specificities also produce their specific niches which are due to unique environmental parameters,

human adaptation, and thus also present a set of corresponding opportunities. Although the environmental settings influence the specificities, the social dimensions are nonetheless present in each of these. Thus, physical inaccessability also produces social inaccessability and, to overcome such constraints, an appropriate media and information flow strategy also merits attention. Likewise, fragility leads to vulnerability of communities in terms of food security and income potentials. Similarly, diversity is as social a characteristic as it is physical. Marginality is more of a socioeconomic term, and the physical factors conditioning such a characteristic are unique not only to mountain areas but to other marginal areas also. All these social characteristics of the specificities are important interfaces of the mountain specificities in general.

However, as with any theoretical framework or construct, these characteristics cannot be applied uniformly across the board, and there is a danger of oversimplification inherent in such approaches that may lead to compartmentalisation and designation of areas and communities. However, a specific mountain perspective can be of great value in studying mountain areas with a mountain focus, rather than being overwhelmed by conventional wisdom and approaches in development. Undoubtedly, mountain areas are different and unique, exhibiting characteristics not commonly found in other areas, e.g., in the plains. Hence the necessity of a specialised mountain perspective.

The generalised conceptualisation of mountain perspectives follows from the mountain specificities. The human and social aspects and potentials of mountain communities in adjusting to life in harsh conditions and their resilience must be emphasised, as well as the specific physico-biological potentials of the mountain ecology which provide alternative means of making a living. Mountain communities have historically dealt with population pressures through migration and through opening up new territories; and overexploitation of resources has been dealt with by diversifying income-earning potentials and through new rules governing the use of common resources. However, such moves have often been constricted by coercive means exercised by central authorities, e.g., restricting trade and other methods (Bista 1991). Notwithstanding, mountain people have continued to be inventive in finding alternative means of subsistence. This is the positive endowment that conventional thinking often misses, and thus reminds us about the utility of methods, such as PRA, that build from local knowledge, insight, and preference ranking to devise sustainable alternative options for mountain communities. Social science methods are also important, as they add participatory processes and take into account issues sensitive to beneficiary communities; issues that are often ignored or overlooked by outside experts who use conventional methods based on dominant paradigms.

Settlement and Historical Evolution of HKH Communities

Unlike the civilisations in the river basins of the HKH region, the historical evolution of mountain communities is relatively less known. Historical research, al-

though it mentions places like Nepal and Kamrup (Assam) in the pre-Christian era (PCE) (Bista 1991) and that the Bactrian empire in the Upper Punjab and Northern Pakistan followed the Macedonian invasion (also PCE), the rest of the HKH region remain in relative obscurity. It is believed, however, that the Hindu Kush and the Western Himalayas were settled by Aryan migrants from Central Asia. In the Eastern Himalayas, settlements began much later, and were settled by Tibeto-Burmese ethnic groups (Roy Burman 1990, Shelley 1992). The Chittagong Hill Tracts were first settled by Arakanese groups following the Burmese invasion of Arakan in the fifteenth century.

Early Nepalese history reports the settlement of the *Kirat* people of Tibetan ethnic origin in eastern areas beyond the Sunkosi, the central areas by the *Magar*, and beyond the Karnali by the *Khas* people of northwestern Indian ancestry (Bista 1991). Settlement of hill areas also evolved into fiefdoms, often incorporated into larger kingdoms, either on ethnic lines or as an agglomeration of similar groups. The eastern Indian and Chittagong Hill tribes have been subjected to a history of intermittent suzerainty and vassalage exercised by central empires based in Northern India. After the British colonisation of South Asia, most of these hill communities remained outside the colonial adminstration, depriving them of the so-called 'Regenerative' aspect of colonisation and capitalism. However, through trade and the proselytising activities of Christian missionaries, contacts with the western world and central authorities were established. The same is the case with communities in northern Myanmar, despite Burma's annexation by the British. Nepal and Bhutan remained outside direct British Control, but civil society, particularly in Nepal, established links with India. The fiercely independent *Pashtun* tribes of northern and western Pakistan were never brought under colonial administration and, along with their neighbours in Afghanistan, maintained their own political and social identities. The Tibetan Plateau, due to its inaccessibility and due to the fact that it was not in the path of major historical movements, remained outside Central and South Asian influences and empires.

Hence, it is evident that most HKH areas remained relatively isolated from larger and powerful external forces with their different social, political, and religious identities and technologies. Therefore, a hamlet-oriented society evolved in the area, characterised by limited trade and largely self-reliant, closed economies, with little diffusion and cultural contact with the outside world, particularly the adjoining plains. This isolationism may have contributed to religious syncretism in some parts of the region and the existence of shamanistic and animistic religious traditions. Due to the physiographic barriers on people's movement, and as a result of being outside the colonial administrative authority, the HKH region evolved into a unique pattern shaped by the dominance of mountain ecology and physical endowments. Fragmented by mountains and powerful rivers, communities have grown into atomistic units with characteristics and cultural manifestations that are unique and often uncommon among similar ethnic groups. To this has been added the sporadic and often unsuccessful attempts at impos-

ing a caste hierarchy and 'Sanskritisation' by the ruling elites (Bista 1991; Roy Burman 1990). Such attempts have not constrained syncretic traditions and indigenous patterns have survived, despite the forces of authority.

The historical evolution of hamlet-oriented enclaves is under increasing pressure from outside forces. Modern education, transportation links, mass media, and contagious acculturation with the influx of tourists are affecting the culture and way of life of mountain communities. Social and cultural changes are inevitable and mainstreaming forces are always at work.

Social Knowledge, Institutions, and Local Organisations

The prefacing of the term 'development' with 'sustainable' since the 1980s has helped interpret and define development in a more holistic way, including concerns for environmental considerations, poverty, inequality, gender, and finally social and cultural factors, all of which contribute towards linking development with human welfare. In Section Four of this paper, the various approaches to Social Analysis were discussed. Together they provide a very comprehensive methodology and content for social analysis that can contribute to the formulation of projects that are socially and culturally sustainable. But the framework is generic (as are all methods and tools), and it is useful to focus on relevant issues with mountain-specific illustrations.

From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that mountain communities have evolved differently and, because of the sheer physically limiting factors, are a distinct entity compared to the plains; and as our ideas about development are largely derived from our experiences of the latter, it is crucial that we make this distinction in developing a framework for mountain development.

Mountain communities, due to a lack of alternative opportunities, are extremely dependent upon the surrounding natural resource base for their survival. Employment, incomes, and subsistence are largely derived from farming and other natural resource extraction. Traditional productivity-increasing measures, such as, seed-fertilizer-water technology, improved breed and input-based animal husbandry, and the conventional production forestry type of approaches, are of limited value in mountain areas, not only because of environmental considerations but also because of their social and cultural unsustainability. Mountain communities, for a number of reasons, are subsistence-oriented. Therefore, agricultural technologies for them must also consider their needs for a wholesome and socially satisfying life. This should include their traditional food habits, taboos, ceremonial requirements, and opportunities for development of surplus-generating commodities. The improvement of genetic and agronomic potentials of subsistence varieties, therefore, should be accorded priority. Desirability of crops should be looked into, not only from the quantity or the economic value angle but also in relation to the dietary-nutritional and the cultural-social needs. Above all, new and exotic crops may not always be successful, as

the people cultivating them may not have the knowledge and experience for these varieties. Furthermore, new and untried varieties could pose greater economic and agronomic risks which people will be unable to handle.

The so-called 'model' or 'lead-farmer approach' in agricultural extension has often provided the right boost to the best endowed farmer to improve his productivity. This has contributed to the growing inequality associated with the 'Green Revolution'. In mountain areas, this would be socially and culturally unsound and would create disintegration of otherwise cohesive societies. The value of trust and mutual cooperation in societies, for human and social capital formation, was highlighted in Section Four of this paper. Project, policies, and applied research aim at targeted beneficiaries. Therefore, mountain farming projects or dissemination of useful and productive species must ensure that these are consistent with the needs, aspirations, and interests of the stakeholders. In the event that cultural factors affect the adoption of a particular technology, then bypassing them or appropriate mitigation measures to deal with them must be adopted in the project design. There are traditional divisions of labour among men, women, and children, and often amongst caste and occupational groups, that affect all productive and subsistence activities. Furthermore, because of the relatively remote and close-knit societies, labour exchanges and cooperation exist in many mountain communities. Agricultural operations are influenced by these and various other forms of participation, exchange relations, and mutual support. Technology generation and diffusion-extension must take these factors into consideration.

Ethnic origin and religious and cultural traditions influence food habits and preferences. Settlement patterns and movement of people are, therefore, important. As mountain communities are diverse, even within their nation states, and within very short distances great variations of climate and culture can be found, across the board recommendations about improved farming systems should be avoided. Ethnic origin and historical settlement patterns are also very pertinent in devising appropriate technologies consistent with ethnic and cultural identities.

There are numerous examples of slow diffusion of energy efficient stoves and biogas technology and preference for traditional fuels such as leaves, crop residues, and twigs from natural forests over the fast-growing fuelwood in block plantations. This slowness to diffuse is either fully or partly due to lack of social and cultural sensitivity in design and dissemination efforts. Reforestation or afforestation efforts with exotic varieties have often met resistance from people living in the area who had a vested interest in indigenous varieties which provided wildlife/game habitats and provided minor forest products or timber that were valuable or useful to them. Similarly, understanding traditional and customary rights over rangeland, watersheds, and forests is absolutely critical in the formulation of improvement strategies for them. Without local-level decision-making and some level of control and user rights, ownership and empower-

ment of beneficiaries will not be possible, and project sustainability will be in jeopardy. ICIMOD's involvement in natural resources' and watershed management might have much to gain from understanding these issues.

Mountain specificities dictate that diversifying mountain economies could be a viable approach to increasing incomes and employment opportunities for mountain people in a relatively environmentally-benign way. Such views gain credence as pressure on fragile land resources can be alleviated. Production and trade in high-value speciality products attainable from mountain niches and services, such as tourism, are examples. In addition to attention to increased value addition, efforts should also be focussed on local institutions and organisations in order to orchestrate useful mechanisms to ensure that incremental benefits remain in the communities and can be channelled into community-social development activities. In addition to formal and structured local organisations and institutions, e.g., the local government, voluntary agencies, private enterprises, there are a host of indigenous local organisations and institutions, such as kinship groups, work groups, commodity markets, and local informal, supra social units, that outsiders often do recognise. These social units and organisations often provide the building blocks of formal organisations. They can be extremely important in ensuring local-level planning and local support for development activities (Esman and Uphoff 1982). This can be crucial for most mountain communities which have strong local identities, loyalties, and characteristics. ICIMOD-supported Tourism and Local Community Development studies can explore these ideas further in several member countries where the studies are currently taking place. The Annapurna Conservation Project, undertaken by the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation, is currently experimenting with a novel method of funding local community development and environmental conservation with income generated from tourism.