

Changes and Challenges in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas: Implications for ICIMOD

Andreas Schild, Director General, ICIMOD, aschild@icimod.org

Kamal Banskota, Senior Economist, ICIMOD, kbanskota@icimod.org



Alex Treadway

Sherpa settlement with the snowcapped peaks of Kantega and Thamserku behind, Khumbu region, Nepal

Three new drivers have shaped the evolution of the Hindu Kush-Himalayan (HKH) region during the last decades: climate change/global warming, globalisation, and population growth. Although mountain societies have in the past been fairly successful in adapting to such factors, in the present context, the changes and challenges taking place are so intense and rapid that traditional adaptation mechanisms are losing their efficacy.

The demand for adaptation is particularly high in the mountain areas of the HKH region by virtue of their inaccessibility, fragility, and marginality, which makes them relatively more vulnerable to the changes, given the backlog of unresolved problems relating primarily to livelihoods and the natural resource base.

The HKH range spans over 3500 km across varied geographical terrain and has many unparalleled characteristics. The range forms a barrier to the easterly monsoon winds and contains the largest deposits of snow and ice after the polar regions. Often referred to

as the 'third pole', the HKH range is the water tower of Asia and regulates the flow of nine major river systems in the region that serve a total population of almost one and a half billion. Moreover, the food and energy produced in these water basins leaves a footprint on up to three billion people.

Globalisation, through a combination of economic, technological, sociocultural, and political forces, has created many opportunities. Of these, market forces and communication technologies are perhaps the strongest and their effects have penetrated deep into

mountain areas. While there is no denying that market forces have brought benefits to mountain people (e.g., cheap manufactured goods and employment opportunities through migration and services), they have also brought lasting change to mountain people's lifestyles, disrupted traditional farming and cottage industry practices, and weakened the livelihoods and coping mechanisms of many mountain communities. While external migration has resulted in a large inflow of remittance income into national economies (in some small countries in the HKH such remittances are already exceeding overseas development assistance), this income has barely benefited mountain economies, but instead in many cases has increased the drudgery, workload, and responsibility of mountain women and marginalised minorities. The mountain people have been unable to realise many benefits resulting from globalisation due to inequalities in access to markets, capacities, technology, and information, as well as non-conducive policies. This situation has widened the income disparity between highlanders and lowlanders and resulted in the large-scale outmigration of men from mountain areas.

ICIMOD: meeting the challenge

Drawing on its accumulated institutional experience, ICIMOD conducted a series of consultations with strategic national partners in its regional member countries (RMCs) to identify and respond to the emerging challenges in the region. The conclusions from these consultations were submitted to ICIMOD's Programme Advisory Committee and the Board of Governors for scrutiny. The recommendations that emerged from these international and national consultations have been incorporated into a new strategic framework, which will enable ICIMOD to position itself to meet the new challenges and to realign its priorities and programmes with those of its RMCs. The framework identifies strategic programmes which advocate a holistic vision of mountain development and interdisciplinary problem analysis and programme design and planning.

ICIMOD endeavours to position itself as a demand-driven organisation with increased relevance to stakeholders. To achieve this, it aims at moving from a project-driven to a strategically-oriented programme mode, aligning its programmes with RMC priorities and international declarations (e.g. MDG, CBD).

As an international institution with a regional focus dedicated solely to the cause of mountain people and their environment, ICIMOD will consolidate its role as a knowledge, learning, and enabling centre. It will conduct pilot action research with partners, thus generating new knowledge. It will also facilitate the customising of global

knowledge and package it for use in the region. ICIMOD intends to be a regional knowledge 'hub' for sharing knowledge generated in the region and beyond.

Why ICIMOD?

The Asian context, in which ICIMOD has evolved, has experienced epochal changes during the last 25 years. Some of ICIMOD's regional member countries have experienced extraordinary growth. These changes have affected the environment and climate in the HKH and have created an increased awareness of development issues, political impacts, communications, and others. Global and regional changes have also triggered changes in the regional institutional landscape. New and stronger institutions addressing environmental issues have emerged. In this context, the following question was put to regional stakeholders: Why is a regional organisation like ICIMOD required and what should be the additional value of such an organisation?

The increasing awareness of the importance of sustainable mountain systems in relation to global warming offers a new chance to call for a specific mountain agenda.

Regional and national policy priorities driven by the economic potential of urban growth centres, have not addressed mountain development. Although ICIMOD pioneered mountain development and mountain specific approaches, it has not so far managed to mainstream the concept of a specific mountain agenda for development of the HKH region. The increasing awareness of the importance of sustainable mountain systems in relation to global warming offers a new chance to call for a specific mountain agenda.

Existing data generated by national and international institutions in the HKH region are often partial, fragmented, scattered, and incomplete because of the focus on accessible areas. The lack of systematic, consistent, and comprehensive knowledge on socio-economic and environmental conditions in the HKH region has prevented a comprehensive understanding of the region and the design of appropriate strategies. The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) refers to the HKH as a 'white spot' from a scientific point of view. Too many efforts lack the necessary continuity and institutional backing. ICIMOD wants to make a substantial contribution to bridge this gap.

In general, the valuable knowledge generated by HKH institutions is limited to their own country's territory. Today we know that adaptation to climate change and the long-term and equitable use of scarce resources needs a regional, transboundary approach. National information has to become regional knowledge. ICIMOD

can contribute the process of sharing national experiences and making information regionally accessible both as a regional hub and by facilitating transboundary dialogue.

The sustainable management of water resources and the provision of ecosystem services call for the establishment of upstream-downstream relationships. ICIMOD, as an intergovernmental institution, can play a catalytic role in promoting transboundary dialogue between member countries on such issues:

- Based on almost 25 years of functioning as a regional platform, ICIMOD has developed a large network of partners. This is a sound basis for scaling up good practices, harmonising methodologies and approaches, and contributing to the customising of international experience to the specific needs of its regional member countries.
- ICIMOD provides a bridge between research and the application of the knowledge generated by research, ensuring that good practices, important breakthroughs, and global innovations are packaged for use by the regional stakeholders enabling them to address the potential challenges of change in mountain regions.
- The HKH mountain system, its inhabitants, and ICIMOD's regional member countries are facing a

challenge of enormous dimensions. Therefore, a small institution like ICIMOD has to set its priorities carefully. A main concern is the access to global resources and centres of excellence for the benefit of sustainable development of the HKH region.

Focus and impacts

ICIMOD's Strategic Framework, briefly described above, sets ICIMOD's road map for the coming years. Guided by this framework, inputs from the Board of Governors, and extensive consultations with partner organisations (both regional and non-regional), ICIMOD has developed a five-year strategic Medium-Term Action Plan (MTAP) for 2008-2012. ICIMOD realises that business as usual will not deliver results relevant to its regional member countries. There is a need for a greater and deeper focus. Therefore, given the challenges faced, the national priorities of the RMCs, and the competencies ICIMOD has developed over the last two and half decades, the new MTAP is organised around three strategic programmes: Integrated Water and Hazard Management (IWHM), Environmental Change and Ecosystem Services (ECES), and Sustainable Livelihoods and Poverty Reduction (SLPR).

In IWHM, ICIMOD will focus primarily on climate change and its impact on the water tower of Asia, starting from the cryosphere (snow and ice). This programme has a macro focus on the region's water basins, the sustainable harnessing of water resources, and the management of water related hazards.

ECES has a more meso-mountain level focus and will address upstream-downstream relationships. Watersheds are characterised by ecosystems rich in biodiversity and environmental services, but which are under increasing threats from global warming and human interference. The livelihoods of a large majority of mountain people continue to depend on community resources and hence management of watersheds and natural resources are critical in this programme.

ICIMOD is not undertaking poverty reduction at the grassroots or micro-level. However, through SLPR, ICIMOD will facilitate poverty reduction or livelihood improvement by generating examples and establishing good practices that have the potential to be scaled up, or which are useful in influencing policy makers. In addition ICIMOD will also facilitate the transfer of good practices across the region.

Finally, in the long run, ICIMOD expects three major results: equitable and sustainable water management (at the macro-level), the provision of stable ecosystem services (at the meso-level), and the generation of more sustainable livelihoods (at the micro-level) in the HKH region.



Paribesh Pradhan

Porters carrying fodder for yaks to Shomare village in the Khumbu region, Nepal