

# Climate Change in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas – A Case for International Awareness, Solidarity and Cooperation

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Xu Jianchu

Villager driving cattle against a backdrop of snowcapped peaks in northwest Yunnan, PR China

**Climate change and its consequences have become a well accepted truth, highly relevant for the Hindu Kush-Himalayan (HKH) region. They have become a central theme in ICIMOD's new strategy and hence appropriate responses to climate change will be very much at the centre of ICIMOD's future activities.**

It is anticipated that cooperating partners from outside the region will be increasingly attracted by the climate change focus and the issue of climate change will be of interest to most of ICIMOD's regional development partners. For the international partners, however, support for ICIMOD will be only one, relatively limited, component of their cooperation activities in the region. In relation to development cooperation, various bilaterally supported programmes with individual countries in the region will be far more important in terms of financial volume. Nevertheless, I am convinced that ICIMOD, if it continues to facilitate regional cooperation according to its own ambitions and plans, can expect growing interest and support.

## The relevance of climate change

The IPCC reports of 2007<sup>1</sup> provided overwhelming evidence of the global relevance of climate change. Climate change and its related issues are unavoidably very high on political agendas in Europe and internationally, and also in Asia, including the HKH region. Defining and implementing adequate responses to climate change will pose significant political, economic, social, and institutional challenges. There will be contentious issues for many years to come. Climate change, in the words of Kofi Annan, is "...not just an environmental issue, as too many people still believe. It is an all-encompassing threat<sup>2</sup>". It will affect

<sup>1</sup> International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Fourth Assessment Report – Climate Change 2007, Reports from Working Groups and Synthesis Report

<sup>2</sup> The former Secretary General of the United Nations at the UN Conference on Climate Change, Nairobi, 15 November 2006



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Harvesting bamboo in the Arun valley in Nepal

the lives of people, rich and poor, in many parts of the world and more perceptibly over time. It will bring about negative, and some positive, effects on the environment. It will directly and indirectly change economic risks and opportunities. The effects will be uneven, very difficult to assess in detail, and hard to predict. Climate change will trigger far-reaching debates involving politicians and professionals, and, perhaps equally important, enterprises, engaged groups and individuals, and the population at large.

Climate change is specifically relevant to the HKH region. There are many references to South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the HKH in the IPCC reports. Key findings concerning future impacts on physical and biological systems or sectors, such as freshwater resources, ecosystems, and river basins, explicitly and implicitly point to the expected effects of climate change on the HKH. Decreases in the amount of water stored in glaciers and snow cover, reduced water availability, endangered biodiversity systems, and flooding from rivers due to more frequent extreme weather events are some of the expected impacts<sup>3</sup>. The vulnerability of the region, its countries, and, particularly, of poor communities is clear.

### International responsibility to act in terms of mitigation and adaptation

The outcomes of the Bali Conference suggest that there is a fast growing consensus on the urgency to act. It can be assumed that coordinated action is in the interests of

all countries and of all country groups. The Bali Plan of Action<sup>4</sup> is based on recognition of the fact that mitigation and adaptation have to be pursued simultaneously. It will by no means be easy to arrive at a balance of interests when it comes to mitigation commitments and actions. Nevertheless, all countries and international actors are called upon to cooperate, despite their differences in position, point of view, and approach. The Bali Conference underlined the guiding “principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities”.

It is an accepted fact that the highly industrialised countries have been the main source of greenhouse gas emissions, especially CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, which are the major cause of climate change. Hence, many people in developed countries share the view that past industrial practices and the degree of exploitation of carbon-based energy sources should be considered when responsibility for future action and commitment is discussed. History, a feeling for global socioeconomic justice, as well as perspectives for the future, should guide their leaders. As maps of vulnerability show, the negative consequences of climate change will be most marked for poor people in relatively poor countries and regions. In many cases, the people who have contributed the least to the major causes of climate change will be the most severely affected. The burden of far-reaching adaptation often has to be shouldered by countries, institutions, and people with limited capacity and resources. In aggregate, the necessary reaction to climate change will not be achieved unless developing countries and emerging economies, in particular, cooperate actively and take decisive action<sup>5</sup>.

The processes which will lead to the new balance between environmental and economic interests are still in the early stages. The European Union, which claims to play a leading international mediating role in climate protection, proposed through the EU Commission on 23 January 2008, a package of decisions concerning the efforts of EU Member States to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions by 2020<sup>6</sup>. A very difficult negotiation process can be expected to follow.

Climate change ranks very high on the development cooperation agenda. Africa will receive much of the related attention and assistance, but trends and impacts in Asia will not be overlooked. The Environment Profile Asia, drawn up in 2007 for the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) in Germany refers, for example, to climate change

<sup>3</sup> See among other documents: International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Climate Change 2007: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability, Working Group II Contribution to the IPCC Fourth Assessment Report, Summary for Policy Makers, pp 5-8

<sup>4</sup> [http://unfccc.int/meetings/cop\\_13/items](http://unfccc.int/meetings/cop_13/items)

<sup>5</sup> It has been estimated that 90% of the increase in greenhouse gases until 2012 will be emitted by emerging economies and developing countries.

<sup>6</sup> Commission of the European Communities (2008): Proposal for a decision of the EU Parliament and of the Council on the effort of Member States to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions to meet the Community's greenhouse gas emission reduction commitments up to 2020, COM (2008) 17 final; available at [http://ec.europa.eu/environment/climat/climate\\_action.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/environment/climat/climate_action.htm)

(mitigation and adaptation) as priority action areas. The 2008 BMZ budget allocates €700 million to climate change measures.

### Security considerations

It is increasingly recognised by the international community that climate change will be accompanied by growing security risks. In my own country, the German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU)<sup>7</sup> chose this subject as the theme for its 2007 main report<sup>8</sup>. The report presents two core messages at the outset.

First, without decisive counteraction, climate change will overtax the capacities of many societies to cope with the mounting problems; this could result in insecurity, destabilisation, and violence. Second, a joint response to climate change as an accepted common call for cooperation could also unite the international community and ultimately lead to a globally coordinated policy.

The effects of climate change will exacerbate existing environmental and other crises, particularly in conflict-prone regions. The probability of more poverty, inequality, and social deprivation will increase. The report analyses the potential causes and implications of what it calls conflict constellations including the degradation of freshwater resources, decline in food production, increase in storm and flood disasters, and migration. The WBGU also expects new, climate-

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induced conflict constellations to occur<sup>9</sup>. The WBGU report also takes a closer look at selected regional 'hotspots of climate change', among them the South Asian region of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The potential for social crisis in the region is emphasised, given the existing cross-border conflicts and the instability of governments in some of the countries.

The report pays special attention to fragile and weak states. It is not only their populations that are vulnerable, their institutions will also struggle with the additional stresses and challenges placed on them by climate change. The WBGU fears that the number of weak and fragile states may increase as a result of climate change. One of the recommendations in the report asks for enhanced efforts to help stabilise those states. In this



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Preparing a field for planting maize, Gorkha, Nepal

context, I would also like to point out another aspect: although countries may be as fragile and prone to conflict, they and their societies still provide indispensable resources and services to their neighbours and beyond. There are institutions, professionals, and other individuals with tremendous knowledge, insight, and experience who are able to deal and live with a changing environment. It is imperative to make use of the existing capacity and offer support to enhance it.

### The need to fill gaps of knowledge and research

The IPCC based its reports on a tremendous body of research results. However, there are still important gaps. Working Group II of the IPCC, summarising information on the impacts and costs of climate change, stated that "aggregate estimates of costs mask significant differences in impacts across sectors, regions, countries, and populations"<sup>10</sup>. Concerning adaptation measures, the report continues: "At present

we do not have a clear picture of the limits to adaptation, or the cost, partly because effective adaptation measures are highly dependent on specific geographical and climate risk factors as well as institutional, political, and financial constraints"<sup>11</sup>. The WBGU report of 2007 argues strongly in favour of a "long-term focus for political economic and societal actors"<sup>12</sup>. From the perspective of the HKH region, some of the report's recommendations for further research could be underlined. For example, the recommendations for research into adaptation strategies in developing countries and "preventive strategies to stabilise fragile states", taking into account, among other aspects, the heterogeneity of the affected states and the functioning of public institutions and non-state actors. In relation to conflict constellations, the report advises that further

<sup>7</sup> Wissenschaftlicher Beirat der Bundesregierung Globale Umweltveränderungen (WBGU)

<sup>8</sup> English version 'Climate Change as a Security Risk', first published by Earthscan, London, 2008; summary available at [www.wbgu.de/wbgu\\_jg2007\\_kurz\\_engl.html](http://www.wbgu.de/wbgu_jg2007_kurz_engl.html)

<sup>9</sup> WBGU (2007): Climate Change as a Security Risk, p.2

<sup>10</sup> IPCC (2007), Working Group II, p.16

<sup>11</sup> IPCC (2007), Working Group II, p.17

<sup>12</sup> WBGU (2007), p.181

research should be conducted with a view to understanding “the causal linkages at the interface between climate impacts and society, the dynamics of which have the potential to bring about social destabilisation or violence”<sup>13</sup>. Not surprisingly, issues of water balance, water management, and flood disasters are among the identified research requirements.

### **Interests of external partners in the HKH region**

I will focus here on the role of development partners, being aware that outside countries and organisations have many and varied interests in the region. Development partners will be concerned because of the scale of the anticipated impacts of climate change, which will affect many millions of people, both in mountain areas and in the densely populated river basins below. The likelihood of achieving development goals will be endangered and the related processes may be prolonged and become more costly. Identifying and preparing adaptation and prevention measures requires the appropriate capacities. Capacities in terms of qualified human resources and institutions are being set up rapidly in the region. However, they are distributed unevenly and important deficiencies remain. For several international partners, the existence and effectiveness

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of cross-boundary cooperation on a regional scale is an important factor in determining their own contribution. Climate change in the HKH is challenging government institutions, academia, and other organisations in the world’s most populous countries, China and India. It also calls for cooperation between India and Pakistan, and India and Bangladesh – countries that have both shared and conflicting interests and preoccupations. The interests of very large and relatively small countries must also be balanced. Sensitivities, resentment, temptations to use power, and existing or perceived superiority must be recognised and overcome where possible.

### **Reasons for cooperating with ICIMOD**

Considering the relevance of climate change to the HKH, international partners have good reason to cooperate with ICIMOD. The Centre is well placed as an organisational hub for its partners to broaden and deepen knowledge about the region, its natural resources, and the management thereof, and about cross-border interlinkages between ecosystems. ICIMOD serves as a platform for exchange of approaches and practical experiences. ICIMOD’s focus on three new strategic programmes – Integrated Water and Hazard Management, Environmental Change and

Ecosystem Services, and Sustainable Livelihoods and Poverty Reduction – appears to be well considered and justified. Through established long-term partnerships and experience in cooperation, ICIMOD has gained deep insight into the societies in the region and their cultures. The landscape of institutions and their capacities and potential is well known to ICIMOD. The Centre has shown that it can serve as a vehicle for fostering cooperation between very different organisations, state and non-state, and between organisations and people. Scaling up and scaling down (or customising) are key concepts characterising ICIMOD’s mode of operation. ICIMOD helps to scale up programme activities, with approaches that have been proven in practice. ICIMOD can also be instrumental in making knowledge about global trends and impacts, such as the consequences of climate change, more easily accessible and more applicable at the regional and local level. It can assist in identifying gaps in knowledge, particularly those at the regional level. ICIMOD can work on research and research recommendations. This seems to be particularly promising because of the widely held view that there are dispersed research results on climate change in the region, which need more comparison and integration. ICIMOD can help to develop vulnerability studies and adaptation strategies. ICIMOD’s effectiveness in such roles is enhanced by the fact that it is a non-political organisation. The resolution of political conflict must be done at other levels.

Being one of several organisations concerned with environmental issues in the region, ICIMOD will continue to fine-tune its position, as well as to strengthen cooperation and relationships with its partner organisations. ICIMOD is the only regional organisation with a specific mountain agenda, which makes it even more pivotal in relation to climate change in the HKH.

ICIMOD’s history, mission, and openness, embedded in statutes and cooperation, bring together a great variety of partners. Evidently, there is continued interest in ICIMOD by its regional member countries, large and small, some emerging as global players, others struggling with severe economic and security problems. All have recognised that a coordinated response to climate change is essential, and that ICIMOD should play a more ambitious role. International support for ICIMOD has been provided, so far, by a stable, but limited, number of funding partners. In a way, it is surprising that the number has not grown beyond a rather small circle, convinced by the cause of mountain development a long time ago. There is the hope and the prospect, however, that this will be different in future under the influence of the climate change agenda. With its new strategy and Medium-Term Action Plan, ICIMOD has taken up the challenge.

<sup>13</sup> WBGU (2007), p.184