

Greater Voice for All Mountain People in the Himalayan Region

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A gathering for a nature conservation project in Walangchung Gola in the remote far eastern part of Nepal

In this issue of *Sustainable Mountain Development* we focus on how ICIMOD and our partners try to contribute to a more equitable society in which the voices of all mountain people are heard.

People living in mountainous areas often have to live in remote places at the fringes of states with weak infrastructure and limited access to means of communication. Their fair share of political and social representation is not always ensured and they are not entitled to influence the power relations controlling their livelihood options. The inequalities of opportunities are manifold: mainstream societal norms and institutions which discriminate against ethnic groups, gender, and age. In other words, physical and social marginalisation has kept the voices of *all* mountain people from being heard adequately.

In the ICIMOD context, ensuring 'greater voice' means enhancing the capacities of individuals to influence the decisions that shape their lives. This relates closely to the concept of equity, of a fair treatment of all individuals. In general we can relate these issues to the well-known concepts of empowerment, participation, and social inclusion leading to more equity in a society. With the focus on the 'rights-based approach', which makes

an intrinsic link between the right to development and human rights, governments and development agencies have over the last two decades increasingly turned their attention to issues of equity.

However, structural economic and political inequalities are embedded in social and cultural institutions. Unfortunately, these cultural and societal structures tend to be readily reproduced. Girls and women have had limited options for individual development (education, health, power, assets) for generations, so why should it change now?

Equity is a normative concept which means different things to different people, but nevertheless is in the core of development theory and practice. All societies have abundant normative rules, like ideals on social justice, and support for a more equitable society. In addition, economists argue that equity matters also instrumentally because it generates more efficiency and sustainable development (World Bank 2006).

A basic argument for the promotion of more equitable societies is that they perform better on an economic, societal, and sustainable scale. However, promoting equity creates costs that return only in the long run, and therefore it is difficult to see that this is the key element of all possible development strategy.

Inefficiency in a society is also created by inequality in access to facilities that enable income generation. Unequal access to political rights also leads to hindrances in economic development. A society where the governance system is not adopted because it does not allow equitable political voice of all its citizens wastes valuable resources for development. Excessive inequity and weak institutions could finally generate serious disorder in society, like crime and violence, or even political instability and conflict.

New and innovative forms of governance are required to address the complexities and uncertainties associated to rapid change (institutional, economic, and cultural) related to globalisation processes. A better understanding of local knowledge and practices can

help to identify what are important and can be promoted at various levels. Building upon local knowledge and practices – that is, capitalising on local strengths whenever relevant – can decrease dependencies on external aid. However, the main obstacle societies in the region need to overcome is the gap between policy and practice.

Throughout the region there is a move towards more democratic governance systems. More and more people see themselves and act as citizens of democratic states than as subjects of an authoritarian government with no say in development issues. Very often in the development debate, ‘reduction of poverty’ although the main aim, is reduced to economic growth and wealth accumulation. The relevance of equitable distribution of growth, welfare, and income is often overlooked.

Policies supporting equitable societies must cover all members of the society. Poverty reduction policies that are only oriented towards the poor and not the rest of the population are prone to fail. We should not pursue the illusion that it is possible to come to more equitable societies without raising a fair share of contributions from people who can afford it, and without reducing the

influence of elites in state organisations. Creating more inclusive societies is not a one-time achievement; it is a long-term and dynamic process. It needs a permanent bargaining mechanism on the fair contribution of responsibilities, resources, and power.

The examples featured in this journal illustrate how ICIMOD and its partners contribute to raising the voice of the mountain people. And they raise the questions: Why do societies often forget the most vulnerable people in disasters? Who gets benefits from the abundant biological and genetic resources of the mountains? Why are indigenous peoples excluded? Why do we prefer external knowledge before hearing the people? But they also provide some answers to these pertinent questions. If marginalised groups use their rights and organise themselves, they raise their voices in an organised way and increase their chances of being heard.

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The article by Turin shows impressively how diverse the ‘voices’ of the mountain people are. Considering only language diversity, several hundred

languages are spoken in the Himalayan region, of which over 400 are spoken by minorities of less than 100,000 people. With examples from Nepal and Sikkim he shows also how complex language policies are, and how a fair approach could look like.

The relevance of the category ‘indigenous peoples’ is exemplified in Gupta’s article. Indigeneity has come to a centre-stage in a time marked by ethnic strife and conflict in many parts of the world. Indigenous groups are under threat by political and economic marginalisation, cultural stigmatisation, and their lack of rights and persistent poverty. Some indigenous peoples criticise that national and international development programmes often demonstrate little sensitivity to the cultural difference and special resources of indigenous peoples. However, with the ‘Decade of Indigenous Peoples’, the implementation of an international convention, and the creation of representation at the UN level, the voices of indigenous peoples are now much better heard. They are explicitly mentioned in the CBD and its access and benefit sharing mechanisms. ICIMOD activities to support the implementation of an ABS regime in the Himalayan region with a strong focus on equitable benefit sharing for all mountain people are accounted by the article of Oli, Dasgupta, and Dhakal.

The CBD recognises the state's sovereignty over genetic resources. However, this does not touch the ownership rights for biological and genetic resources by local people, and their right to benefit from the use of these resources as determined by national laws.

ICIMOD and its partners raise the awareness at the citizens' level by developing and disseminating information materials on the processes and potential benefits of an ABS regime. Media awareness programmes are also in place. In many cases the efforts are pioneering, as the concept of an ABS regime is very new.

The importance of accounting for and integrating local knowledge into poverty reduction projects gained recognition within academia, inter-national development agencies, NGOs, and with policymakers since the '80s. Interestingly, local knowledge and practices have been barely explored in the field of disaster preparedness. Accounting for them can substantially support national and international organisations to better formulate and plan for disaster and implement disaster preparedness plans. The article by Dekens gives a good example of how this can contribute to a build-up of mutual trust, acceptability, common understanding, and a community sense of ownership and self-confidence. She proposes a framework that aims to contribute towards a greater sensitivity to and a better understanding of local knowledge on disaster preparedness.

Very closely linked in theme is the article by Mehta, stressing the inclusion of gender consideration in disaster preparedness. In nearly all kinds of disaster females suffer higher mortality rates, and despite women's roles as 'first responders' in disasters they tend to be excluded from policy and decision-making in reconstruction efforts. The experience of disasters in the region illustrates how physiological vulnerabilities, socio-cultural and economic marginalisation, and gender stereotypes can make all the difference in whether an individual manages to survive a disaster or not, and if having survived, the extent of access he or she has to aid and rehabilitation afterwards.

Apart from physiological and biological factors different kinds of 'cultural permissions' between women and men and a 'learned powerlessness' in girls and women account for gender-differentiated mortality rates, in much of the Himalayan region. Evidence from the Pakistan earthquake suggests there was a higher



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A mountain family in Bajura district, Nepal

female mortality rate in areas where 'purdah' norms prevailed.

Gender matters in disaster risk reduction. Here equity pays again: more equitable responses to people in crises helps to ensure that human and material resources are used more efficiently. ICIMOD with its disaster preparedness project is ideally situated to initiate dialogues on gender and disaster with practitioners in the region at the policy, development, and field levels. The Centre could facilitate documenting and disseminating lessons learned and best practices emerging from disasters that have taken place across the region. The challenge is for national governments and the development community to find the political will and capacity to develop and put gender-sensitive methodologies into practice.

To raise the voice of marginalised people, ICIMOD has several activities that could be placed under the umbrella of advocacy (Subedi and Kollmair). Support of civil society in the mountain areas is one of the most effective ways to enhance democratisation and good governance. A key focus of civil society is to empower their constituency by undertaking lawful, people-oriented advocacy to safeguard people's rights.

Advocacy is a relatively new concept in the development arena. As part of the rights-based approach it functions

as a tool to protect individual and group rights which have been denied by other actors. The rights-based approach argues that the absence of a process of realising fundamental human rights and freedoms calls for advocacy to attain them in a respectful manner.

Past lessons indicate that NGOs and community-based organisations and their networks in mountain areas are able to advocate better by bringing the issues in the sphere of public debate to exert greater influence in local, national, and regional policies. Under this changed context, civil society organisations can play important roles negotiating between the state and market mechanisms to hold both accountable to the people they are supposed to serve.

The case study of Jana shows how the lives of indigenous communities dependent on the natural resources in Southern Nepal have been affected by biodiversity conservation efforts. The marginalised groups of Bote-Majhis and Musahars in these communities have never been at the centre of the conservation discourse, nor have they had adequate voice in the global environmental movements that have affected their lives. Their struggles and sufferings have not found adequate space in research, mainstream media, or popular discourse.

Despite the so-called 'democratisation' in Nepal, the National Park authorities simultaneously confiscated boats and fishing nets in several villages in 1993. One of the community leaders remembers: "The incident shook us. A ringing in our ears nagged: Why are we silent? If our forefathers have grown up to this land, river, and forest, why can't we exercise our rights over these resources?" By organising themselves and raising their voices together they could achieve improvements in their livelihood situation.

The struggle of indigenous peoples like the Bote-Majhis and Musahars has exerted its influence on the contemporary debate on democratisation and in rethinking the policies governing protected areas and wildlife conservation in Nepal and elsewhere. Their experiences as a part of a movement for life and dignity illustrates how the spontaneous resistance of marginalised communities, when it takes the shape of a non-violent movement, could engage powerful

conservation agencies and influence democratic practices and state policy.

An ICIMOD-supported initiative which tries to influence the voice of the citizens at a policy level is described in the article of Dhakal. The 'Right-to-Information' (RTI) legislations have a comparably short history in the Himalayan region, even if the concept is well-known long since. It ensures the citizens' right to information about all state activities. RTI has both a governance as well as a rights perspective. It helps governance systems function better, holds service providers accountable for their actions, and creates a participatory and transparent environment for people to contribute to policy formulation and establishing the rule of law. Correct information at the right time reduces the chances to misuse resources and lessens corruption. It also

gives people a legal right to demand entitlements and monitor the use or misuse of funds meant for the public good.

Advocacy can serve as a tool to achieve changes in a constructive, constitutional, and peaceful manner.

India is considered the regional pioneer in implementing the RTI law. The Indian RTI movement originating from Rajasthan is well known and has attracted stakeholders in many countries. The demand for an RTI law has taken the form of a mass movement at the grassroots level in India, with a strong advocacy component. Through the advocacy of ICIMOD-supported groups, an RTI law will most likely be promulgated and implemented in Nepal in the near future to achieve inclusive democracy for its citizens. However, broad sections of the society must be made aware of this legislation and strong enforcement will be needed for the law's effective use.

All voices should be heard, and societies must make the decision on how to include all the different voices in their governance system. And finally, it is important to understand that equity matters – always and everywhere!

Reference

World Bank (2006) *The World Bank Development Report, 2006*. New York: IBRD/The World Bank and Oxford University Press