Session VI

Promoting Greater Voice and Influence, Dignity, Security, and Social Equality for All Mountain People

Greater Voice for All Mountain People in the Himalayas

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People living in mountainous areas often live in remote places on 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 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 fair treatment for 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. Focusing 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, turned their attention increasingly to issues of equity.

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

Equity is a normative concept which means different things to different people, nevertheless it is at the core of development theory and practice. All societies have abundant normative rules, like ideals about social justice and support for a more equitable society. In addition, economists argue that equity matters instrumentally also 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 economic, societal, and sustainable scales. Promoting equity, however, creates costs that

return only in the long run, and, therefore, it is difficult to see that this is the key element in 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 to economic development. Excessive inequity and weak institutions could finally generate serious disorder in society such as crime and violence, or even political instability and conflict.

New and innovative forms of governance are required to address the complexities and uncertainties associated with rapid institutional, economic, and cultural change related to globalisation processes. Understanding local knowledge and practices can help to identify which 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. The main obstacle societies in the region need to overcome, however, is the gap between policy and practice.

Throughout the Himalayan 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, having no say in development issues. Very often in the development debate, 'reduction of poverty', although the main aim of development, 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 follow the illusion that it is possible to come to more equitable societies without raising a fair share of the contribution from people who can afford it and reducing the influence of elite groups 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.

We have to ask ourselves how ICIMOD and its partners can contribute to raising the voices of mountain people. Why do societies often forget the most vulnerable people in disasters? Who 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? The answer to these questions often is that if marginalised groups use their rights and organise themselves, they raise their voices in an organised way and increase their chances of being heard.

The linguist, Mark Turin, shows impressively how diverse the 'voices' of 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 (Turin 2007).

The relevance of the category 'indigenous peoples' in the Himalayan region and beyond has come to a centre stage in a time marked by ethnic strife and conflict in many parts of the world. Indigenous groups are still under threat by political and economic marginalisation, cultural stigmatisation, and their lack of rights and persistent poverty. Some indigenous peoples criticise national and international development programmes because they often demonstrate little sensitivity to cultural difference and special resources of indigenous peoples. With the 'Decade of Indigenous Peoples', however, as well as the implementation of an international convention and the creation of representation at the UN level, the voices of indigenous peoples are now being heard. They are explicitly mentioned in the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and its access and benefit-sharing mechanisms. ICIMOD has introduced activities to support the implementation of an access and benefit sharing (ABS) regime in the Himalayan region with a strong focus on equitable benefit sharing for all mountain people (Oli et al. 2007)

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

ICIMOD and its partners raise awareness at citizens' level by developing and disseminating materials that raise awareness on the processes and potential benefits of an ABS regime. Media-related awareness programmes covering both print and electronic media are in place. In many cases the efforts are pioneering, as the concept of an ABS regime is new.

Since the 1980s, the importance of accounting for and integrating local knowledge into poverty reduction projects gained recognition among academia, international development agencies, NGOs, and policy-makers. Interestingly, local knowledge and practices have barely been explored in the field of disaster preparedness. Accounting for them can support national and international organisations to improve their plans for disaster and implement disaster preparedness plans. Work by Dekens (2007) on this aspect of disaster preparedness gives good examples of how accounting for local knowledge and practices can contribute to building mutual trust, acceptability, common understanding, and a sense of community ownership and self-confidence. What she proposes is a framework that contributes towards increased sensitivity to and an improved understanding of local knowledge on disaster preparedness.

Closely linked to this theme is work by Mehta (2007) stressing the inclusion of gender considerations in disaster preparedness. In nearly all kinds of disaster, it has been observed, females suffer higher mortality rates than men, and despite women's roles as 'first responders' in disasters, they tend to be excluded from participating in policy and decision making in reconstruction efforts. The experience of disasters in the region over the past decades illustrates how physiological vulnerabilities, sociocultural and economic marginalisation, and gender stereotypes can make all the difference in whether an individual manages to survive a disaster or not and, having survived, the extent of access he or she has to aid and rehabilitation afterwards.

Apart from physiological and biological factors accounting for gender-differentiated mortality rates, in much of the Himalayan region women and men have different kinds of 'cultural permission'. Evidence from the Pakistan earthquake suggests there was a higher female mortality rate in areas where 'purdah' prevailed. Socialisation processes are also implicated in inculcating in girls and women a 'learned powerlessness'. In some tsunami-affected regions the disproportionate number of female deaths is attributed to the fact that girls and women were less likely to know how to swim.

Gender matters in disaster risk reduction for both women and men. Here, equity pays again: more equitable responses to people in crises helps to ensure that human and material resources are used more efficiently. ICIMOD, through 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. ICIMOD could facilitate documentation and dissemination of lessons learned and best practices emerging from disaster from across the region. The real challenge, however, 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, 2007). The support of civil society in mountain areas is one of the most effective ways to enhance democratisation and good governance. A key focus of civil society is to empower its 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 that 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.

Advocacy can serve as a tool to achieve changes in a constructive, constitutional, and peaceful manner. Confrontation should be avoided and used only as a last option. Past lessons indicate that NGOs and community-based organisations and their networks in mountain areas are able to advocate well by bringing issues into the sphere of public debate to exert influence on local, national, and regional policies. Within this changed context, civil society organisations can play important roles negotiating between the state and market mechanisms in order to hold both accountable to the people they are supposed to serve.

One case study shows how the lives of indigenous communities dependent on 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; and their struggles and sufferings have not found adequate space in research, mainstream media, or popular discourse.

Despite 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 our inner selves. A ringing in our ears nagged: Why are we silent? If our forefathers have grown up in 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 the conditions of their livelihoods.

The struggle of indigenous peoples like the 'Bote-Majhis' and 'Musahars' has exerted its influence on the contemporary debate about democratisation and in rethinking the policies governing protected areas and wildlife conservation in Nepal and elsewhere. Their experiences as part of a movement for life and dignity illustrate 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 the policy level is described by Dhakal. The 'Right-to-Information' (RTI) legislations have a comparably short history in the Himalayan region, even if the concept is well-known elsewhere. It ensures the citizens' right to information about all state activities. RTI has both governance as well as rights' perspectives. It helps improve the functioning of governance systems, holds service providers accountable for their actions, and creates a participatory and transparent environment in which people can contribute to policy formulation and establishing the rule of law. Correct information at the right time reduces the chances of misusing resources and controls corruption. It also gives people a legal right to demand entitlements and monitor the use or misuse of funds meant for the public good.

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 and has 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. Broad sections of the society, however, 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 concerning how to include all the different voices in their governance system. Finally, it is important to understand that equity matters – always and everywhere!

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