

Opportunities and challenges for mountain livelihoods

FOR MOUNTAINS AND PEOPLE

SUSTAINABLE MOUNTAIN DEVELOPMENT

No. 59 SUMMER 2011



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Dear Friends of ICIMOD,

The present issue of ICIMOD's periodical focuses on some aspects of a complex topic: migration in the Himalayas.

After hosting the joint Foresight-ICIMOD Mountain Regions Workshop on Environmental Migration in Kathmandu (28 February to 1 March 2011; see p9), we have been encouraged to publish elements of ICIMOD's ongoing work and to devote an issue of *Sustainable Mountain Development* to this topic.

We concentrate in this issue on labour migration, and particularly on the economic aspects. ICIMOD considers labour migration basically as a livelihood strategy enabling mountain people to cope with the challenges of a rapidly changing world. Our assessment is that this type of migration is underestimated and the consequences undervalued in development strategies. We think that the leverage offered by labour migration could be used under certain circumstances as an important driver for sustainable mountain development.

It is not possible to treat the topic exhaustively here; rather, we see this publication as a beginning and hope it will encourage interested researchers, academics, non-governmental organisations, cooperation agencies, and governments to embark on a comprehensive effort to assess the potentials and challenges created by migration.

First of all, labour migration is only one of many phenomena in the region's complex population dynamics. It is also necessary to consider closely related and important aspects such as rural-to-urban migration and rural-urban linkages.

Some readers might be disturbed by the emphasis on economic aspects. This focus is not intended to downplay the importance of the social aspects – the disruption of traditional structures and of the social fabric of rural communities, and a strong tendency towards feminisation of the mountain economy – although these are touched on more briefly. Likewise, the importance of new attitudes and skills as building blocks for new livelihood strategies should not be underestimated.


The effect of labour migration on poverty reduction, which has been observed in various parts of the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region, has to be viewed together with its impact on values, norms, practices, and behaviour of migrants and their societies. The exposure of migrants to the values of the host countries can have divergent consequences: While migrants from the central Himalayas working in the Middle East or Malaysia may find themselves in a completely strange cultural environment and feel isolated and marginalised, their colleagues from the western Himalayas may find themselves in an environment that is culturally familiar, enticing, and mobilising. The growing conservative and Islamist trend observed in the rural areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan has largely been underestimated as a factor in social change. For the rural labour migrant in Saudi Arabia, for example, Wahhabi Islam transmits values and behaviour that are deemed appropriate for the family back home. Conservative values are an instrument for preserving social coherence in an environment of change. This touches a sensitive point which requires further knowledge and analysis.

Finally, we should not misjudge or overvalue the economic potential of labour migration and related remittance flows. In Nepal, for example, the imbalance in infrastructure development, with a construction boom in Kathmandu and limited development impact in rural areas, is closely related to underdeveloped investment opportunities for substantial remittance flows. In Bangladesh, new imbalances are being created in rural areas, with far-reaching consequences for land and housing prices.

Perhaps one of the most impressive eye openers for me was the example of a rural labourer from Kohistan who purchased an electric refrigerator and an electric pump to provide his family with prestigious 'modern' assets of development – but the equipment lies idle because his village has no electricity and does not expect to receive it in the near future.

This brings us to the conclusion that it will not be possible to harvest the fruits of migration, to use remittances for sustainable mountain and rural development, without conducive government policies to create effective incentives. Building up the financial services infrastructure and access to information are important prerequisites. Perhaps the international donor community should concentrate on such aspects in order to realise the potential of migration – new attitudes, improved skills, and flow of remittances.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Andreas Schild', written in a cursive style.

Andreas Schild,
September 2011