

Event Brief

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ICIMOD

FOR MOUNTAINS AND PEOPLE

Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals in the Hindu Kush Himalayas: A Smart Investment for Asia and the World

Challenges and opportunities for sustainable development in the HKH

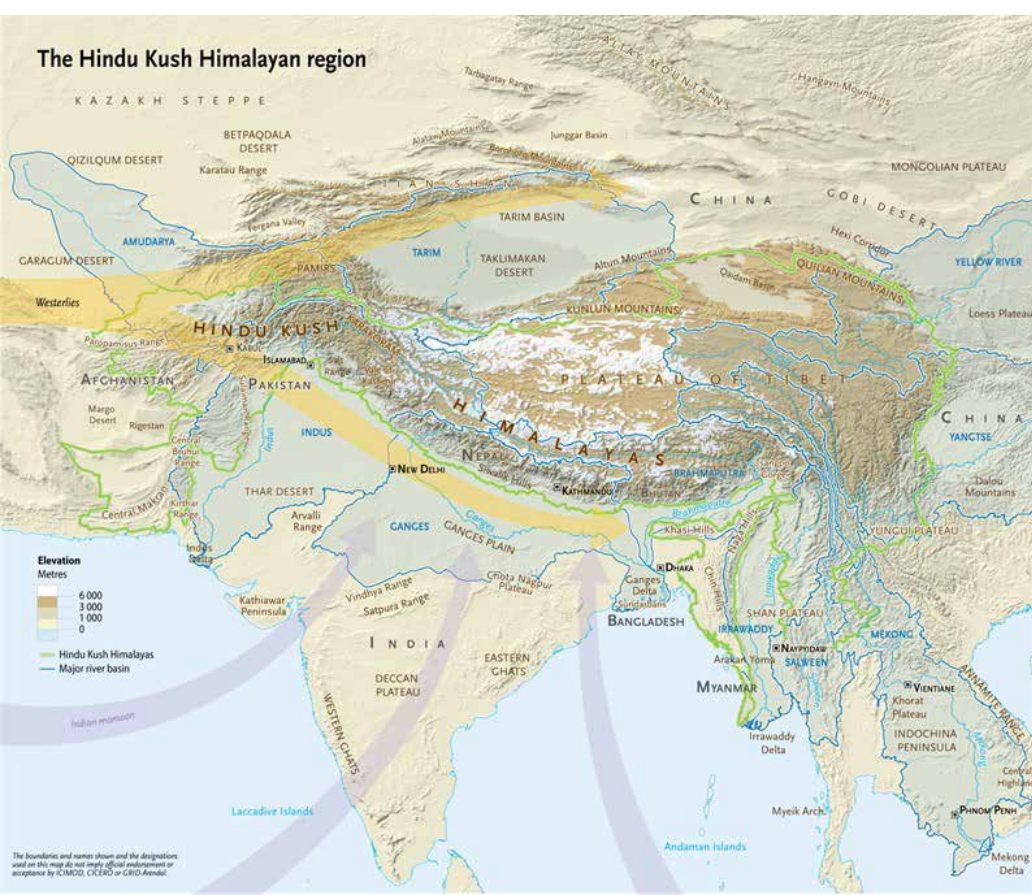
The Hindu Kush Himalayan (HKH) region extends across eight countries – Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Nepal, Myanmar and Pakistan, and is the source of 10 major river systems that provide water, ecosystem services, and the basis of livelihood to more than 210 million people upstream in the mountains and some 1.3 billion people downstream.

The mountain communities living within the region are largely agrarian, relying heavily on local natural resources and subsistence farming on small plots

of land. Like many agrarian mountain communities, they experience high levels of poverty making them vulnerable to rapid environmental and socioeconomic changes. The poorest often live in the most inaccessible parts of the region, cut off from markets and with reduced access to basic public services.

Although the HKH countries have made remarkable progress in socio-economic development in recent years, tremendous challenges – especially in the mountainous regions – persist in ending hunger and poverty, and ensuring food and nutritional security.

The vulnerability dilemma of the HKH mountain communities has never been starker. Mountain regions are warming at a faster rate than the global average, which is already perceptible in the hundreds of glaciers that are receding each year in the region. Some pockets of the HKH region could experience up to a 4-degree rise in the temperature by 2050 if the current trend continues. This will have a huge implications for both mountain communities and downstream communities which are highly dependent on upstream ecosystem services like water for irrigation and hydropower, fresh drinking water, and soil fertility and nutrients.



In 2015, the international community struck two groundbreaking agreements which have the potential to better human lives in all nations. The first is the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and associated targets, and the second is the Paris Agreement under the UNFCCC.

These global agreements will need to be implemented hand-in-hand. Climate change effects are becoming more pronounced across the world, with the poorest and most marginalized often hardest hit, which is exactly where the most development gains have to be made. Therefore, integrating climate risks and adaptation into sustainable development and poverty reduction actions are crucial.

Why concerted action is needed in the Hindu Kush Himalayas

The HKH region needs to be at the forefront of sustainable development and climate adaptation action in the coming decades. The region has challenging physical characteristics, including fragile terrain, high seismic activity, and exposure to climate hazards to floods and droughts. Combined with high levels of poverty, and limited public infrastructure and access to basic services, this means that countries will have to make concerted action to meet many of the Sustainable Development Goals and raise the quality of life of significant proportion of their populations.

At the same time, the HKH mountains are endowed with rich biodiversity and diverse ecosystems. As the water tower of Asia, the region provides ecosystem goods and services not only to mountain populations but also to a huge downstream population, which accounts for one fifth of the global population. Maintaining and further improving these ecosystem services in the future will require concerted action to manage these upstream resources.

The Road to 2030: Pathways to Sustainable Development for Mountains

Nations across the world are currently discussing how to implement the SDGs now that they have been agreed. There are many potential approaches on how to translate the goals into national actions, including integrating the SDGs into their national sustainable development policy frameworks.

This brief outlines some options to help prioritise mountain environments and populations as an essential target of the HKH countries' implementation efforts:

1. Improve regional action and transboundary cooperation

Many issues identified as targets in the SDGs, including poverty reduction and climate change adaptation, call for a common action plan given that they are either transboundary in nature or are too big for one country to tackle independently. Therefore, regional cooperation and collaboration is critical to identify common opportunities that the SDGs will afford to mountain communities, for example, investments in ecosystem services, renewable energy, etc. These investments will need to be climate-resilient, offering flexible solutions in order to meet both slow and fast onset of climate change events.

Regional cooperation is critical for innovating policies and designing interventions for the dual goals of conservation and development. The HKH countries should develop a common mountain-specific strategy to embed SDGs into national development plans and programmes. For example, the Kailash Sacred Landscape Initiative brought together stakeholders from China, India, Nepal, and Bhutan to draw up clear guidelines and policies on a more scientific approach to harvesting and trading of Cordyceps, a high value mountain fungi and a singular source of cash income for HKH highlanders.

Table 1: Mountains explicitly feature in two SDGs and three targets













Sustainable Development Goal	Target(s)
 <p>Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all</p>	<p>Target 6.6: By 2020, protect and restore water-related ecosystems, including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes.</p>
 <p>Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss</p>	<p>Target 15.1: By 2020, ensure the conservation, restoration and sustainable use of terrestrial and inland freshwater ecosystems and their services, in particular forests, wetlands, mountains and drylands, in line with obligations under international agreements.</p> <p>Target 15.4: By 2030, ensure the conservation of mountain ecosystems, including their biodiversity, in order to enhance their capacity to provide benefits that are essential for sustainable development.</p>

Table 2: Most of the Sustainable Development Goals are relevant and applicable to mountain regions

 <p>1 NO POVERTY</p> <p>End poverty in all its forms everywhere</p>	 <p>8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH</p> <p>Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all</p>
 <p>2 ZERO HUNGER</p> <p>End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture</p>	 <p>9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE</p> <p>Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation</p>
 <p>5 GENDER EQUALITY</p> <p>Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls</p>	 <p>10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES</p> <p>Reduce inequality within and among countries</p>
 <p>7 AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY</p> <p>Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all</p>	 <p>12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION</p> <p>Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns</p>
 <p>17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS</p> <p>Revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development</p>	 <p>13 CLIMATE ACTION</p> <p>Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts</p>

2. Articulate the SDGs at the national level and integrate mountain concerns into national plans and programmes

The SDGs need to be harmonized with national concerns and realities. In this respect, sound evidence and analyses needs to inform effective policies in order to put the SDG targets into practice. Special focus should be on mountain agriculture and food security (poverty reduction), climate change, adaptation, migration, green practices in water resources management, clean energy and alternative energy technology, disaster risk reduction, etc.

At the moment, most national development policies and plans do not spell out mountain specificities clearly, primarily because there is a lack of mountain-specific disaggregated data. Further, local government structures are still weak and inefficient in some of the HKH countries thereby widening gaps in the implementation of critical interventions identified in the national action plans.

There is a need to identify country-specific mountain issues so that the broader regional picture is inclusive and complete. Doing this could help the HKH countries to devise a gap assessment, based on which a regional framework could be developed to tackle some of the common challenges.

3. Direct climate financing to address climate risks and opportunities in mountains

The Green Climate Fund (GCF): Climate financing can be a significant (although not the only) tool for achieving the SDGs.

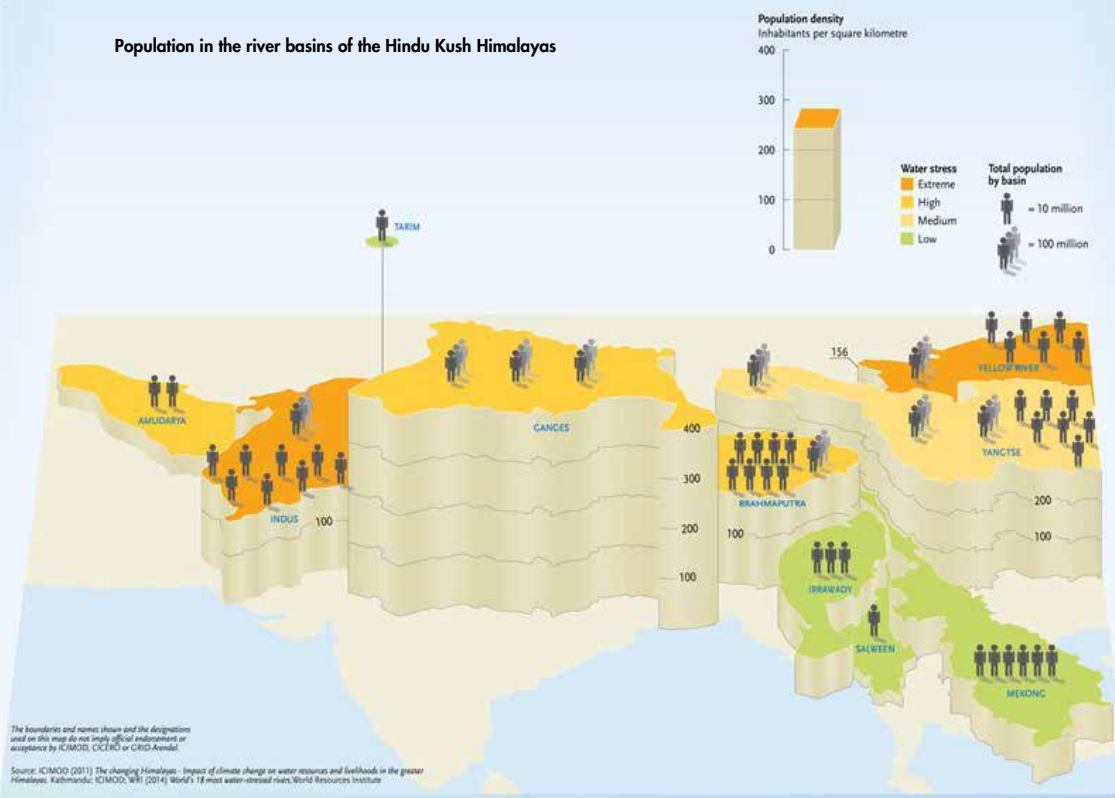
The GCF has recently been established by the UNFCCC in order to promote the paradigm shift towards low-emission and climate-resilient development pathways. Many countries are now establishing their GCF Readiness Programs, which prepare countries to access financing through the Fund. While countries are working to identify suitable activities for implementation, the opportunity exists to work through the readiness programme and with National Designated Authorities (NDAs) to include mountains considerations and both upstream and downstream linkages. Opportunities could also be explored by the countries to engage with the Green Climate Fund on a regional basis.

Countries can also apply for technical assistance to the Climate Technology Centre Network (CTCN) in order to pilot test mountain-relevant technologies, methodologies and solutions that can later be up-scaled through larger programmes and investments such as the GCF.

4. Direct donor priorities and financing to mountain concerns

The SDGs will influence donor priorities over the coming decades, and many governments are now starting to translate goals and set priority goals for action within their national sustainable development strategies and plans. As the Sustainable Development Goals are a voluntary framework, donors and particularly those countries who are strong supporters of mountain action, can work to strengthen civil societies' participation with regards to monitoring the implementation of the SDGs within the mountain context.

Population in the river basins of the Hindu Kush Himalayas



ICIMOD could, for example:

- Link the implementation of SDGs to ICIMOD and partners' on-going work in the landscape and river basin programmes, including through a transboundary action plan;
- Assist member countries to implement common modalities to address prioritised challenges. Such modalities, for example, could focus on local-to-national planning based on bottom-up, inclusive, responsive, and

flexible process to help mainstream adaptation into development planning;

- Assist member countries to review the mountain-related milestones of MDGs, identify gaps and failures, and factor these important lessons learned into implementation of the SDGs to avoid the replication of failed approaches;
- Facilitate the sharing of mountain-related knowledge to help member countries link the implementation and monitoring of specific SDG goals and targets to specific geographical domains. While seeking country-specific inputs for its regional activities, ICIMOD and partners could take into account mountain-specific SDGs concerns, so that as many activities in a particular ICIMOD member country directly or indirectly address SDG targets, and;
- Develop and advocate regional mechanisms for engaging with the Green Climate Fund.

5. Increase investments in the mountainous region

There is no doubt that in order to achieve the SDG targets in the HKH region, more investment in mountainous areas will be needed, ranging from enhancing regional and local economic activities, increasing social development, and through initiatives that promote green economy and infrastructure. On this last point, investing in the diverse ecosystem goods and services in the upland mountainous areas and communities will be crucial to help secure the continued flow of services to large, populated downstream areas.

The role of ICIMOD and its partner organisations

Through its unique position as a regional organization governed by all eight countries of the Hindu Kush Himalayas, ICIMOD could provide a platform for the member countries to build consensus on a common approach to mountain-related issues within the broad framework of the SDGs.

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